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Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 10 March 2015

Session 4

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
5th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
*Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP)
*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)
*Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

James Bream (Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce)
Noel Fojut (Scottish Government)
Professor Alan Gilloran (Queen Margaret University)
Mhairi Harrington (West Lothian College)
Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs)
Terry Lanagan (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Kevin Lowden (University of Glasgow)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 10 March 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:05]

Subordinate Legislation

Charity Test (Specified Bodies) and the Protection of Charities Assets (Exemption) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2015 [Draft]

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning and welcome to the Education and Culture Committee's fifth meeting in 2015. As usual, I remind everyone to switch off all electronic devices in case they interfere with the sound system.

Agenda item 1 is an evidence-taking session on a piece of subordinate legislation. I welcome to the meeting Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs, and her supporting Scottish Government officials. After we have taken evidence on the amendment order, we will debate the motion in the cabinet secretary's name, and I point out that officials are not permitted to contribute to that formal debate.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make opening remarks.

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Good morning, committee members. Public bodies such as historic environment Scotland that are responsible for looking after our treasured national cultural resources have charitable purposes at the heart of their existence. There are many examples of public bodies with charitable status looking after the historic environment, including the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and the Historic Royal Palaces in England.

The committee will recall that last year we discussed the implications of charitable status for historic environment Scotland and examined in some depth a wide range of issues—especially the potential impacts on other charities in the sector and the risk of conflicts of interest. We also discussed the potential financial benefits and other less tangible benefits of the special role that charities contribute to public life.

In the end, it will be for the newly appointed board of historic environment Scotland to assess the benefits of charitable status for the body but, before it can decide whether to apply for charitable status, ministers must amend two existing orders to exempt historic environment Scotland from certain provisions of the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005. The amendment order that is under consideration makes those amendments.

First, section 7(4) of the 2005 act prevents bodies that are subject to ministerial direction from becoming charities, which means that, in general, public bodies cannot be charities. However, the act also includes powers to exempt certain bodies from that provision, which allows them to become charities while being subject to ministerial direction, to reflect the nature of some public bodies, whose activities clearly serve charitable purposes. As the exemption is already in place for other holders of national collections, including RCAHMS, it is logical to extend the approach to historic environment Scotland, which will hold a national collection relating to the historic environment. The amendment order achieves that by adding historic environment Scotland to the Charity Test (Specified Bodies) (Scotland) Order 2006, which lists exempted bodies.

Secondly, section 19 of the 2005 act protects the charitable assets of bodies when they cease to be charities by requiring them to continue to operate those assets in accordance with their charitable purposes and allowing the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator to transfer the assets to another charity. The act includes powers to exempt specified bodies from those provisions, which in this case would ensure that assets funded by the public purse remained under ministerial control in the event that the body lost or surrendered charitable status. Such an exemption is already in place for the other national collections, and I propose to extend the approach to historic environment Scotland.

The amendment order delivers on the Government's commitment to treat HES as we treat our other national cultural collections and as we already treat RCAHMS. I believe that the approach has the support of all key stakeholders, and I would welcome the committee's support for it, too. I am happy to take questions.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. Do members have any questions?

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): This is probably more of a comment than a question, convener. In considering various statutory instruments, we have discussed the detail of the consultation section in the policy note. That section in the policy note for the amendment order appropriately points to the discussions that we had about the Historic Environment Scotland Bill, which the cabinet secretary referred to.

My concern stems from the sections in the policy note about impact assessments and

financial effects, which gloss over the fact that during the passage of the bill there was quite a robust debate about the equalities impact and the perhaps more likely financial impact on other bodies. The National Trust for Scotland was vocal about the matter. The Government and the Parliament have taken bodies' views but, for the purposes of transparency, it might be better for the policy note to better reflect that discussion and the points that were made on both sides of the argument.

Fiona Hyslop: You have raised quite a lot of issues. On consultation, I deliberately ensured during the passage of the bill that the committee was made aware of the impact—or not—of having charitable status, and we made it clear that the new body's viability did not depend on that. In its very full consultation on the bill, which happened only last year, the Government put in quite a lot of proactive provisions about the implications.

Similarly, as you rightly pointed out, there was quite a lot of discussion about the potential impact on other bodies. That discussion was had and the determination was made during the passage of the bill, and the committee made a number of comments about the matter not only in its stage 1 report but in the debates in the chamber.

Another point that gave comfort to other organisations, including the National Trust for Scotland, was that HES must operate under the historic environment strategy. That strategy has brought everyone together, and we now have for the first time a historic environment forum, which has brought together all the agencies.

That brings us back to the point about the importance of the amendment order, which allows for ministerial direction—which, I should add, I have never used in seven years for any of the bodies for which I have responsibility—to deal with circumstances in which, for whatever reason, HES might be working counter to the interests of the wider historic environment or doing something detrimental to another body. Charities and other bodies are therefore protected by the strategy, which HES has to support; if that does not happen, that is an issue. Mary Scanlon rightly tested that issue during the passage of the bill. We have therefore discussed such areas quite a lot, and the committee discussed them fairly recently.

The final issue that I will address in answering your important question is what charitable status provides. It would, for example, allow HES to help the whole sector to grow the cake of what might be provided. People expressed concern that everyone would be competing for limited resources, which could only be detrimental, but the discussions in the historic environment forum have been leading us in the direction of expanding what we are doing and growing the cake and the available resources.

If HES chooses to have charitable status—we are not saying that it has to; it is up to the body to make that decision—it will have access to gift aid, rates relief and so on. Moreover, it might be able to approach the European Commission for funding in a way that Government bodies cannot, but the sensible way of doing that is to work with other bodies, such as the National Trust for Scotland.

Securing charitable status is an enabling move, but today's debate is not about whether HES should become a charity. That is a debate and a decision for the board. Today's debate is about whether it is sensible for HES, if it chooses to become a charity, to be treated the same as other holders of national collections and in a way that not only allows for ministerial direction—I have gone over the issue a lot with the committee and I make it clear again that that would be a last resort, that it has never happened to date and that any issues would be resolved well before such an approach was taken—but ensures that, if at some point HES decided not to be a charity any more or if it had charitable status taken away from it, public money that had been invested in public assets would come back to ministers. Ministers, not OSCR, would be in control of that.

That was a long answer, but there was a lot to address in answering your important question.

Liam McArthur: That was a fair response and a fair characterisation of the debate that we had on the case for and potentially against a move to charitable status. It is up to the board to decide whether to make an application and up to OSCR to decide whether the body complies.

We are all familiar with that discussion, because we were protagonists in it. However, the financial effects section of the policy note says:

"The impact of charitable status was considered during"

the business and regulatory impact assessment

"carried out for the 2014 Act which found that there would be no financial impact."

That rather glosses over what was a lively debate, albeit that, ultimately, we came down on the side of saying that the bill should proceed, given the reassurances that had been provided and the fact that it would be for the board to decide whether to apply for charitable status. I think that, as a committee, we will want to return to the matter if the National Trust or others come back to us and say that, in practice, the arrangements are not working in the way that those bodies were assured that they would.

10:15

Fiona Hyslop: That relates to the wider policy context. The convener or the clerks can correct

me if I am wrong, but I think that, when the financial impact of an order is being considered, it is necessary to look specifically at the impact on the relevant body—in this case, that is historic environment Scotland—and on the Government. You are talking about the financial impact on organisations that are not subject to the order that we are considering. I suspect that that is a bit of a legal anorak's answer.

The Convener: What you have said is correct.

Fiona Hyslop: I understand that Liam McArthur is interested in the wider policy context. Perhaps the committee can discuss whether, when it considers subordinate legislation, it should focus only on the order in front of it or whether and to what extent it wants the wider context to be taken into account. In this case, because the wider context was examined very thoroughly by the committee and debated in the chamber, we assumed that that was a reasonable position to take.

Technically, the point about there being no financial impact means that there will be no financial impact on the Scottish Government or on the new body, HES, to which the order applies.

The Convener: I remind members that we agreed to come back to the Historic Environment Scotland Act 2014 later this year. That is already in the work programme.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning. You said that the order will have no financial impact, but you mentioned that it might allow HES to apply for European funding and so on. What is driving the proposed change?

Fiona Hyslop: If we go right back to the beginning of the process, when evidence was taken on different bodies—I do not think that Chic Brodie was a member of the committee at that time—one issue that came up was the commitment that I gave the RCAHMS commissioners that we would protect the underlying tenets of what RCAHMS provided, which would not be compromised. We were keen for it to be possible for the element of its education service that was charitable to be accommodated in the new body. In addition, we reckoned that there was an opportunity for between £1.4 million and £2.1 million to be gained—whether through gift aid or rates relief—as a result of HES having charitable status.

Chic Brodie: So there will be a financial impact.

Fiona Hyslop: There will be a financial impact on the body if it chooses to apply for charitable status. The order does not decide whether the body should become a charity; all that it does is enable HES, should it so choose, to become a charity. For protection, ministers would be allowed to offer ministerial direction.

The committee is not considering whether the organisation should become a charity. If it decided to become a charity, ministers would still have powers of direction, as we have in relation to National Museums Scotland, National Galleries of Scotland and so on. That would be in the interests of the public because it would mean that, if charitable status was at some point taken away from the organisation or if it chose not to be a charity, the assets would be determined not by OSCR but by ministers.

As I said in my answer to Liam McArthur, we are addressing what the order will do in relation to the 2005 act; we are not considering a decision about whether HES should acquire charitable status, which was thoroughly discussed during consideration of the Historic Environment Scotland Bill. I return to the point that, when we talk about the financial impact, we are talking about the financial impact of the order, which is about the powers of ministers, not the powers of HES.

Chic Brodie: Has the acquisition of charitable status by governmental bodies been contested by other charities in terms of the protection of the assets by the Government?

Fiona Hyslop: The 2005 act is the relevant act. I remember taking part in consideration of the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Bill. It was the Parliament's strong cross-party view that our national collections should have the power to be charities but that there should be checks and balances such that they should not be completely exempt from ministerial direction. There might be cases in which it was necessary to provide ministerial direction—that would probably be in the area of corporate governance. In my eight years as a minister, I have never used a power of ministerial direction on a body. The power is like a safety net.

Chic Brodie: I understand that and subscribe to it somewhat, but it was not really what my question was about. My question was about whether charitable status can be contested by non-governmental charities that wish to protect their assets.

Fiona Hyslop: You might want to explain what you mean. The relationship is between the Government and the national collections, not other charitable bodies. I do not understand the premise of your question and why you think that an external body would challenge whether there was ministerial direction or how assets were treated.

Chic Brodie: No, I am saying that there is one rule for the Government under charitable status, and I understand why we want to protect the assets, but there is another rule for other charities

that might wish to have an asset distribution model or activity.

