



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 1 June 2022

Session 6



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CONTENTS

	Col.
INTERESTS	1
CONVENER	2
SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION	3
Cross-border Placements (Effect of Deprivation of Liberty Orders) (Scotland) Regulations 2022 [Draft].....	3
COLLEGES REGIONALISATION INQUIRY	4

EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
16th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Audrey Cumberford (Commission on the College of the Future)

Clare Haughey (Minister for Children and Young People)

Professor Sir Peter Scott (Commissioner for Fair Access)

Nora Senior (Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 1 June 2022

[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting at 09:45]

Interests

The Deputy Convener (Kaukab Stewart): Good morning, and welcome to the 16th meeting in 2022 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Oliver Mundell has sent his apologies for today's meeting.

I welcome Sue Webber, who is joining us for the first time as a member of the committee. Sue is replacing Stephen Kerr. On behalf of all members, I thank Stephen for his contribution to the work of the committee.

Because Sue is joining us for the first time, our first item of business is for her to declare any relevant interests.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): In the interest of being complete, I state that I was a councillor at the City of Edinburgh Council, but I ceased to be a councillor at the recent election.

Convener

09:46

The Deputy Convener: The committee's next task is to choose a convener. The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party are eligible for nomination as convener. I understand that the Conservative nominee to be convener is Sue Webber.

Sue Webber was chosen as convener.

The Deputy Convener: I will hand over to Sue to convene the rest of the meeting. Congratulations, Sue.

Subordinate Legislation

Cross-border Placements (Effect of Deprivation of Liberty Orders) (Scotland) Regulations 2022 [Draft]

09:47

The Convener (Sue Webber): Thank you. It is great to be here for what looks like an exciting meeting.

Agenda item 3 is subordinate legislation. The committee took oral evidence on the draft Cross-border Placements (Effect of Deprivation of Liberty Orders) (Scotland) Regulations 2022 at its two most recent meetings. On 18 May, the committee heard from officials from the office of the Children and Young People's Commissioner, and at its meeting last week, the committee took evidence from the Minister for Children and Young People, Clare Haughey, and Scottish Government officials.

The minister has returned to the committee today to move motion S6M-04165, in her name, which I invite her to do.

Motion moved,

That the Education, Children and Young People Committee recommends that the Cross-border Placements (Effect of Deprivation of Liberty Orders) (Scotland) Regulations 2022 be approved.—[Clare Haughey]

The Convener: Do members wish to make any comments?

There are no comments for you to respond to, minister. That seems to be straightforward.

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: The committee must now produce a report on the draft regulations. Is the committee content to delegate to the deputy convener and me the responsibility to agree that report on behalf of the committee?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank the minister and her officials for their attendance.

There will be a short suspension to allow a change of witnesses before we move on to the next agenda item.

09:48

Meeting suspended.

09:50

On resuming—

Colleges Regionalisation Inquiry

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is the first evidence session in our colleges regionalisation inquiry. I welcome Audrey Cumberland, a commissioner with the Commission on the College of the Future, who joins us in the committee room; Professor Sir Peter Scott, the Commissioner for Fair Access, who joins us online; and Nora Senior, chair of the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board, who also joins us online. Good morning to you all.

I begin with a bit of housekeeping. Our evidence session today is hybrid, and some witnesses and committee members are participating virtually. As those who are attending remotely will not be able to catch my eye, I ask them to put an R in the chat box when they wish to comment. The clerks will keep an eye on that and I will bring people in when I can.

I reassure you all that it is not necessary for every witness to respond to every question. If you have nothing to add on a particular question, that is fine. However, when you wish to speak, you can put an R in the chat function. As Audrey Cumberland is in the room, I will be able to bring her in if she catches my eye. I thank you all for your time today. Our session should last until around 11:45.

I will kick off. Yesterday, we had an announcement on the budget. What might the real-terms funding cuts that colleges are facing do to put at risk some of the benefits of regionalisation, and what might they mean to you? I will go to those who are joining us online first, if that is okay. Perhaps Professor Scott can start.