Fiona Hyslop: The National Trust for Scotland, for example, would not take kindly to the committee, the Parliament or the Government telling it that, if at some point it wanted to change its charitable status, the state would take control of all its assets. Are you suggesting that it might want to have the same treatment—

Chic Brodie: No, I am talking about other charities versus the Government and the rules that apply to the assets that the Government can control. I take your point about the assets and I could be wrong, but should charitable status be removed, the assets would be the Government's anyway. What is the comparison between non-governmental bodies and governmental bodies?

Noel Fojut (Scottish Government): If a charity ceases to be a charity, the normal rule is that OSCR, the charities regulator, will ensure that the charity's assets are disposed of to another body that can continue to use them for the charitable purposes for which they were originally being used. The assets of a charity that had not received substantial Government funding as a core of its being would have been accumulated from contributions from members and money that the charity earned, so they would belong to that charity. Somebody would have to act as a go-between to get them to a new charity if they were to carry on being used for charitable purposes.

The Government has been the main contributor to the accumulation of the assets of the national collections and quite a number of other public bodies. The Government has spent public money on the body to help it to accumulate and develop the assets for the charitable purposes that they serve, so it is taking the responsibility of ensuring that they are passed on to another body. In an extreme case, that might mean that the Government had to create another body to take on that role, and OSCR could not do that.

The arrangement is a means of ensuring that the Government takes responsibility for bodies that it has been supporting and funding and ensures that assets are carried forward. It is a special arrangement for Government bodies, because the assets will contain money that the Government has given those bodies over many years to accumulate the assets that support the charitable purpose.

Fiona Hyslop: That is why I said in my previous answers that it is the public money that has been invested over many years that is of interest. The committee, the Parliament, the Government and the public in Scotland have concerns that, after many generations of investment in national collections, they might be distributed to bodies other than the Government to decide what to do with them.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I was on the committee that set up OSCR in 2005 and I think that I am right in saying that the national museums and others were already charities at the time. If HES applied, it would face a fairly robust test from OSCR, and the order that we are looking at opens a door for HES.

I have two points, which are not exactly new. I remember how important the independence test was for a charity to achieve its outcomes in accordance with its principles. I would like some clarity from the cabinet secretary about how the independence of a charity sits alongside ministerial direction. I heard everything that you said about how you have not used such powers in eight years as a minister.

We received quite a lot of evidence from charities that asked whether, given that the Government allocates and disburses huge amounts of money, it will automatically choose those over which it has ministerial direction, irrespective of how important the collections are to the country. I do not remember who raised that in evidence, but there are genuine concerns. I seek a bit of clarity on those two issues.

Fiona Hyslop: An important point for not just HES but the other collections is that the Government does not interfere in curatorial decision making or what curators do with the collections. The committee has made its views on that clear, particularly in its scrutiny of the National Library of Scotland Bill. In relation to that bill and the legislation that governs historic environment Scotland, we have made it absolutely clear that we will not have curatorial direction. We had that debate at stage 1, as Mary Scanlon rightly remembers.

The committee should remember that it will be up to HES to decide whether it wants to apply to be a charity and, if it does, it will be up to OSCR to determine whether it passes the independence test that Mary Scanlon rightly identified. Members will recall that, during the passage of the Historic Environment Scotland Bill, OSCR stated to the committee and to us:

"OSCR has had sight of the Functions of Historic Environment Scotland in section 2 of the Bill ... and our view is that in principle these can be clearly linked to one or more of the charitable purposes set out in the 2005 Act".

Mary Scanlon is right. The final decision will be for OSCR to make in relation to independence, but we certainly drafted the bill in such a way that, should HES want to become a charity, the independence that is set out in the provisions should enable it to do so, if OSCR agrees.

Mary Scanlon: My second point was about concerns from other organisations. Given that the

Government has control over so much funding, will HES be given preferential treatment, irrespective of how important buildings or collections are to the nation?

Fiona Hyslop: We have made it clear that HES will not provide grants to itself. I have managed to protect grants so far, which has been a challenge in the financial circumstances. Given that HES will have public funding, people wanted the assurance that it will not be able to decide to give grants to its own works. There needs to be provision for on-going care, maintenance and development, but that is an important part of the separation of interests.

One purpose of the historic environment strategy is to enable all the bodies to share consideration of the priorities. Is the priority castle buildings or the streetscapes of our conservation areas? The aim is for the bodies to work collectively to make the most of what we have in challenging times. The historic environment strategy and the forum that I have put together will help Scotland, collectively, to decide what the priorities are, as opposed to a sole body saying that it will determine everything that happens in the area.

Mary Scanlon: I am sorry—my question was really more about the Government having ministerial direction and also the ability to disburse funds. The concern was that there might be preferential treatment. I just asked the question for clarity. I do not have an issue with the position, but it is worth while to raise the concern, because it was mentioned in evidence.

Fiona Hyslop: The more resources I as a Government minister can allocate—with the committee's support—to historic environment Scotland, the better it will be for everybody, because not only HES but other bodies will get the benefit of that. That is the route for disbursement. If we bear it in mind that HES will not be able to give grants to itself, that gives the protection. A lot of organisations came to us to discuss that point, and they were satisfied with our response.

The Convener: We move on to agenda item 2, which is the formal debate on the amendment order. I invite the cabinet secretary to move motion S4M-12362.

Motion moved,

That the Education and Culture Committee recommends that the Charity Test (Specified Bodies) and the Protection of Charities Assets (Exemption) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2015 [draft] be approved.—[*Fiona Hyslop*.]

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: I suspend the meeting to allow the witnesses to change over.

10:29

Meeting suspended.

10:31

On resuming—

Educational Attainment

The Convener: Our next agenda item is to take evidence on the implications for schools, teachers and pupils on the commission for developing Scotland's young workforce. The commission's final report, which is often referred to as the Wood report, after its author, was published last June, and the Scottish Government published an implementation plan last December. Today's discussion is part of our on-going work on educational attainment.

I welcome to the committee James Bream from Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce; Terry Lanagan, from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland; Professor Alan Gilloran, from Queen Margaret University; Kevin Lowden, from the Robert Owen centre for educational change; and Mhairi Harrington, from Colleges Scotland. We have a large panel so I would appreciate it if members could keep their questions succinct, and witnesses keep their answers likewise. We will get through as much as we can this morning. Given that we have such a large panel we will go straight to questions.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I will ask a couple of broad questions about the attainment gap before we get into the work of the commission and the Government's implementation. Is there a common understanding about what closing the attainment gap means? What does it mean to you?

Terry Lanagan (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): Closing the attainment gap means raising attainment for all young people in Scotland, but raising the attainment of those from more disadvantaged backgrounds more quickly and to a greater extent, so that where someone is born in Scotland will become significantly less important to their life chances.

Some of the statistical evidence on attainment shows limited progress on that. We can see that attainment is rising across all Scottish index of multiple deprivation deciles, and it is rising marginally more quickly for those from the most deprived deciles. There is a long way to go, but I, my colleagues and schools across the country take the agenda very seriously indeed. The Wood commission's work on developing the young workforce has the potential to be a powerful tool in moving forward the agenda.

Kevin Lowden (University of Glasgow): I agree with that statement. Research also shows pockets of more extreme deprivation that pose particular challenges regarding the attainment

gap, but even in those areas there are examples of innovation—especially recently—in educational programmes such as the school improvement partnership programme, through which schools, local authorities and Government are addressing the issue.

It is interesting to tease out what we mean by "attainment". It includes formal qualifications, but we must also look carefully at broader achievement.

Professor Alan Gilloran (Queen Margaret University): I agree with what my two colleagues have said. I think that a lot of effort has gone into widening participation, particularly in the higher education sector. A lot of good work has been done, and it is slowly making a difference. However, in some ways, we have to push that work back. A lot of it has been focused on 15, 16 and 17-year-olds; I think that we need to do more work in primary schools. That is the age at which we begin to set what people think about education, how they approach learning, the culture of learning and so on. I think that examples such as the Children's University, which I am sure we will discuss later, are extremely important in terms of shifting the way in which very young people see learning. We need to adopt a partnership approach in that regard. I am sure that we will discuss the nitty-gritty later.

Mhairi Harrington (West Lothian College): I agree with my colleagues. However, for me the issue is not just about raising attainment but about making attainment more meaningful. The commission on developing Scotland's young workforce is aimed at the 50 per cent or more of our young people who do not go to university and aims to improve quite radically their qualifications and pathways.

James Bream (Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce): From an employer's point of view, I add that it is important to think about why people try to obtain qualifications. The purpose of qualifications is to demonstrate that people are ready for work and can make a meaningful contribution pretty early on.

We certainly need to focus on the low end of the attainment scale, but we should not forget that there is room for improvement at the top end, as well. We need to ensure that attainment is maximised across the whole spectrum. At the lower end, we need to address what we would call equality of access. Some families are well networked and the children benefit from that in terms of work placements, but others do not have that opportunity. Employers can do a lot to manufacture solutions to improve that situation.

Mark Griffin: Some of those answers lead me to my next question. We have received written evidence that suggests that measures of attainment should be changed, with more credit being given to vocational qualifications. Do you support that, and do you think that that would be a step towards closing the attainment gap?

Mhairi Harrington: That is obviously a valid point and I acknowledge the concern that has been raised. It is important to recognise that different qualifications measure different things. Just now, we have quite a narrow focus on measuring attainment and achievement by exams, whereas vocational qualifications are more commonly measured by competence. It is important that credit is given to that competence, but we must bear in mind that the two things are not the same.

We must raise the credit and value that we give to vocational qualifications when assessing the competence of young people. We should take into account the volume, breadth and depth of study in relation to vocational qualifications, which are every bit as valid as someone's ability to pass an external exam.

Professor Gilloran: We should be a bit careful about separating out vocational and academic qualifications. That makes me rather nervous. I would not want us to create a two-tier system, with some people just going for vocational qualifications. It is important that we look to develop in young people skills that are important for vocational outputs but also those that are academic, theoretical and conceptual. I think that we can do both things. There should be a blend. I do not think that it is an either/or situation.

Terry Lanagan: I absolutely agree with the last contribution. A number of the submissions make the point that what is required is cultural change in Scottish society. It is about the perception of the importance of vocational education, or employment education—call it what we will.

I believe that vocational education is as important to academic young people as it is to others. It is a false dichotomy to talk about vocational education as opposed to academic education. When you think about it, the most high-tariff courses in Scottish universities—medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine—lead to the most vocational qualifications that people can get.

The skills that are developed through work-based learning are important to everyone in society. One of the challenges is to persuade Scottish society—and particularly, but not exclusively, parents—to recognise the value of different routes to lifetime achievement.

The modern apprenticeship, for instance, can be just as valuable for a youngster, and can lead to a degree-level qualification while the young person is earning a wage, as going straight to university

would be. There has been a sort of mantra about getting the maximum number of young people into university, but for some of our young people—as we know from the drop-out rates at the end of first year—that is not the most appropriate route.