Professor Sir Peter Scott (Commissioner for Fair Access): Good morning, and thank you for inviting me to give evidence today. On that particular question, I am not sure that I am well qualified to answer. All institutions—colleges and universities—would like more money, and Governments obviously always face constraints on what is available. To the extent that college regionalisation has made—[Inaudible.]

The Convener: We are having an issue with the connection. We will sort that out. In the meantime, perhaps Audrey Cumberland would like to respond to the question.

Audrey Cumberland (Commission on the College of the Future): As, I am sure, the committee can imagine, every principal in Scotland was following events closely yesterday afternoon. Essentially, there is a freeze over pretty much the full length of the current session of Parliament. There is no question but that the real-

terms cuts are going to be a challenge for colleges and universities across the sector. That is on top of a situation in which, as has been demonstrated in a number of recent reports by Audit Scotland, and by the Scottish Funding Council in its “Financial Sustainability of Colleges and Universities in Scotland” report, the college sector is at a very unstable point with regard to its funding. That potentially has an impact in relation to the benefits of regionalisation and realising its full potential.

What does that mean? For Edinburgh College, it means that we are looking to find in the region of £5.5 million-worth of savings over the next three to four years on top of the savings of around £28 million that have been realised since 2013. We—and I—know that, if we continue to do what we do in the way that we do it, that will not be sustainable. As I said, reports that have been published recently indicate that it will not be sustainable, so something has to change in respect of either what colleges do, how we do it or the amount of activity.

I am a strong supporter of the suggestion that the solution is not solely in the gift of the college sector and the Government. It is about a whole-system approach to what Scotland needs to get out of its educational-vocational system and the wider tertiary and skills systems.

Nora Senior (Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board): I concur with what Audrey Cumberford has said: this will be a very challenging time for colleges. She mentioned £5.5 million of savings, but it is fair to say that the system needs to be freed up so that colleges can be more flexible in what they deliver, how they deliver it and where they can get funding from. In tandem with considering savings, we need to explore how to flex the college system and the whole infrastructure framework to make it easier for colleges to do things that they might not have considered before. That might involve more international contracts, closer working relationships with business, or closer partnerships and collaboration with universities to obtain funding through them, which colleges can repay.

We need to be more innovative about how colleges can deliver—about creating the conditions for colleges to be more fleet of foot and able to deliver—and about what they deliver. Investment will be required in order to maintain the vitality and sustainability of the sector. We also need to consider what it is that Scotland requires from its whole education sector. We cannot just consider taking funding away without being able to flex the system and the rules around it to make the college sector more productive.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I have just changed the question that I was going to ask. I

will come back to my original question in a moment, but I am intrigued by what Nora Senior has just said. What does that flexing mean? Why is it not happening already?

Nora Senior: At the moment, colleges receive funding on the basis of teaching and learning. Audrey Cumberford can probably give a better answer to the question than I can, but the funding mechanism is based on the credits for the number of people who are sent through the college system. There is a sort of pro rata payment to colleges for that. However, there is an anomaly in that. Fife College receives a higher per capita payment than Edinburgh College. There is a disparity whereby the colleges provide the same service but Edinburgh College gets paid a lower rate. That means that it cannot invest in people or in support and training to the same extent as other colleges in the sector.

There needs to be flexibility in how funding is delivered to individual colleges—and more flexibility around the types of courses that are delivered—so that business can participate more closely with colleges and universities in delivering against skills demand and needs.

Audrey Cumberford: Colleges currently do what we are funded to do, and the funding predominantly involves activity, volume and inputs. Nora Senior makes a really good point. If the funding is all geared towards that, the capacity and space to do other things is significantly reduced, to the extent that the core grant in aid that we receive is no longer enough even to pay the staff bill. There is therefore no capacity, and our focus is completely on learning and teaching. As some of you will know, the symbiotic relationship that colleges should—and do—have with industry is really important, but we could be doing so much more if we had the capacity to do it.

Nora’s point is really important. The answer is not always additional funding; it potentially involves considering how we can best flex the resource that is currently in the system and target it for the outcomes that we want to see in our regions.

10:00

Nora Senior: To answer Mr Rennie’s question a bit further, I add that innovation is a key area. In the innovation landscape at the moment, funding is geared towards universities and innovation centres but colleges actually have a really important role to play in innovation, particularly through live challenges for business and ensuring that the skills needs of business demand are met, particularly in skills planning. However, colleges are not funded for innovative development. There

is an anomaly in how funding is distributed—I refer to what Audrey Cumberford said about that. There perhaps needs to be greater scrutiny of and debate about what money is in the system and how it is actually used.

Willie Rennie: I am sorry to dig further into that, but I am intrigued. All of that sounds very sensible, and I am wondering why it has not happened already.

Audrey Cumberford: I agree with you: it sounds simple and it is very frustrating that it is not happening already. As ever, however, the solution is a wee bit more complex.

I would describe the college sector as a whole as being at quite an unstable point in its existence. It is therefore really important to try to maintain institutional stability across the sector. It is a matter of doing things that need to happen, such as changing not just funding levels, but funding models, methodologies and distribution. We need to ask whether the funding is in the right place in response to the demand. If we start to change all those things, things could quickly be destabilised as a consequence.

For example, I know—all the evidence is there—that the Edinburgh region is growing, and Edinburgh College can absolutely evidence that we could grow. Given the resource that is available to the whole sector, however, Edinburgh College being resourced to grow would by definition mean that another region will potentially have to go in the other direction. That could absolutely be the right thing to do, for all the right reasons, but maintaining funding stability to allow that to happen by way of transition is really important. The Scottish Funding Council's recent report on tertiary sustainability points to that, in that there is recognition that funding models and funding distribution have to change.

Returning to a point that Nora Senior made, I note that the environment has to be such that it will allow a transition towards that to happen. The Scottish Government has accepted almost all the recommendations in the report. I guess that the collective challenge is how to get from where we are now to where we know we need to be. It is not an easy question, and the answer is not easy or straightforward either.

Willie Rennie: I will ask my original question, convener. Sorry for going on a bit.

The Convener: That is okay.

Willie Rennie: For as long as I have been in the Parliament, colleges have faced significant cuts in funding. Those institutions are a shadow of what they used to be, even though regionalisation was supposed to strengthen the sector. In describing the result, you talked about stability, but I would

describe this—perhaps unfairly—as a crisis situation in which you are trying to hold things together. You face potential industrial action. Things in the sector are not easy. A significant number of places have been cut. Do you agree with that characterisation? If so, why are we in this situation? Does the Government not value you?

Audrey Cumberford: I was a principal pre-mergers and pre-regionalisation and during the reform, which took place over an 18-month period around 2012—that was very fast; it probably sets a record for how quickly public sector reform is done. This is very much a personal view, but the biggest disappointment for me was that, despite all the potential in creating colleges of scale and influence, with a footprint such that they could take the lead, and which were anchored in their communities but with regional coherence and delivery, we missed a trick when it came to putting in investment at exactly the same time in order to fully realise that potential. Mergers and regionalisation coincided with cuts in funding of circa 10 per cent, which is what we are experiencing at the moment.

The answer is yes. I would argue—and have argued, in a number of reports that I have been involved in producing—that there seems to be inequity across the system, and that, if we are focused on a skills-led wellbeing-focused economic recovery and transformation, skills people have to be at the heart of that, as does vocational, professional and technical provision. Colleges should be at the heart of that, working with our university and industry partners.

It is frustrating, which is why I said earlier that something has to change. The situation is no longer sustainable, and the solutions have to be about how to use what I believe are very strong foundations, in taking to the next level the regional reform of the sector. There is real potential to do that, but it is not in the gift of colleges on our own. We need to do it with other partners in the region—with our university partners, with Government, with union colleagues and with industry.

The Convener: Bob Doris, you indicated that you have a short supplementary question.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I will be incredibly brief, because Audrey Cumberford may just have addressed this.

You said that there was a missed opportunity at the point of regionalisation, and there is undoubtedly a tough financial and budgetary outlook for the years ahead, but has regionalisation provided greater resilience and stability in the sector than there would have been had we not undergone it? You mentioned strong

foundations. Is there a stability in those that would otherwise not have existed? We are evaluating the success or otherwise of the regionalisation process. Because of regionalisation, is there a foundation that provides greater resilience?

Audrey Cumberford: Yes, absolutely.