James Bream: I am less concerned about measures of attainment than I am about looking at what employers actually tell us. Roughly 60 per cent of employers say that the main indicator of whether a young person will be successful in a job is whether they have relevant work experience, and 80 per cent tell us that most of the lack of work readiness is because of a lack of work experience. When we start to speak about attainment and to look at vocational activity and how people learn, we need to understand that they go hand in hand. If we can get the work experience right, and if we can look at education in terms of its interaction with employers, the cultural change can move through to an actual behavioural change, so that work becomes very much ingrained in education.

We are of the view that the old-fashioned way—one week of work experience, as I had, does the job—simply does not work. Moving that forward would be a huge thing for employers and young people.

Chic Brodie: Good morning. On academic versus vocational qualifications, we all agree that there has to be a greater balance, and we have not overcome the cultural challenge. How do we change the culture from "education, education, education, university, university, university" to an alignment of vocational qualifications with the Government's economic strategy in the sectors that it wants to play in?

We can all talk about it, from within whatever bubble we are in, but we are not changing the impression that people must go to university—and I was at a college yesterday. University is still seen as being most important. Am I wrong?

Terry Lanagan: That is a very important question. I believe that we can change that impression in two ways. We change it by the way that everyone, including political leaders, talks about this agenda. The message that goes out there is extremely important. We should not artificially separate vocational and academic education—we should talk about them in a far more joined-up way and talk about there being a universal right to high-quality vocational education for young people.

The second way that we can begin to change perceptions is by results and by illustrating to parents the different routes that are possible, because parents' perception in the past has been that college is a less attractive and less academic option than university. To use a local example, we have a partnership with West College Scotland in which a group of youngsters from one of our secondary schools—the programme will be rolled out to the rest next year—are this year doing a higher national certificate in engineering part-time at college and the rest of their subjects in school. That is showing parents—parents have fully bought into it—that that is an appropriate role for the college sector. Some of the youngsters who are doing the HNC intend to go on to modern apprenticeships and others intend to go on to do engineering at university.

10:45

What the parents are seeing, in that small example, is that a college education can be valuable vocationally and academically to a range of youngsters of different abilities. It is about illustrating the power of different routes to achievement. There is a lot of misunderstanding about the nature of modern apprenticeships at the moment. We need to get the message out there about how that route can unlock a youngster's potential in a different way from the straight university route.

Mhairi Harrington: In addition to that, the key difference in this particular step change—it is a step change—in our education system is that at least half the recommendations that came out of the ""Education Working For All!" report were in relation to employers. That particular change already has significant buy-in from employers across Scotland. Two invest in youth regional groups are already established. That will happen right across Scotland and already has considerable momentum in terms of employer support. In relation to working in partnership with schools and colleges, that significant buy-in from employers has the potential to really drive forward that change in our system.

Kevin Lowden: I agree with those comments. Historically, parents' views on the value of vocational education and the level of esteem that it is held in have been important, as have the attitudes of school staff and school leaders and the pressure that they feel to move students towards academic outcomes. There has always been pressure for schools to perform in relation to academic outcomes, even though the political message may have shifted more towards the message that we have been hearing from the people round the table. The culture more broadly is changing, but there are still mixed messages and schools still feel under pressure.

Professor Gilloran: That was a cracking question from Chic Brodie about how we change perceptions about the various destinations for young people. To follow up on what Terry Lanagan said, our hospitality and tourism

academy is about trying to get young people and their parents to recognise that working in hospitality and tourism is not just about being a chef or a waiter—there is a wide range of career opportunities. The average age of a general manager in that industry is 35; people need to look at what they are earning and at the opportunities in that industry. Many parents look at hospitality and tourism and do not recognise the opportunities.

Terry mentioned medicine—law is another example of a vocational qualification. This is about changing perceptions about the values of different destinations. It is a challenge, but a lot of good work is going on.

Liam McArthur: I am very interested in what all of you have just said in response to Chic Brodie's question. To offer an example, I recently met a young apprentice who was taken on at St Magnus cathedral in my constituency on a stonemasonry apprenticeship. She is a young girl by the name of Sophie Turner, who has become a bit of a poster child for the modern apprenticeship scheme. She had been down the route of a university education at Edinburgh Napier University—I think that her degree was in photography. That is an illustration of the points that people were making. Stonemasonry was something that she was interested in but the pressure within the school environment meant that there was never any discussion of a modern apprenticeship.

As long as the debate is seen to be about how we raise the attainment of people from non-traditional or poorer backgrounds, the political imperative—the drivers within the system—will always be a bit muted, and moving more people away from being channelled down the university route is always going to be an impossible nut to crack. People can be channelled down that route for laudable reasons, but it can be against their interests in relation to their longer-term attainment. It is as much about attainment for those who are attaining quite well at the moment but are perhaps being sent down pathways that are less well suited to their actual aspirations and their skill set. Is that a fair comment?

The Convener: I think that that silence is a yes. [*Laughter*.] Sorry, Professor Gilloran.

Professor Gilloran: That is a fair comment but, in our academies programme, for example, which is now being picked up by local authorities other than the four that we work with, there are a whole lot of exit points. The programme is not just about getting people into university; it is also about demonstrating the benefit of college education or the need to develop the relevant skills so that people can move into work. Although we have been operating the academies programme for only two years, the indicators are that some people leave and go into work. We hope that they go into work with a better idea of what that work is and with better attitudes, better understanding and a better link with employers so that they are successful in that work. The same applies to the people who go to college or university.

Liam McArthur: To return to the earlier point about the need to push the discussion back so that it does not just happen at age 15, 16 or 17, there is clearly a cohort who are identified as being university material probably before they leave primary school, and there is never a discussion with them about whether they should go to college to receive their higher education, never mind a discussion about modern apprenticeships. Is it not the case that, until we have a better balance in the demographic at colleges and university, we will have the parity of esteem issue, and the division between them will always be marked?

Kevin Lowden: That is an interesting issue. Both the reports touch on the point about going back earlier in the education system. Just like adults, young people change their ideas about where they want to go, their skills develop and their orientation or trajectory changes. There is a careful balance to strike between providing sufficient information to allow informed choice and to show various pathways, and ensuring that we do not channel people and say at primary school that they are university material. So much can happen over time.

The education system has to be nuanced enough to provide opportunities and the right guidance, working in partnership with the right organisations. Alan Gilloran talked about systems that articulate to further education, higher education or something else so that if people want to change their trajectory as their skills develop, the system will allow that. It is about building in flexibility.

James Bream: To go back to the question why any of us learn, ultimately, it is to progress ourselves and get more money, particularly as a young person. That kind of simple thing inspires people. For me, the culture change will come largely through a communications process that shows inspirational people who have achieved great things without having gone to university. There are a huge number of them out there. As industries in the north-east have grown—in particular the oil and gas and food and drink industries—many of the young people who have progressed quickly have come through what you all call vocational education or modern apprenticeships or apprenticeships of some sort. I guess that we just call it a way to get into a job. Celebrating success has to be a huge part of the

culture change. Actually, the success pathway should be immaterial.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I have a wee concern about some of the terminology. Glasgow City Council's written submission states:

"We need to have a clearer shared understanding of vocational courses and not imagine that vocational courses are in any way worth less than an academic course. Medicine is a vocational course."

On the other hand, North Ayrshire Council's submission says:

"reorganisation in schools must not be done at the expense of our highly academic pupils. Scotland's workforce will still require doctors, dentists, lawyers, accountants".

Those two bodies clearly have a different interpretation of what "vocational" means. How big a problem is that and how do we get consistency?

Professor Gilloran: How societies place jobs in hierarchies is a massive problem. The tradition is to see medicine and law as the pinnacles of achievement. We all have a responsibility to challenge what are established orthodoxies. Why is medicine seen that way? It is plumbing, for God's sake.

Colin Beattie: That sounds like fighting talk.

Professor Gilloran: Why not? Be provocative. Yes, there is a lot of theory involved, but should we not challenge why someone must have five As at higher in order to be a doctor? Does that make the best doctors? I think that medical schools are challenging that thinking and see a need for a wider range of people. We all have a duty to challenge the hierarchy.

Terry Lanagan: Mr Beattie raises an interesting question. It is partly a question of nomenclature. Traditionally, the division between vocational and academic education is that one is seen as being inferior to the other. We are trying to stop using the term "vocational" to get away from that division. I must say that I would be much closer to the Glasgow City Council definition that you gave than to North Ayrshire Council's definition.

We must start talking about education for employment. Everyone needs employability skills. Language is important in that regard. I would not for a minute in any way undermine the importance of academic education, and a strong academic educational system will be important to Scotland's future, but the people who are delivering education in schools are traditionally those who have come through the academic route, and they are predisposed towards thinking that that is the route to success. We need to get beyond that mindset.

We can do that in a number of ways. One way is by changing the terminology that we use. The other and more powerful way is by illustrating the different routes to success and the opportunities that those can open up for young people.

Kevin Lowden: I would agree that there is almost a conceptual fog. It would be interesting to have a meeting between the people who made those different submissions. If they talked for long enough, you would probably find that they are talking about the same thing.

It is interesting to look at the employers' surveys over the past five to 10 years United Kingdom-wide. When you drill down, you find that they are often talking not about a narrow vocational definition but about the more generic skills that allow people to adapt to change and to work in teams and so on. The boundary between the two is blurred.

The reports set out that we should first address the need to get a consensus about what we are talking about here, to say what we mean by vocational and academic and then somehow to address the parity issue.

James Bream: I guess that we use jargon whatever industry we are in, unfortunately. It is usually used by people in the industry rather than by those who are from outside it. As someone who is from outside the education industry, it is sometimes tricky for me to get through all this stuff.

Ultimately, to return to the issue of what makes people employable, nine out of 10 people say that it is communication and teamwork, and eight out of 10 will say that it is customer service. You do not see any of those things on a course syllabus—they are not subjects; they are things that people can do. As part of the process, we need to move away from thinking about subjects in what has become an unchallenging way and move more towards what people can do. That would be a huge change, but it is one that is perhaps worth thinking about.

Colin Beattie: Clearly, there is a problem in that we do not have a consistent approach to and understanding of what the basic terminology means. Many vocational courses and educational policies tend to be directed towards pupils who are not performing well academically or who are perhaps disengaged from school. That is the box into which vocational courses are being dropped. How do we move it on?

11:00

Terry Lanagan: You are right that, traditionally, under the old system of standard grades and so on, at the start of senior 3, the more disaffected youngsters for whom the traditional curriculum is

not seen as appropriate or interesting tended to be directed into vocational courses.

That takes us back to earlier questions from Mr Griffin and Mr McArthur, both of whom talked about the fact that employability has to be embedded at a far earlier stage. If we are talking about closing the attainment gap and raising attainment and achievement for Scotland's youngsters, we have to see things such as developing the young workforce in a much broader context—we have to see it as part of curriculum for excellence. We must look at the initiatives that are taking place elsewhere in Scottish public life—not just education—such as the early years collaborative and the Scottish attainment challenge, which is targeted at primary schools.

We have to look at the employability skills that we are starting to introduce in primary schools. In my own patch, all primary 7s in about half of our schools get a week's work experience in the school kitchen. If we start to embed that sort of thing, groups of children can learn the whole curriculum for a week through the medium of the school kitchen—not just catering but customer service, working as a team and so on. Once we start to embed vocational education, or employability skills, into the three-to-18 curriculum, we get away from the idea that vocational education is only for the less academic and more disaffected.

As long we offer vocational education only in the senior phase, to youngsters who are less academic, we will not get away from that mindset. If we can embed it further down, and see it as part of the core curriculum—after all, curriculum for excellence is about skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work, but we have some way to go on the skills for work agenda—we can start to change the perceptions.

Mhairi Harrington: When we talk about "less academic" young people, that is not necessarily a reflection of their ability. Just because young people do not thrive in a school setting does not mean that they do not have academic potential. To go back to the beginning, more than 50 per cent of our young people are not achieving their full potential and that goes back to the issue of meaningful attainment. There are a large number of young people who are taking vocational qualifications, and they are not simply those who are disaffected and disengaged from school.

It is always better to give a real-life example of how potential can be maximised. There are a number of pilot projects currently being run across Scotland. Our particular programme targets youngsters going into S4; West Lothian College, in partnership with schools, has targeted the four schools that have the lowest performance and the highest deprivation statistics. We recruited 32 young people and, at the end of S5, those 16 or 17-year-olds will come out of school with a full national qualification in manufacturing engineering, a competence-based assessed qualification in engineering operations, three core skills in communications, information technology and maths, and a raft of broader general education units. That gives a 16 or 17-year-old coming out of school a fantastic CV. For me, that is the potential that needs to be explored and grown across Scotland.

The Convener: We are agreed about the problem with how academic education and vocational education are viewed in the general culture of Scotland. Is the problem fundamental? People do not want their children to pursue academic or vocational qualifications in particular, but they want status and financial security. As long as status and financial security are tied up with succeeding academically, that is how parents, schools, culture and society will continue to push children—it will be seen as the preferred outcome. Is the problem not a much more fundamental one, involving status and financial reward? It is a matter of being somebody who achieves very well academically, as opposed to somebody who goes down the vocational route. Is it not about that fundamental problem in society, rather than about us trying to muck about with this course versus that course?

Professor Gilloran: I think that it is. However, there have been inroads into that. I was speaking earlier about a hierarchy. I do not necessarily think that the medical profession is quite as far up the tree as it was for my father's generation, say. Society has changed, and it is much more critical and challenging of some of the established professions. Other professions are now developing that were not around 20 or 30 years ago. The hierarchy is that little bit more fluid.

We have been talking about employers, and I was talking about hospitality and tourism. If we are trying to encourage more young people into hospitality and tourism, those who are running those industries must think about career progression within them. From an educational point of view, if we are helping to provide better-skilled young people who have aspirations in that industry, employers have a responsibility to think about a career framework in their industry in order to keep them. That comes back to the partnership model that we were talking about.

Chic Brodie: I return to the subject of parental involvement. When we considered underemployment and various aspects of employment in the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee last year, the problem was that nobody realised how much parental involvement is required. For example, we are very short of

engineers. The number of women employed in the engineering industry, particularly in oil and gas, reflects the fact that they are either in administration or, for those on the oil rigs, in catering. That is because working in that sector is seen by parents as a dirty job. What mechanism is there to address that?

I know that QMU does excellent work, and we have had a conversation about the hospitality industry, but what do we do to embrace parents and help them to understand exactly what opportunities—whether through academic or vocational qualifications—are available in industries such as those that I have just mentioned? How do we convince parents that they should have a wider perspective on things?

James Bream: The new chief executive of Oil & Gas UK will be a lady, Deirdre Michie, so that is one positive and visible step that has been taken in that sector. It is a small step, but having visible role models is really important for young people.

In the north-east, we have just started to roll out an evaluation tool for all business and education links. Among the stakeholders we ask about those are parents. Parents—and I speak as one—often do not have full sight of what is going on in the schools.

Chic Brodie: Why?

James Bream: It is a two-way thing. As with employers, there is an imperative on both sides. Some parents are very engaged, and they will play an active role in securing work experience. As I said earlier, some parents might be less well networked and might feel unable to do that. From the employers' side, we need to open up that access to all parents and all pupils, so as to provide the same level of opportunity to people across the board, not just to those who are particularly well connected.

Professor Gilloran: I will try to answer your question, but I might go off on a wee tangent to start with. When it comes to involving parents, we have been talking about education as it has to do with employability, but we need to think about education in a slightly broader sense. The Children's University uses the idea that not all young people will be turned on by the formal curriculum in schools, so we try to use other activities that young people are involved in to get them to see the learning potential around them. If you look at the activities around schools, you will see that a lot of the mothers are involved, so we try to see how we can get fathers involved. Through the children's university, we can use sport to get fathers involved in helping out with young people's sports teams, swimming or other activities.

It is about trying to renegotiate the relationship within education between young people, parents, schools and employers. You have to allow the parents in and they have to see that there is a role for them. For some parents, schools are big, scary places, either because they have had bad experiences themselves or just because the school has that kind of formal aura about it, so there are barriers to be broken down.

One of the things that the Children's University does is regular graduations. I do not know how much you know about the Children's University, but it is an accredited system with stamps, which children love, and once they have a certain number of stamps they can graduate. They come to the university with their parents, so they are coming into a higher education institution and the children have their bunnets and gowns on, and it is seen as not such a scary educational place. Breaking down barriers is really important.

Kevin Lowden: You have to engage with parents first, regardless of whether you want to engage them in education or in other activities, to get them to consider the value of vocational education or of whatever is on the agenda. One of the big challenges across education is engaging with parents, and past research shows that, if you can demonstrate that what you are doing makes a difference to their children's quality of life and life opportunities, they are more likely to become engaged. Once that relationship starts building, you can then engage them in debates about life choices, course choices and so on at a fundamental level.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): You mentioned the importance of parents and parents' attitudes. If we really want to close the attainment gap between those individuals who are from our most marginalised communities and the rest of the population, how do we get parents to switch on to the importance of education full stop—not just vocational and academic education—when they might be juggling zero-hours contracts, part-time jobs, and Department for Work and Pensions sanctions? In that scenario, their children's education, unfortunately, is pretty low down the list of priorities, because of the stresses of everyday life. If you are going to turn things round, how does that play?

Kevin Lowden: That illustrates the wide spectrum of the challenge. There are some really good examples across Scotland, and more widely, of schools and partnerships in educational communities that are doing just that. By thinking more radically and by innovating, and by going out into the community, almost like outreach work, with community learning and partnerships, it can be done. It is not just about education, although that is one part of it. It is the more innovative and

outward-looking approaches that are starting to engage with parents in making a difference. Right through the proposed programme, we are looking for examples that work like that and trying to mobilise that knowledge across the system and translate it as appropriate to different contexts. There is practice out there that has already started doing that, but it needs innovation, creativity and a bit of risk taking.

11:15

Mhairi Harrington: I reinforce the point that parents who are struggling are nonetheless every bit as committed and want the best for their children. It is their ability to support their children that needs more support. That is where we as the organisations that are tasked with supporting them have to use our very best resources and interventions at the very best time to get the best outcomes for those young people. That can be achieved only in partnership with others in schools and local authorities, but that is absolutely our duty.

The Convener: Terry Lanagan should be very brief.

Terry Lanagan: I will be.

Gordon MacDonald is right that engaging that group of parents is a big challenge. It is not just education alone that has responsibility for that; society has a responsibility to try to pull those parents into the system. Schools need imaginative ways to engage them.

Another important factor is that, if we make the curriculum more meaningful to young people and enthuse young people, including those from the most disadvantaged groups, about learning, parents will ultimately become more engaged. An issue has been that youngsters from those disadvantaged groups have become disengaged from education. If we can get them to talk positively about their experience and address their needs through school—there is some evidence that we are beginning to do that, with better staying-on rates in more deprived areas, for example—that will be a way of pulling parents in.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you. I call Mary Scanlon.

Mary Scanlon: I am sorry; I was daydreaming.

The Convener: You should never say that in the committee.

Mary Scanlon: I know.

Colin Beattie: It is on record.

Mary Scanlon: We are talking about attainment and the Wood commission, and I am slightly concerned about the way the discussion is going. It seems that when someone gets to the age of 14 or 15, people think, "Gosh, we've got a problem. We better do something."

The convener will not forgive me for mentioning Audit Scotland again, but I refer the report that it published last year. I was quite shocked that, for example, Inverclyde and East Lothian have the same level of attainment, but hugely different levels of deprivation. Therefore, deprivation is not the only answer.

I was also shocked that there is

"no independent evaluation of how much councils spend"

on schools and

"what this delivers in terms of improved attainment and wider achievement".

Probably the most concerning thing is that

"there is no consistent approach to tracking and monitoring the progress of pupils from P1 to S3."

Finally, 2 per cent of primary 7s are not working at the expected level in numeracy, and 35 per cent of S2 pupils are not achieving the expected level of numeracy.

I am concerned that, because we are looking at attainment and the Wood commission, we are assuming that there is no problem until people are aged 14. If we look at the unemployment rates in 2013, we will see that the average—we are very good at looking at averages—is 21 per cent for 16 to 24-year-olds: the figure is 8 per cent for people who have a degree, and 47 per cent for people with no qualifications.

I am kind of concerned. I love the Wood commission and support every single element of it, but it is not the only answer to attainment and achievement issues.

What is being done in schools? We cannot expect to start to look at matters when people are 14 or are unemployed. According to Audit Scotland, we are not doing enough in schools. Will you address that before I ask my second question?

Terry Lanagan: I go back to my earlier answer. I absolutely agree that we cannot let people get to 14 and suddenly recognise a problem.

The work has to be seen in the context of the three-to-18 curriculum, the whole curriculum for excellence model, the work that we are doing with the early years collaborative, the work on Scottish attainment that we are about to start and the Scottish attainment challenge in primary schools. There is a much bigger picture.

Mary Scanlon put her finger on the issue of the lack of consistent monitoring of attainment through the primary stages—

Mary Scanlon: And in secondary school—from primary 1 to S3.

Terry Lanagan: And into early secondary. As a result of that, the vast majority of local authorities, including mine, have gone for standardised assessments. We have them in primaries 3, 5 and 7 and in S2. Therefore, we are beginning to build up a body of data that gives a robust measure of attainment.

Mary Scanlon: That is not happening in every local authority.

Terry Lanagan: It is not happening in every local authority, but one of the aims of the Scottish attainment challenge is to look at the use of data at primary and early secondary school level and to consider how we can measure attainment levels more robustly.

Mary Scanlon puts her finger on a significant challenge, but I dispute the idea that we see it as a problem that arises only at the age of 14. I draw the committee's attention to all the other initiatives and the work that is going on in schools to try to address the issue at the earliest possible stage. Early and effective intervention is what works, as everyone recognises.