Bob Doris: I think you addressed that in your previous reply.

The Convener: The response was briefer than the question. *[Laughter.]*

Bob Doris: That is always the way.

The Convener: Nora Senior, do you want to come in on that, or are you happy for us to move to the next supplementary question?

Nora Senior: When it comes to the wider benefits of regionalisation, again, Audrey's experience on the ground is probably greater than mine. There have been benefits of scale from regionalisation, through the provision of anchor institutions within local communities. That means that there is perhaps greater access to courses across the region, so there is the benefit of reducing duplication while still allowing access to courses across the region rather than in one institution. However, that also leads to a debate about how individuals are got through that, depending on which institution is running the course. Travel expenses can be a barrier to getting from one place to another. That opens up the whole debate about widening access and fair access.

Regionalisation has opened up opportunities, but it has not been as effective as it could have been in terms of the use of budgets and outcomes. However, that goes back to how funding is allocated to individual institutions.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The budget settlement for 2022-23 has been passed on to the colleges. For almost all colleges, it means significant cuts to staffing and the programmes that they run. Principals and other senior staff have expressed concerns to me that they have received letters from the Scottish Funding Council telling them that they have to do exactly the same things that they did last year.

We have talked about the ability to flex in the longer term. However, in the short term, is the Government system responsive enough to the context in which colleges exist to enable the money that is allocated to them to reflect the job that the Government wants them to do?

Audrey Cumberford: That is where the opportunity lies over the next year to two years. The measures exist for what colleges are expected and funded to do. There is agreement

that that needs to change, but there will have to be a transition towards that change.

Michael Marra: Is that transition recognised in the current SFC arrangements?

Audrey Cumberford: What the SFC recommends would address that. Funding distribution, funding models, funding equity, multiyear funding and removing siloed pots of funding are all in the SFC report and there is an acknowledgement that the situation has to change.

Michael Marra: I am sorry, but I think that we might be talking slightly at cross-purposes. I am not talking about the SFC report but about the letters of requirement that are being sent to colleges telling them what they have to do with the money that is allocated to them. The SFC has produced a report about reform. I am concerned about the amount of money that is allocated and what colleges are being asked to do in the coming year. It is not realistic, is it? Colleges cannot cut posts and do the same job as they did last year.

Audrey Cumberford: I am sorry for misunderstanding your initial question.

Colleges have received their grant information. We know what finances we will receive next year and what volume of activity we will be expected to deliver, which is still a big issue. Individual colleges are having conversations with the funding council about how realistic it is for each region to achieve those activity levels. There is no question but that it is becoming increasingly difficult to hit those input activity volume targets.

What has happened to date is that, if a college did not achieve those levels of activity, the funding council would claw back funding from it. Debate continues with the funding council about whether there is scope for some leeway on what colleges can realistically achieve within the finances that they have. Many colleges, including mine, are giving feedback to the funding council that they will be looking to reduce provision, activity and staffing levels. We have a voluntary severance scheme for staff, which opened in the past few days.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I apologise if this is a layman's question, but I want to get an understanding of this. What is the collective reserves position for Scotland's colleges set against what it would have been before regionalisation?

Audrey Cumberford: I do not have the figure to hand for the whole college sector, but I am sure that we can get it to the committee. However, I have been a principal for 12 years and none of the colleges that I have been in has generated reserves since regionalisation. Of course, if we were in the luxurious position of being able to

generate reserves, we would not be allowed to keep them because of reclassification. Therefore, the main focus for principals and boards of management is delivering balanced budgets and sustainable colleges annually.

10:15

Graeme Dey: I have one further small supplementary question. Earlier, Nora Senior gave the example of Fife College receiving a higher level of funding than Edinburgh. Is that to do with rurality? What is the basis of it?

Audrey Cumberford: No, it is not to do with rurality. The basis of it is a historical model of funding. There is a recognition in the funding council that although it may have been fit for purpose a number of years ago, it is no longer fit for purpose. One of the main reasons for that is that, through national collective bargaining, all colleges have staff costs that are determined nationally. Our cost base is therefore exactly the same, so why would our funding for doing exactly the same be any different across colleges?

In relation to the recent allocation that Michael Marra referred to, in the case of Edinburgh College, there has been a slight adjustment to our funding to try at least to start to address that inequity—which is a serious inequity—across the whole of the sector.

Kaukab Stewart: I will explore a bit further the key achievements of regionalisation over the past 10 years. We are entering into scrutinising that, so it might be nice to look at it. I will then push witnesses on what improvements are still to be made, or could be made.

Audrey Cumberford: The amount and choice of provision and access to it have all improved because of taking that regional perspective on coherence. To put it simply, pre-merger and pre-regionalisation, a college may have been running courses that were just not viable, as not enough people wanted to do a particular course. One of the benefits of regionalisation is that that efficiency of scale—in Edinburgh's case, we have four campuses—gives colleges the opportunity to keep and provide provision where, historically, they may have had to take a very difficult decision to stop it.

Choice is really important, and the point was made earlier that local access is also really important. One of the defining characteristics of colleges is that we are absolutely at the heart of local communities and local provision, particularly for those who are furthest away from education or who have the most support needs at the lower levels of education and skills training.

As provision increases to higher national certificates, higher national diplomas and, in some

cases, degree level provision, colleges can encourage more student mobility across the region. Social mobility and economic mobility are really important, so that has also been a real benefit of regionalisation.

Another key area of benefit is the leadership role that regional colleges now very much play across the footprint of the region. In most regions, the college is often the only institution that has that footprint and therefore has a real opportunity to bring together partners, local authorities, businesses and other people to look at what the region needs—what the people need, what industry needs and what the wider stakeholders in the region need. Those are just some examples of the benefits.

The second part of Kaukab Stewart's question was about the next benefits of regionalisation, and I partly answered that in my previous point. To realise the full potential of regionalisation and the importance of place—which is really important—the environment and wider system have to change. We need to take that wider-system perspective. We have very clear national priorities; for example, we have a national strategy for economic transformation and a national performance framework. Again, this is a personal view, but I would like to see those national priorities set very much alongside regional autonomy, regional responsibility and regional outcomes for collective partnerships and collaborations. That would be the ideal, but we are not there yet.

Kaukab Stewart: It is a journey, is it not? Would Professor Scott like to come in at this point?

Professor Scott: I apologise for the connectivity problems earlier; I am not quite sure what happened. I have been hearing people fine throughout, and I hope that you can hear me. I will address the whole conversation so far.

It is undoubtedly the case that colleges are under more financial pressure than higher education institutions are—although I am sure that universities would like more money as well. Colleges play an absolutely crucial role from the perspective of fairer access, so any excessive financial pressure on them has the potential to damage efforts to move towards fairer access. They deliver an awful lot of higher education in their own right, and they are a key channel into degree courses. If you look at entrants from more deprived backgrounds to degree courses in higher education, you will see that 40 per cent of them have gone through a college route. Colleges are therefore absolutely crucial there.

Obviously, there is always scope for greater efficiencies. One thing that I would like to see is more higher national students being given full

credit for what they have already achieved. That would potentially benefit them and, of course, it would potentially create greater efficiency in the system. I think that the Scottish Funding Council would like to see at least 75 per cent get advanced standing—in other words, full credit for what they have already achieved. The current figure is 58 per cent, so there is progress to be made there.

I think that Audrey Cumberford made the point that colleges also play a key role in having very strong local footprints, and that is mediated through a regional level and at the university level.

I am not best qualified to say where colleges could do better, but I can comment on the role that they play in promoting fair access, which, as I have said, is absolutely crucial. In my written statement, I made the point that there is potentially a dilemma for them. Of course they need to maintain as strong a local footprint as possible—I am thinking of Edinburgh's four separate campuses—but, at the other end of the system, the geography is somehow rather different in relation to the higher education provision in our ancient universities. Colleges have to manage a very local geography, a regional geography and, to some extent, a national geography at the same time, and I can see that that is a source of quite significant pressure.

Nora Senior: I would like to highlight two things that colleges have done well. In the growing area of innovation and knowledge interface with industry, colleges are really embedded in their local communities. That reflects Audrey Cumberford's point. They are much closer, or have much easier access, to businesses and are able to flex the courses that they offer to suit the needs of business.