Kevin Lowden: I do not necessarily endorse exactly what Terry Lanagan said, but I note that, in Scotland, we are starting to see a shift in professional roles, identity and culture among teachers, whereby they are becoming more reflective practitioners. External monitoring is built into the system, but teachers are also becoming far better at reflecting on their learning and teaching strategies. Mary Scanlon has provided an accurate pen portrait of the challenge and the wider context, and what I have described is part of addressing that challenge.

Mary Scanlon: Okay—I will move on to my second question.

Before I came to Parliament, I was a lecturer in further and higher education, so I was surprised to see that colleges barely get a passing mention in the submission from Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce.

During the committee's visit to Wester Hailes last week, some of us, including Chic Brodie, asked questions about colleges. Given how much the school wanted to work with the college, I was surprised by how difficult it found that to be; I think that my colleagues would agree with me on that. The school said that it had resources for a car mechanics course but could fill the course only if it could get a lecturer to come in once or twice a week. The engagement from the college was not very good.

Secondly, I know that there have been a lot of challenges with mergers taking place and so on, but it seems—forgive me for saying this, but it was said to me—that colleges are so busy being universities that they have taken their eye off vocational education, and they need to do more to engage with schools. I am not talking about the whole of Scotland—that comment was made in relation to Edinburgh College—but, in order for the system to work, we all have to work together rather than passing the buck.

James Bream: I will respond to that directly. Our primary body of work in that area involves employers and schools, so the fit with the Wood report has been strong in that respect. The omission, as Mary Scanlon sees it, of any comment on colleges is not necessarily to be viewed as a bad thing.

In the north-east we have one particularly strong college—which was formerly two colleges—with two campuses, one in Aberdeen and one in Fraserburgh. Some really good practices are being embedded between schools and the colleges in the north-east. In particular, we are starting to see a more flexible approach to learning, which we welcome. Pupils are being released in school time to learn their trade or gain their education—whatever we want to call it—in the colleges. That more flexible approach, which allows young people access to college provision during school time, is already happening, and we do not see the need to reflect on that area in any great depth. It is a really positive thing.

Mhairi Harrington: First, I am really disappointed to hear that a school has requested to work with a college and that request has not been taken forward. I cannot speak about the individual circumstances of any one institution, but given my own experience I feel strongly that colleges in most parts of Scotland play a key, pivotal role with schools in the development of vocational qualifications.

The quality and evidence base of the college-school partnerships is quite stunning in some areas. There is work to be done to make that consistent throughout Scotland, which can be addressed through learning about and sharing best practice. Colleges are such an integral part of partnership working; that can never be overstated.

I am confident that if such a problem was raised, it would be taken very seriously and addressed. The college sector is known to be proactive, responsive and utterly committed to partnership working for the benefit of our young people.

Terry Lanagan: I am disappointed at the reference in the account of the committee's visit to Wester Hailes to the comment about the college. The Wood report highlighted that there is an issue with consistency across the country, as Mhairi Harrington said. That applies not just to college

liaison but to all aspects of the work. One can probably find good examples of all—or most—of the 39 recommendations somewhere in Scotland, but that good practice needs to be embedded.

I have to say that my own experience with colleges is very different. My authority has an excellent relationship with West College Scotland, and I serve on the college's learning and teaching quality committee. We have college lecturers working in our schools, and our youngsters go to college on day release and on a longer-term basis. We work closely with colleges on a range of initiatives, and I hear my colleagues talking about the same things happening elsewhere in Scotland. That work might not be universal, but there is a lot of good practice.

One of the challenges in the Wood commission's final report is for us to identify good practice and ensure that it is shared across the country. It is there already—it is just not taking place everywhere.

Mary Scanlon: I have a final small question, convener.

The Convener: Okay—one final small question.

Mary Scanlon: I was disappointed to read in the submission from Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce that its members consider that there are

"young people often receiving poor or incorrect information about careers and work opportunities in particular sectors."

and that a

"change needs to be embedded in both primary and secondary schools."

It would be concerning to the committee if people were getting "poor or incorrect information" in schools.

James Bream: Again, I hope that the disappointment is not a reflection on us for reporting that view. It is something that we are told frequently, and it is one of the areas in which we think there is an opportunity to embed different behaviours and activities to engage employers in the process of providing careers guidance in schools.

It would, I think, be unfair to expect that teachers of whatever type can give accurate careers advice. They are teachers—that is their job—and they are professionals in their own way.

Mary Scanlon: Skills Development Scotland is supposed to be giving careers advice.

James Bream: Even with that being the case, SDS can access the knowledge of employers who are much more up to date on the jobs that exist. We heard earlier that jobs and roles are continually changing and will be very different in another 10 years, so the best people to give advice on the jobs that are out there and the skills that are needed are those who are employing. There is a great opportunity to look at careers advice and use employers to benefit young people, and we should snap it up.

The Convener: For everybody's information, the committee will have separate sessions with SDS and Education Scotland as we go through the process.

Kevin Lowden: What seems to be underpinning a lot of what we are talking about is co-ordination—or brokering, in a sense. There are approaches from schools and colleges, and there is a role for careers advice in primary school and so on. We have seen from studies that things have worked well. There is a need, in a local context and through local partnerships, for some brokering and organisation, perhaps through a co-ordinating body or individuals who can make the links and create the liaison. Otherwise, people talk past one another.

James Bream: That is where the regional invest in youth groups are absolutely crucial. They can see all the work that is going on, make the best use of resources and help agencies to consolidate the resource that they have to work more effectively.

The Convener: Siobhan McMahon has—I am assured—a very quick supplementary.

11:30

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): It should be. It is based on the evidence that we heard at Wester Hailes education centre about schools wishing to engage with colleges. The timetables do not start when the school term starts, which means that pupils are unable to go to college for four or five weeks. Terry Lanagan referred to an engineering course involving St Peter the Apostle high school and West College Scotland. Is engagement happening in that particular example? If so, what should we do to change the position across the board? What resources need to be in place so that, when people start the school term, they can go to the college from the off, rather than wait until college starts?

Terry Lanagan: Our college courses start within a week of the start of the school term. You mention St Peter the Apostle high school, which has the engineering HNC that I mentioned earlier. The key was that the school and the college were prepared to be flexible in their approach to timetabling. Basically, they ripped up the timetable, because it was an opportunity for a particular group of youngsters for whom the course was an appropriate route. Increasingly, as

the ADES written evidence says, we need to look afresh at senior phase timetabling so that it is not so much a menu approach, where people take it or leave it, but is about what individual youngsters want to get from their senior phase, and then doing our best to ensure that they get it. That is what happened in that case, and that was the key to its success.

Professor Gilloran: I reassure the committee that, in the work that we do in the academies programme, there is huge flexibility. We work with more than 50 schools, along with Edinburgh College, West Lothian College and Borders College. There has been flexibility in moving young people around the country so that their education is in their school, in a college, at university and in work. That was not easy to start with, but that flexibility is now there in the system.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): My question follows on from that, because it is about flexibility in schools and colleges, which is a major part of the Wood report, and we have gone into it at some length. West College Scotland's submission states:

"School timetables and how subjects are placed across them can, at times, lack flexibility".

SDS said:

"A flexible, but consistent approach to school and college timetabling across Scotland, and within local authorities or regions where needed, could avoid duplication of resource."

Duplication is a subject that constantly comes up at the committee with regard to education.

The people we heard from at Wester Hailes education centre told us how they ripped up the timetable, which Terry Lanagan talked about, and found a way to make it work for them. I was impressed with that type of flexibility, not just because the headteacher is a fellow Paisley buddie—I do not think that that is the only reason why the school has been reasonably successful, although it might be one of them. How do we get that type of flexibility throughout Scotland so that, as Terry Lanagan says, the young person in effect takes control of their destiny and future? That is how we will get buy-in from young people, whether it is vocational or academic education. I was impressed by some of the young people at Wester Hailes, who told us exactly what they were doing and how they had bought into that. How do we get teachers to buy into it as well?

Mhairi Harrington: We have to ensure that, in areas where we are trying to be flexible, that fits the needs of the area. The danger is to try to impose a flexible model across Scotland that would not be fit for purpose in all areas. There are serious logistical challenges in working between colleges and schools. In my experience, even when local partnership working is strongly focused on the common goals for young people, underneath that, very good infrastructure is needed to tackle the logistics.

In West Lothian, all 11 secondary schools have come together with common timetabling options so that young people can travel to college. That was done a number of years ago, because we wanted to open up the options for young people. The college sits on the senior phase timetabling group and the opportunities for all group, and we work with headteachers. We are embedded in the infrastructure, which allows us to listen, understand the logistical challenges and ensure that we deliver the programmes that young people need. That comes about only as a result of working seriously and closely in partnership with our colleagues in schools and education services.

Terry Lanagan: We have a similar situation, as we have common timetabling elements that enable travel to college and travel between schools, so that we can get the most efficient timetable possible. However, if schools are left to themselves, they will simply do what they can within their own resources. The approach requires leadership at the centre, so timetabling can be done across the schools.

Schools can see the benefits for their pupils. By changing the way that we did the timetable last year, we almost doubled the number of youngsters who were able to get advanced highers, because we maximised the opportunities across the five secondary schools. We are fortunate enough to be a small local authority with a small geographical area, and we made the most of that. There are big advantages to the approach, if we can convince schools to do it.

Kevin Lowden: Mhairi Harrington and Terry Lanagan have identified some excellent case studies, which should be used as inspiration in other areas of Scotland, so that people can see what can be learned from them. We should always be wary of transplanting things; it is better to translate them. We should say, "Here's a model. This is how we did it. How would you fine tune that for your context?" We should also build in careful evaluation so that we know what the impact is. We should be sure that something works, and works over time.

George Adam: The depute head of Wester Hailes education centre said that he had to get buy-in from the staff in relation to working differently. He said that they felt that they were going through a process rather than educating young people. They embraced the curriculum for excellence totally—much as you have already said—which manages to get teachers to teach again as opposed to processing pupils. I thought that that was a valid observation.

A lot of the evidence that we get is about teachers wanting to know what their end game is, looking to the exam and working back from there. It was good to hear about a place that had found a way to have an on-going evaluation as well. It was one of those examples that make you want to say, "How can we get that flexibility elsewhere?" How do we engage with the unions and everyone else to get to that place?

Professor Gilloran: It is interesting that the staff have not been mentioned much up to now. That is an important point. One of the unintended consequences of the academies project was getting teaching teams in schools, colleges and universities to talk to one another and share their expectations and practices, which enabled people to understand what is happening to someone when they are 14 or 15 and what is going to happen to them when they are 18 or 19. There are real benefits to that cross-fertilisation between staff groups.

Liam McArthur: One of the other things that Wester Hailes education centre's depute head told us was that it was not until they moved to the three-plus-three model and away from the two-plus-two-plus-two model that the staff found that they were able to adopt the flexible approach that others have referred to. It would be interesting to know whether our witnesses feel that that is a sine qua non for making the progress that we want to make.