That begs the question: what could be done better? The strategic board found that there needed to be greater collaboration between higher education and further education—between universities and colleges. It became quite obvious that institutions needed to have greater awareness of what each institution within the ecosystem does so that they can identify opportunities for collaboration.

In business, there are knowledge exchanges or transfer partnerships in which there are placements. That is one way in which we might be able to look at the issue. It would empower institutions and individuals to have greater access to knowledge. There is greater scope to learn from such placements and adapt them for colleges and universities. Innovation is one of the great drivers of productivity, but it needs to be live and real.

That is an area where colleges have started to do well, with employer hubs, although they could

do better through greater collaboration with universities.

The other area is about being able to gear more towards specialisms or the needs of industry. Universities are less flexible in the courses that they offer, and it takes them longer to flex. During the pandemic, colleges were very good at introducing short, sharp courses and giving microcredentials or accrediting people to an extent. What could they do better? That is about having more such courses so that businesses can upskill or reskill their staff. It is also about being able to acknowledge and certify people through accreditation and qualification microsegments—that could be done better going forward.

Kaukab Stewart: It is interesting to hear about what will happen going forward, because part of the committee's job is to look at that. I am glad to hear that colleges are responsive to individual, local and national demands, because they make a complex and ever-changing picture.

Is there evidence of the impact of regionalisation on students and the student experience? I do not know who could best answer that.

The Convener: There is nothing in the chat bar, so I will bring in Audrey Cumberford.

Audrey Cumberford: The student experience is measured in a number of ways, and is monitored closely by colleges in respect of satisfaction and positive destinations. More often than not—the percentage figure is in the high 90s—people who go through college go on to positive destinations, which means either further study or work. About three quarters of the 30,000 students who study at Edinburgh College are part time and are already working, so in that context college is about supporting people who are already in work with upskilling and reskilling.

As I said, in my experience choice and access to provision have increased. The number of students going through Edinburgh College has got higher and higher year on year, despite the fact that funding has remained pretty static or has been cut. However, one point that I make in my written statement is that, as Kaukab Stewart just mentioned, the nature of demand changes quickly. Therefore—to go back to Nora Senior's point about agility and responsiveness—we need to find ways of embedding that in the system so that we can be more responsive.

I will give a quick example of our responding to demand. Not long ago in Edinburgh and the wider Lothians, NHS Lothian had something like 700 vacancies and was in crisis because it needed people with specific skills to fill the jobs. Therefore, with the NHS, we designed the sort of course that Nora Senior described—a fast-track, six-week programme. People knew that, if they got through

that programme, they would have the skills to get on the NHS payroll. We recruited students to the programme and the NHS reduced its recruitment process by half.

We now offer that as a rolling programme. When a student finishes the six-week programme, as most do, they are guaranteed a job in NHS Lothian. They finish with us on Friday, and on Monday they are on the NHS payroll. However, it does not stop there: we are responsible for continuing to work with those people to upskill and reskill them to allow them to progress in their careers in the NHS.

That programme was funded through the young persons guarantee and the national training fund, which were discrete pots of money in response to the Covid pandemic. The beauty of those funds was in the flexibility in how they could be used. We need to apply what we have learned from that to our core funding and loosen that core funding up. That programme is a great example of what we can do to respond quickly and flexibly to demand.

Kaukab Stewart: I am happy with that, convener, unless anybody wants to add anything.

The Convener: Nora Senior wants to come in.

10:30

Nora Senior: I will add a supplementary point about the impact of Covid on the student experience. Covid had an impact in a number of ways. There was the change to use of digital learning and of hybrid models. Many students suffered from not interacting with their peers on their courses. Access to technology was a challenge from the outset, but most colleges managed to resolve it in some way. However, we will have to consider how we manage hybrid systems.

Lectures being delivered on screen rather than in a room full of people was also challenging for staff in terms of delivering knowledge, but the benefit for students was that they could dip in at any time and listen to learning that they had missed. The situation was a bit more difficult for students who were on practical courses, because a lot of the work had to be done on their own then sent down the line, via technology, to be assessed. That was challenging.