The other thing that I found interesting about our visit last week was that the teaching staff were able to see each of the pupils' progress in any subject at any given stage in any month. Given all the stuff that we have heard about the workload pressures and overassessment in the roll-out of national 4 and national 5, and, to a lesser extent, the new highers, it would be interesting to know whether the panel thought that that was a realistic ambition for schools across the country. Presumably, if Wester Hailes education centre can do that in a way that delivers results and is bedding in successfully, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that that could be achieved across the board.

Terry Lanagan: Schools are becoming more and more sophisticated about using technology to track and monitor the progress of young people so that they can get a clear picture. SEEMiS provides a module that allows that to be done quite effectively.

On your question about the three-plus-three and two-plus-two-plus-two models, I agree that people are beginning to see a clearer picture about the broad general education and the transfer into the senior phase. Interestingly, however, the waters are probably becoming more muddied, in that there is probably more divergence in the curricular models that are being offered and elements of choice are being introduced sometimes at the end of S1 and sometimes at the end of S2.

We must remember that personalisation and choice are entitlements in curriculum for excellence. I sense, therefore, that the argument about the three-plus-three model versus the two-plus-two-plus-two model is probably a dead one and that we are moving into a period of refinement in which schools are looking again at their curriculum. Indeed, all of our schools are looking again at the broad general education and are changing what they are doing.

As for workload, I am halfway through the annual reviews of the secondary schools. As part of that process, we go out and spend a whole day in each school, and we have been talking about workload and where teachers are at the moment. The feeling from the schools that I have been in so far is very much that this year has been better than last year; that the pressures of introducing the national 5s, in particular, have settled and that people are more comfortable with them; and that people are more confident with the new highers, where they have been introduced, and that they dovetail well with the national 5s that were introduced last year.

Although there are still significant workload issues, which I am sure that you will hear about from the Educational Institute of Scotland and others, I think that the general feeling is that there was particular pressure last year and that things are improving this session.

Gordon MacDonald: I am keen to understand the role of employers in the attainment agenda. To start with, I want to read out a couple of quotes.

> "All pupils over the age of 14 must have an opportunity for work-based vocational learning linked to accompanying relevant qualifications. This will require a major commitment from Scotland's employers, working closely with local authorities and secondary schools."

> "There must be a major expansion in the involvement of businesses in our schools. All primary, secondary and special schools must develop partnership agreements with local businesses and other appropriate organisations."

Those quotes comes from a Scottish Executive report called "Determined to Succeed: A Review of Enterprise in Education", which was published in 2003. Given that the Wood commission has made similar recommendations, what are the challenges in getting employers involved in education?

James Bream: This is not the first time that I have heard about "Determined to Succeed"; in fact, it comes up every now and again when I have meetings with people who were involved in this issue 12 or 13 years ago.

The first point is that we are seeing what might be described as a latent demand. There are

employers who want to do this stuff; however, although about 70 per cent will say that they want to engage with it, only about a third are doing so. There is an opportunity and something to aim for there.

More of our businesses are probably at the small to medium-sized enterprise end of things, and they have told us about difficulties in finding out how to get engaged. For example, they might not know how to contact a school. That might sound fairly easy—you just phone up the headteacher—but it is a barrier.

Gordon MacDonald: But we are talking about 12 years to work out how to pick up a phone and call a school.

James Bream: Absolutely. Obviously, we have not moved on very far.

From the invest in youth side of things, I think that we need some standardisation for smaller businesses and a very simple template—for want of a better word—for giving them guidance. I cannot comment on what has happened over the past 12 years, because we have been involved with this for only a year and a half, but small businesses are certainly saying that they welcome such an approach.

At the larger end, there are active partnerships in the north-east that are working pretty well. The majority of the schools have a strong business partnership. We have spoken about case studies and examples. We need to look at those and see how they work because they are achieving really positive outcomes.

11:45

Terry Lanagan: One of the challenges is the very differing labour markets across Scotland. West Dunbartonshire is very different from the north-east in that the council is by far the biggest employer in the area. We have to take the lead as an employer in engaging with education and other council departments. We have two or three medium-to-big players, such as Aggreko, Polaroid and BAE Systems, and it is comparatively easy to get them to engage in the process. In fact, they are very enthusiastic and supportive.

Most of our employers are not even SMEs, but are microbusinesses—one or two-guy operations. How do we persuade them that there is something in it for them and that they have something to offer? We have to become quite inventive about incentivising microbusinesses and small businesses to engage.

For example, many very small businesses find it hard to employ apprentices. We have to find a way to help that, perhaps by delivering the academic side of apprenticeships in school and by joining up colleges, employers and schools, so that there is less downtime for the small employer. Can the hours when the apprentice is traditionally at college be done while the young person is still at school?

One of the big challenges will be to engage SMEs and very small businesses in the process. It is easier for the bigger businesses because they have the capacity to do it.

Kevin Lowden: The engagement of employers at all levels is fundamental to the success of the strategy. If we look south of the border, there has been a real issue in getting employers to engage with schools. The context is different in Scotland, but, as you say, there is a range in the size of employers and in some cases employers may be transient. Given the vagaries of the economic system, some employers may feel that they can engage with schools over a one, two or three-year period, but what happens when the market turns or the employer disappears? We have to build some recognition of those issues into the system.

This goes back to what I was saying earlier about having a focus on partnership in the area that is co-ordinated by someone who does the brokering. All partners want to know what is in it for them. There may be a shared commitment to the outcomes for young people, but they also want incentives. Engagement is fundamental to the strategy.

James Bream: Only about half of businesses take on young people for work experience because they think that it is of benefit to the business. That is quite surprising.

Bizarrely, the companies that are best suited to giving young people a broad experience are microbusinesses, because in a week a young person can get experience of finance, sales and human resources—the businesses have to do everything. If we can make it easy for those companies, there could be a big opportunity.

Gordon MacDonald: How do we make it easier for businesses? The committee visited Wester Hailes—that is in my constituency, so I would have mentioned it even if no one else had—and the pupils said that they had a positive view of work experience and considered that slightly longer placements of around four weeks were better than a one or two-week placement. Placements were also seen as a good means of boosting confidence and increasing work readiness. The pupils themselves recognise the benefit of work experience, but how do we get employers—those one or two-man businesses, if they are the majority—to offer work experience?

James Bream: The right challenge has been put to employers to offer work experience; the challenge back to the education sector is how we

create a flexible timetabling system and embed the opportunity within it. In the old days, there would be afternoon release on Wednesdays over four weeks. Now we need different models of work experience. The old model of one week's work experience is not fit for purpose in allowing different employers the flexibility to act.

Employers can do only so much, and it is incumbent on them to work in partnership with the education system to meet some of the challenges in providing a consistent level of service to hundreds of pupils. I suspect that that will not be easy, but we need to work it out.

Terry Lanagan: I will give you an example from a local perspective. About six years ago, we decided that the week's work experience in S4 was not fit for purpose, and we ripped it up completely. We now offer every young person the opportunity of bespoke work experience or a bespoke work placement in the year that they leave school. Given that more and more youngsters are staying on until sixth year, why would they do their work experience in S4?

Moreover, in the past, work experience often did not relate to youngsters' aspirations or aptitude. That is what we do now. It can still last a week, if that is appropriate, but depending on the nature of the placement it can also be half a day a week for a term or three weeks spread through the year.

One of the advantages of that approach is that we can engage with local employers and talk to them about what they can offer. After all, it is not easy for some employers to offer a full week, whereas half a day a week or work at the weekend might suit them better. We have a range of different models that is suited to the young person and which is based on what the young person is looking for and on what the local labour market can offer.

Professor Gilloran: Gordon MacDonald asked about how we get employers involved, and we have talked a lot about engagement and people's contribution being valued. When we set up the hospitality and tourism academy, we involved employers in the design of the curriculum not because we needed certain industry-specific knowledge but because—and this comes back to James Bream's earlier comment—we wanted soft skills such as communication, team working, discipline and attitude. I have to say that I do not know why these things are always called "soft skills"; it is a bit of a demeaning phrase to describe some of the most important skills that we all need.

Gordon MacDonald: Finally, on employment opportunities for young people, I think that, if we are going to show the importance of vocational training and so on, there has to be an outcome for young people at the end of it. Currently, most of the employment opportunities for young people tend to be in retail, hospitality and tourism. However, the OPITO report, "Fuelling the next generation: A study of the UK upstream oil and gas workforce" points out that over the next five years there will be something like 12,000 entrants to work in the North Sea. Given that such opportunities are coming up, what can we do to encourage more employers to take on school leavers and perhaps put them through the modern apprenticeship scheme to show them the importance of vocational training?

James Bream: The oil and gas industry is pretty good at getting young people into the industry, but it is a slightly different question to ask how you get people from wherever they are in the United Kingdom to decide that they want to move to the north-east, Glasgow or wherever the supply chain might be. I guess that it is a matter of making the industry look attractive.

As for getting young people into modern apprenticeships, some employers have told me that, although we have an economic strategy that talks about getting people into higher-value jobs, the fact is that the funding for engineering apprenticeships is the same as the funding for customer service apprenticeships but the cost of delivering an engineering apprenticeship is much higher. Companies such as the Score Group are really good at this stuff because they want to do it and because they have a leader who thinks that it is important. It might be worth looking at the relative financial incentives in these areas in order to prop up our industrial and economic strategies and ensure that they feed properly into each other.

The Convener: Chic Brodie has a very brief supplementary.

Chic Brodie: I will be brief, convener.

At the end of the day, we might partly close the gap, but we still have an overarching strategy for the country. The fact is that we need more entrepreneurs and businesspeople; QMU, for example, has four academies that are critical to the country's economic future. To what extent do you think that we inculcate the spirit of entrepreneurialism in the curriculum?

Terry Lanagan: I accept that we could do more. There are examples of good practice. If schools really embrace the work of Young Enterprise Scotland and take it seriously, that can have extremely good outcomes. The youth philanthropy initiative is extremely valuable. It is not just about entrepreneurship, but it touches on that.

I think that we could go a good bit further with entrepreneurship. It is probably an area that many teachers do not feel terribly confident in, because it is not a skill that they have been trained to develop. Given the roles that prominent

entrepreneurs such as Sir Alan Sugar and Richard Branson play in popular culture these days, that is probably a way of appealing to young people on that whole agenda. I think that there is a way to go.

Professor Gilloran: It is a fascinating question, because so much of education is about putting things in boxes and entrepreneurialism is about thinking outside the box. I completely agree with what Terry Lanagan said.

Queen Margaret University does not have a module on entrepreneurialism that everyone does; the concept is embedded in particular programmes. We encourage our students to get involved in business start-ups. We have about half a dozen this year. You would expect them to be in healthcare, but they are in fascinating areas such as drama and performance and the creative industries.

Chic Brodie: You should come to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee.

James Bream: I suppose that the concept of entrepreneurialism does not always have to be about someone setting up a new business. There will be great entrepreneurs in the public sector, in schools and maybe even in politics.

The Convener: You seem somewhat doubtful.

James Bream: I said "maybe"; I will think of one. [*Laughter*.]

It is a matter of getting someone who is inspirational in front of a young person. If we can make sure that businesspeople are put in front of pupils, they will pick up the spark and get excited.

Chic Brodie: Yes, but it is not just a one-way street. We can do that, but there ought to be a way of finding entrepreneurs through the teaching mechanism or at least of exposing youngsters to the opportunities that exist.

James Bream: Yes. I guess that that is the role of the educator who spends time with the pupils and who can identify those who behave in a risk-taking way. Perhaps they should encourage such behaviour rather than suppressing it.

Terry Lanagan: If I were to generalise, I would say that primary schools are much better at this than secondary schools are. There are some fantastic examples of businesses being set up in primary schools. They might be tied on to things such as the eco agenda or the rights respecting schools agenda. There are extremely vibrant examples of entrepreneurship in primary schools; perhaps we do not do as well in secondary schools.

George Adam: I have a quick supplementary on the back of what Chic Brodie said. We are not talking only about the entrepreneurial side of things. As Alan Gilloran mentioned earlier, it is a case of getting people to make the leap into education, whether we are talking about sportspeople, the parents or someone who has credibility with the family. Is it not the case that we could take a slightly different approach and try to get sportspeople and businesspeople—people whom we want young people to aspire to be like—really involved in the educational process?

Professor Gilloran: I have a lovely anecdote. Our head of outreach was in a primary school talking about the children's university and the opportunities for young people to get involved. Afterwards, there was a mêlée in the class. He said that the class parted and the class hard man—who had fists like sledgehammers—walked towards him. He would not look at the head of outreach; he just said to him, "I don't suppose my boxing would count, would it?" The head of outreach said, "Let's go and talk to your boxing coach about it." The next day, he went to speak to the boxing coach with the young lad, and he found out that the young lad knew all about nutrition, a regime, discipline and timekeeping. He knew about a whole lot of things but had never thought of them in terms of learning.

12:00

Liam McArthur: I want to go back to a point that Gordon MacDonald made about equality of opportunity. He asked whether the engagement of employers is more problematic in particular areas because of the make-up of the local economy, and Terry Lanagan gave a couple of examples. The issue has been the subject of a criticism of the Wood report, and a number of people have picked up on it. The Scottish Youth Parliament states:

> "there is a significant risk of marginalising young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the practical delivery of the recommendations, which could have no effect or an adverse effect on attainment. For example, the basic costs of sending a young person on good quality work experience may inhibit choice."

That relates to James Bream's point that family or parental relationships might open doors that are not open to others in the cohort.

Do schools have a role to play in triaging the opportunities? I think that it was Alan Gilloran who said that people are doing things because they see an interest in them as well as for more altruistic motives. They might be predisposed to identify the higher performing pupils and get them in for work experience when, actually, the opportunities that are available might be better for raising the attainment of others in the class group.

How do we get round the situation where the more able pupils are gravitating to the better work experience opportunities?

Professor Gilloran: As Kevin Lowden said, there is now much greater reflection on the part of teachers. There is much less preciousness and people saying, "We can fix everything". Our experience from our work with not only the children's university but the academies is that there is an openness on the part of teachers and a desire to get involved and work in partnership. I do not think that that willingness to work in partnership or the triaging that you mentioned were there five or 10 years ago. There is a lot of hope.

Liam McArthur: So the judgment is reached by the schools and employers in discussion rather than employers saying, "This is what we have to offer and this is what we need in return." The schools are brokering that in a way that better reflects the interests of individual pupils.

Kevin Lowden: That is it. It requires a lot of in-depth knowledge of the needs and abilities of the young people. It requires insights from schools and from careers advice services, employers and other partners. It comes right down to knowledge of what will benefit the young person.

Mhairi Harrington: Another dimension is that we should use our collective work with employers to benefit all sectors. The college sector has strong employer engagement—the City of Glasgow College mentions in its submission that it works with 1,500 employers, and at West Lothian College we work with about 800 employers. That must be something that we can benefit from in our partnership with schools. Rather than keeping employers to ourselves, we should ensure that they are involved with the whole pipeline of skills development from accepting young people from schools on placements to working with colleges. For employers, that makes a much more joined-up approach to the skills development of young people.

There are some great examples of leading employers—such as Mitsubishi and Shin-Etsu—who are heavily investing in work placements and opportunities right through from schools to colleges and on into employment. It is not about having employers for schools and employers for colleges; it is about all of us working with employers to better effect.

Liam McArthur: Can I flip that round? There are challenges in areas of higher deprivation given the ecology of businesses that may be able to engage, but similarly you will be aware of some concerns about the way in which the attainment fund is targeted at the SIMD 20 areas.

The fund does not pick up the attainment issues in pockets of poverty in areas that are generally slightly more affluent. There are pockets of poverty and individuals who perhaps need that support in pretty much all parts of the country. Do you see that as a potential problem? If so, are there things that we can do to link the funding to the individual rather than to the neighbourhood or the area?

Terry Lanagan: I need to be careful about what I say. As executive director of educational services at West Dunbartonshire Council, I am delighted that we are involved in the Scottish attainment challenge, but I am here representing ADES and ADES did have some questions about the distribution method. For example, West Dunbartonshire is involved in the school improvement partnership programme with Renfrewshire. The primary schools in our most deprived areas are paired with the primary schools in Renfrewshire's most deprived areas. Renfrewshire is not involved in the attainment challenge, but the most deprived of the Renfrewshire schools are more deprived than the most deprived schools in West Dunbartonshire.

There are anomalies and, statistically, the way to really address the highest number of youngsters living in the most deprived areas would be to get down to primary school level across the country. Areas such as Fife, for instance, which have areas of significant affluence but also have areas of real poverty, are not covered.

ADES has raised some questions about the distribution method, but the fund could provide us with a very interesting piece of work over the next four years as we look at what we can do to address some of the attainment gap issues.

Chic Brodie: I have a question for Mhairi Harrington about the engagement of colleges with the employers. She mentioned that West Lothian College works with about 800 employers. What is Skills Development Scotland doing?

Mhairi Harrington: At West Lothian College, we have a very positive partnership with SDS; it helps support some of our programmes with employers and it works with us on the modern apprenticeship places. As a college, we have a number of modern apprentices with SDS and some young students going through employability programmes. Our experience locally is very positive.

Siobhan McMahon: We have touched on this point, but I want to get the bigger picture on how the implementation plan fits in with everything else. Already in this parliamentary session, the committee has looked at the early years task force, the curriculum for excellence, teaching Scotland's future, the structural reform of colleges, the focus on youth employment through opportunities for all and other initiatives, legislative reform, FE and HE governance, and so on. I have a nice, easy question for you. What do you

consider will be the likely reduction in youth unemployment based on this plan?

James Bream: I do not think that we have put a number on youth unemployment in our regional invest in youth group. We are generally looking at positive destinations, which may include university—or vocational qualifications, as people have used the term. There is not such a significant youth unemployment number in the north-east. From memory, there are about 600 young people at the moment without a positive destination. It feels to me as though we could almost grab them and work with them on an individual basis. However—Liam McArthur alluded to this issue earlier—some of those young people have quite a different distance to travel than others.

When we come back to careers advice and work experience, it is about trying to work with educators, who are spending a lot more time with those young people, to work out how long it will take and what process we need to go through with an employer to get those young people to that positive place. In a roundabout way of not answering your question at all—

Siobhan McMahon: I am not surprised.

James Bream: —I think that we have a relatively small number in our area. In some respects, with everything that is going on, it would be a fantastic result if we could maintain that number. However, we do not think that that is good enough and we are pretty committed to lowering the number of young people without a positive destination below 600.

Terry Lanagan: That is a fascinating question. I would not want to put a figure on it either, so I will not do that. However, one reason that I am so enthusiastic about the whole agenda is that it has the potential to change Scottish society for the better. That sounds quite grandiose, but I genuinely believe that to be the case. If we succeed in meeting the success criteria that are laid out in the Wood commission's final report, Scottish society will have been changed for the better.

However, education on its own cannot deliver employment prospects for young people. One thing that has always struck me is that one of the entitlements in curriculum for excellence is support for a young person into a sustained positive destination. We can give all the support that we can, but if the sustained positive destinations are not there for young people to be supported into, that is the issue. Ultimately, this agenda will be delivered successfully not only if we play our part, but if economic growth at a societal level—a macroeconomic level—is delivered across Scotland. Unless the two marry up, we can have the best prepared workforce on the planet, but we will not have the sustained positive destinations for them to go to. There is a larger societal challenge behind your question.

Siobhan McMahon: Given your answers, and knowing that there is not a coherent education policy—we talked about pockets of good practice earlier this morning—how do we make the implementation plan work? Should it take priority over the rest of the pathways and the plans that are already established or looking to be established?

Kevin Lowden: That is a challenge. The plan has to articulate change rather than being a bolt-on or disrupting what is already in place. At the same time, it is about taking a grand strategy and thinking about how we translate it at a local level. The plan will work if it is locally appropriate and if there is partnership working, as we talked about earlier.

I have thought very carefully about how we take something like this plan and translate it so that it allows creativity, allows some of the examples of flexibility that we have heard about and allows that to develop. Those who are involved at levels where key decisions are made—people working at schools or local authorities, or employers—have to feel supported to take those decisions as well. If they want to be flexible, take risks and work in new ways, that culture has to run alongside this initiative.

Mhairi Harrington: The developing Scotland's young workforce agenda builds on initiatives that are already well under way. We are very clear that it builds on curriculum for excellence—it is not dissimilar to that, and it is not something different.

That said, I think that the agenda needs to be driven forward relentlessly. In terms of delivering the Wood recommendations, there is a commitment to at least a seven-year programme. It needs to be more than a short-term initiative or something that we might change our minds about in two years' time. As Terry Lanagan said, this is the most significant time of change for young people's opportunities. We are committing for the long term, and quite rightly.

Liam McArthur: Terry Lanagan mentioned sustained positive destinations. We want to get this as right as we possibly can as early as we can. That is the best guarantee in terms of lifetime attainment, even if it offers no absolute guarantee.

Throughout the debate about youth employment, there has been a nagging feeling that we are dealing with a sector—the college sector—that enshrines the concept of lifelong learning. Businesses do not go belly-up on a whim, but even with the best will in the world, they come and go. Sustainable opportunities will arise only if we have a commitment to lifelong learning.

A lot of the people whom we are talking about will come in and out of that learning process.

Is there a need for us to continually reinforce the notion that this does not provide a guarantee, and that it does not mean that people will not come back and do other learning at other stages? Do we need to reinforce that idea at the earliest point, as well as the notion that the here and now is important for those life skills that will set people on a reasonable pathway?