We need to consider the benefits that we gained from the Covid environment and how we can upskill people and move to digital approaches in order to open up greater access, particularly for people in rural communities.

The Convener: Stephanie Callaghan has a supplementary question. Who would you like to direct it at?

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I will direct the question at Nora Senior. We are talking about student experiences, so I feel that my question will fit in well, here. We have achieved the access target of 16 per cent of students coming from the most deprived areas, but what progress has been made in improving access for people with disabilities, including learning disabilities, and those from black and ethnic minority backgrounds?

Nora Senior: I am probably not the best person to answer that. Audrey Cumberland, from an operational perspective, or Sir Peter Scott, in relation to widening access, might be better placed to answer.

The Convener: I will bring in Sir Peter Scott.

Professor Scott: One of the criticisms of the drive for fair access is that the one metric that matters is the proportion of students who come from the 20 per cent most deprived areas according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. That is often criticised for a number of reasons. In one of my annual reports, I looked at multiple forms of deprivation, which included looking at people with disabilities and those who come from black and minority ethnic communities. There is often a significant overlap between those groups.

In good time, it would be nice to move towards a more comprehensive definition of disadvantage and to use that to measure progress on fair access. However, we should not lose the central focus, which is not only on social class—which is crucial—but on community disempowerment. Those are important principles to maintain.

The downside is that some disadvantaged groups potentially get ignored. That is certainly not the case in relation to care-experienced students, because there is a strong focus on them. Disability is to some degree a different dimension, and we should also consider older students, for example. There are many dimensions to disadvantage, so it would be nice to consider them in a more comprehensive and holistic way.

Stephanie Callaghan: Do you have any recommendations on how that could best be taken forward?

Professor Scott: The big debate has not been so much about the points that you have raised about disability and ethnicity; it has always been about whether we should use the SIMD, which is an area-based metric, or something that focuses on individual disadvantage, such as free school meals. Not much progress has been made in moving the debate forward; it seems to be rather static. We have the same arguments and we circle round again and again. It would be good to resolve

the debate in some way, but Covid has made it difficult to make progress.

I would like to go further, as I have said. I would like to see a measure of disadvantage being brought into as many dimensions as possible. Ethnicity and disability are particularly important. Older students suffer from forms of disadvantage because we are still focused on the needs of young adults, in respect of driving forward fair access. We have an urgent agenda and not enough progress is being made.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is great. Thank you. We all have an issue with thinking of young people.

What progress has been made in ensuring that students' voices are listened to? How do students influence the sector's future priorities? Is the drive towards net zero and the need to prioritise green skills for the future a priority for students and the sector?

Audrey Cumberford: The student voice is important in every college, as it should be. One of the recommendations for regionalisation reform was on the place of student associations, and how we could strengthen them, within the college sector. We need to strengthen not just the student voice but the influence that students have over colleges as a whole. For example, presidents and vice-presidents of student associations are represented on college boards and the investment budget for student associations is significant. Pre-merger, in a typical college, the amount might have been in the thousands of pounds; in Edinburgh College, we are investing £250,000 in running the student association, on which we have full-time student representatives who are hugely valuable in shaping and influencing what we do and how we do it.

Sustainability is, not unexpectedly, increasingly important to students. Student associations, as separate charities in their own right, can tap into all sorts of funding opportunities that can help them to address climate challenges and the drive to net zero in colleges across Scotland, which is important.

The Convener: Michael Marra has a supplementary question.

Michael Marra: My question is about access to university. Colleges are a critical part of that; Peter Scott referred to his report and some of his important work in that area. Following your report, some reports this morning are saying that the First Minister has said that Scotland is leading the way in university access, but this year's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service's figures show that the application rate from people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland is 35.4 per cent, in Wales it is 37.5 per cent, in England it

is 44.1 per cent, and in Northern Ireland it is 52.6 per cent. Do you agree with the First Minister that we are "leading the way"?

Professor Scott: There is always a course that you can pick. It is factually correct to say first of all that Scotland has the highest rate of participation in higher education overall, which is significant. Essentially, there are people going into higher education in Scotland who would not do so in England but would go into some other form of post-secondary education.