12:15

Terry Lanagan: Yes, I think so. James Bream mentioned that a lot of the employability skills training is on generic, transferable skills. That is important. It has become a truism in education to say that we are educating young people for jobs that have not been invented yet. Therefore, skills must be transferable. Technology will develop, so people must engage in lifelong learning if they are to adapt to the changing society and the demands that will be placed on them by different jobs and employment patterns. We absolutely must be involved in that work.

Liam McArthur: This may be more a reflection of a political weakness, but while you focus on one area as a priority the danger is that you stop focusing on other areas as priorities. Therefore, it is helpful if there is a message back that, even if we get this right, that does not diminish the importance of lifelong learning.

James Bream: On lifelong learning in the workplace, our research suggests that 98 per cent of employers think that training and investment in training is a good thing. I suggest that the 2 per cent of businesses that do not think that will be the ones that will go. All that the education sector can do is get people on to that pathway; once they are in a job, it is over to the employers to be enlightened and invest in their staff, and to see the benefits that that returns.

On the whole, we are moving in a pretty good direction. In a downward economic cycle, the only challenge is for businesses to continue to think, "We'll keep investing in our staff, because when we come out of this we'll be in a better place to push on." We probably need to work on that.

Mhairi Harrington: I echo Terry Lanagan's comments. Lifelong learning must absolutely be at the heart of the approach. We must never forget all the parallel activity. Indeed, over the past few years in particular, because of the recession, there have been large-scale responses to redundancies across Scotland. Colleges, along with other partners, have played a significant role in those responses.

If we took a straw poll around the room and asked people to put up their hand if what they are doing now is what they thought they would be doing when they were 17, and to say what that was, I imagine that what people say would be quite disparate.

Colleges are absolutely central to people's learning.

The Convener: I see that Mary Scanlon wants to ask a supplementary. It had better be a small matter, Mary.

Mary Scanlon: It is a small question and it is to one person only. My favourite Audit Scotland publication looks at the percentage improvement in attainment over the past 10 years. It says that East Dunbartonshire improved attainment by 15 per cent, which is commendable. Can Terry Lanagan explain why West Dunbartonshire has improved attainment by only 2 per cent?

Terry Lanagan: First, it depends on which measure you take. I can give you another figure—[*Interruption*.] Yes, I know. However, with respect, the Audit Scotland report is a selective document. There is another figure that indicates that, in the past four years, West Dunbartonshire has improved by 10 per cent in terms of the number of youngsters getting three-plus highers at the end of S6 .

The latest benchmarking data, which was published in December, shows the proportion of youngsters from SIMD deciles 1 and 2 gaining five-plus higher equivalents by the end of S6. West Dunbartonshire is third from the top in that statistic; only East Dunbartonshire and East Renfrewshire are above us. That is a remarkable achievement given that the numbers of youngsters in SIMD deciles 1 and 2 in those two authorities are very small and the deprivation levels in West Dunbartonshire are very high. We can bandy about statistics, but I think that I can show significant and sustained improvement in a range of measures, which are not necessarily the ones that Audit Scotland chose to focus on.

The Convener: Okay. I think that the score is 15-all.

The Convener: I have one final question. The Government has said that it will publish an annual progress report on the implementation of the Wood report recommendations on developing Scotland's young workforce programme. Do you have any suggestions, advice or comments on what should be in that report?

James Bream: I suppose that we are slightly ahead of the game, in that we have our regional invest in youth groups. At the end of year 1, which is only two months long for us, we will have a board in place and we will have had a series of

working group meetings on work experience, careers and communications. Therefore, there is progress.

To look towards the end of the first operational year, once the executive team is in place, we would like every secondary school to have a business partner—a formal business relationship. That type of measure will start to show that there is commitment from both sides to make a difference in the area. I will be extremely disappointed if we do not achieve that.

Terry Lanagan: Both Mhairi Harrington and I are on the national programme board for developing the young workforce. Over the past few months, we have developed a series of programmes that should provide evidence for the annual report. We have five different workstreams, all of which have very clear milestones and targets. I think that that will be part of the report. The work of the groups that James Bream referred to will also be important.

I think that there may be more of a narrative rather than a statistical report in the first year, because it will take longer for the hard stats to really come through. I think that there will be a narrative about where we have got to, particularly with the five separate workstreams. That will cover employment, engagement and what we are doing in broad general education and the senior phase. I think that there will be some statistical evidence on modern apprentices and some evidence on what the colleges are doing. Off the top of my head, I think that that should form the basis of the report.

Professor Gilloran: I support that. We started a conversation about measuring attainment. I agree with Terry Lanagan: there may be more of a narrative. I would like to see information about partnerships, collaboration, what has been built on and the consistency that we have talked about. We have also talked quite a lot about cultural shift. I will not open up the debate on how to measure that, but I would like some progress to be made on identifying how much of a cultural shift has been made.

Kevin Lowden: From a research perspective, it was interesting to hear what we have just heard. I endorse what has been said. I, too, expect to see a narrative. Given the ambitious scale of the matter, we would expect to see evidence of infrastructure and systems being put in place that will lead on to maybe more metric and quantitative indicators over time.

Mhairi Harrington: I would like an annual report to pull out and highlight the real value that is being added by high-quality partnership working across the five change themes. We have said on the programme board that nothing will be successful in isolation. It really has to be about how we are pulling across all the change themes for success.

The Convener: I thank all of you for coming to the meeting and for giving us your time. We have spoken for almost two hours, so we have given the matter a fair old go. It was very important that we started to cover some of the broad themes as well as some of the detail in looking at the attainment gap.

I suspend the meeting briefly.

12:23

Meeting suspended.

12:24

On resuming—

Public Petition

Creationism (Schools) (PE1530)

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is consideration of a petition. On 27 January 2015, the Public Petitions Committee referred PE1530, by Spencer Fildes on behalf of the Scottish Secular Society, to this committee. The petition

"Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to issue official guidance to bar the presentation in Scottish publicly funded schools of separate creation and of Young Earth doctrines as viable alternatives to the established science of evolution, common descent, and deep time."

Members have the note from the clerk, which provides links to the petition and the Public Petitions Committee's previous consideration of the matter. Do members have any comments or suggestions for further action that the committee might or might not wish to take on the petition?

Mary Scanlon: I would like clarification, convener. I would be interested in seeing some information on why other UK Administrations have issued guidance that creationism and intelligent design should not be considered.

Liam McArthur: Paragraph 14 of the clerk's note, which I think was prepared for the Public Petitions Committee, says that neither the Educational Institute of Scotland nor School Leaders Scotland believes that guidance is necessary and

"they do not believe that teaching of creationism is prevalent or a serious problem in Scottish schools."

I am sure that that was meant as a reassurance, but the use of the terms "prevalent" and "serious problem" rather than just "problem" raises questions about the number of cases that we are talking about.

I do not necessarily support intervention through guidance, because that goes against the grain of ministers' interaction with what happens in schools, but I note that the EIS has said that

"the curriculum is a matter for teachers, both individually and collectively, and ... legislative interference in the content of the curriculum is both undesirable and unnecessary."

Although I agree with that comment, I observe that in the recent past there has been controversy about items being placed on the recommended reading list for Scottish studies in a way that seems to move slightly away from that overarching principle. It would certainly be helpful to get the clarification that Mary Scanlon seeks, but as I have said, I am reluctant for ministers to issue guidance on the matter, given that there will be other areas where similar guidance will be sought.

Chic Brodie: I was a member of the Public Petitions Committee when the petition first raised its head. Although I will go along with what the committee decides, I suggest that we send the Scottish Secular Society and those who support creationism away with Einstein's message that

"Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble."

They should go into a room and discuss that and just let everyone else get on with the curriculum as it is.

The Convener: Thank you for that.

I am quite happy to take on board the suggestion by Mary Scanlon and Liam McArthur that we should find out a bit more information, but I accept Liam's point about the nature of Scottish education and the fact that directives are not issued here in the way that they might be elsewhere. That might be the difference that Mary Scanlon was wanting to know about. The Scottish Government has made it quite clear that it does not issue guidance in that sense, and I certainly accept the point.

In advance of the petition coming before the committee, a member of the public forwarded me a letter that they had received from Aileen Campbell MSP, who had obviously written on the person's behalf to the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, Alasdair Allan. His response contains quite a useful paragraph that I want to make members aware of. It says:

"In relation to school science teaching, guidance is provided by Education Scotland in line with Curriculum for Excellence ... The guidance does not identify Creationism as a scientific principle and consequently it is not and should not be part of science learning and teaching. Likewise, Education Scotland does not identify Creationism as a scientific theory or a topic for inclusion within the curriculum. Therefore, Creationism should not be taught within science lessons."

That is quite a clear statement from Alasdair Allan on the issue, but given the questions that have been raised, I think that, just for clarity, it might be appropriate—and I will ask the committee for its views on the matter—to write to the Government to ask Mary Scanlon's question about the difference between what happens here and what happens across the rest of the UK. I think that it is to do with the different traditions in the education system. We will also ask the Government to confirm the position as laid out—quite fairly, I think—by Alasdair Allan in his letter of 26 February.

Liam McArthur: I entirely support that suggestion, convener, but it might also be helpful to inquire whether the Government has a sense of how "prevalent" or how much of a "serious problem" this is. It will be up to local authorities to take action on any concerns that are raised. Indeed, there was a prominent case in which such concerns were raised, but there are others and it would be helpful to get a sense of how widespread the issues are and how frequently they have arisen.

Mary Scanlon: You said that the Government does not offer guidance, convener, but the letter that you read out seemed like pretty clear guidance to me.

The Convener: The guidance is from Education Scotland.

Mary Scanlon: Is the letter to the committee, or did it go out to all local authorities?

The Convener: No. The letter was from the minister to Aileen Campbell MSP. I presume that she was raising a question with the minister on behalf of a constituent, and she got that response. She passed the response to the constituent, who then sent it to me.

Mary Scanlon: She would have got that letter a few years ago, then.

The Convener: No. It is dated 26 February 2015.

Mary Scanlon: Right. It was from work on behalf of a constituent. Given that the letter makes things absolutely clear—I am fine with that—will it be made available to all local authorities?

The Convener: No. It is a letter from the minister to an MSP who was acting on behalf of a constituent.

Mary Scanlon: Okay. It states the Government's position quite clearly.

The Convener: I think that it is quite clear, but for clarity the committee should ask the Government these questions. Instead of using a letter about a constituent, we will get its response to our questions and then the position will be available for everyone to see.

Mary Scanlon: That would be very helpful.

The Convener: That is why I am suggesting that we write to the Government for clarity on the position that is set out in the letter of 26 February to an individual member of the public; on the question that Mary Scanlon raised on the difference in culture with regard to the information and guidance that is issued elsewhere in the UK; and on Liam McArthur's point about prevalence. Are members content with that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: That brings us to the end of the agenda. I thank members for their attendance and co-operation, and I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 12:32.

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