It is difficult to give a precise answer in terms of the targets that the Scottish Government has set. Good progress has been made on the target that 16 per cent of entrants to first degree courses in higher education should come from the 20 per cent most deprived areas. That was the target for last year, and it has already been met. The target for 2026—which is only four years ahead, after all—has been pushed up to 18 per cent. That will be more challenging, particularly because we still have not had time to assess properly the impact of Covid on school attainment levels and aspiration levels. Covid has been a great challenge to young people in many ways, and it has been greatest for those who come from the most deprived communities.

Therefore, although it looks as though we should be able to meet the target fairly comfortably, it is not by any means guaranteed. Of course, the target of having a level playing field by the end of the decade looks challenging; no country in the world has yet achieved that. It is fair to say that good progress has been made, but it is also a nuanced picture, and there are always areas of concern.

I mentioned earlier the need to look at disadvantage more broadly. At the moment, we are focusing on people from deprived communities, but there are other forms of disadvantage, not least among the disadvantaged people who live in less deprived communities and who potentially get missed out by our current policies.

I will make one more general point. Earlier, Audrey Cumberford emphasised the need for a whole-system approach. That is absolutely crucial to fair access, which is about access to schools, colleges, universities and, beyond that, the move into employment.

To mention another nation in the United Kingdom, I note that Wales has adopted a very interesting approach by bringing together a fully comprehensive system of tertiary education and training. A single agency manages further education, higher education, on-the-job training and, crucially, community learning. Adult learning

is often missed out of the equation, but it is extremely important.

I am sorry; I have probably gone on for too long.

The Convener: Thank you.

Nora Senior has typed R in the chat function. Would you like to come back in? That might be to respond to Stephanie Callaghan's question.

Nora Senior: Yes. My response is more to Ms Callaghan's question, but it is probably also relevant to Michael Marra's question.

With regard to the student voice and the decision to move from further education into university or to make job applications, some of that is to do with careers advice and what happens across the system. Is it necessary for people to go to university for the skills that will get them a job? Audrey Cumberford talked about what happened with NHS Lothian. If there is a job at the end of the college course, do people necessarily need to go to a full-time course at university? It perhaps becomes more important to move into a job and then take more qualifications, perhaps as a graduate apprentice, rather than to go into full-time education. Although we look at the application rates—for example, 35 per cent against 37 per cent—for me, it is more about the outcome. Will the outcome be better jobs? There are different routes to get people into those jobs, where they can upskill and reskill through lifelong learning, as opposed to their going for a university degree then having to be reskilled anyway, as they move into a full-time job.

The debate around the student voice, and about looking system wide at the best route to progress through education, raises questions about how we direct and guide people of all ages into careers that are necessary and relevant to the long-term aims of the country, including the aim of net zero. I do not think that Grahame Smith has reviewed the careers system across tertiary education, but I will welcome some of the recommendations that he will make on how we might more closely align the long-term education pathways that we are guiding people towards with where funding is focused. It is artificial to talk about whether 35 per cent is any better than 37 per cent because, for me, it is more about the outcome.

The Convener: Thank you, Nora.

We move to questions from Bob Doris.

Bob Doris: Thanks, convener. I have been struck by that conversation on the student pathway, irrespective of a student's age, but I am more interested, for the purpose of this question, in the pathway from school through the college process and into, potentially, higher education. We have heard that four in 10 young people from SIMD20 areas who are at university went there

from college. That is a huge achievement for the college process. Is that figure up on previous years? Is it about right? What should that figure be?

10:45

More importantly, can you say a little bit more about the experience of young people from the most deprived backgrounds, however we define that, as they journey from school through the college process and, potentially, into higher education? I am conscious that a lot of community outreach programmes were disrupted during the Covid pandemic. Could we be storing up issues in the next couple of years in relation to those young people going through the college system?

Professor Scott: The college route is absolutely crucial, because colleges clearly reach people that universities, in their own right, find it much more difficult to reach, even with their best efforts. Scotland's record on fair access would be much diminished if it were not for colleges. One of the key reasons that Scotland has done better than England is that 27 per cent of higher education is delivered in colleges in Scotland, while the figure is less than 10 per cent in England. That has made a crucial difference.

It is right to say that we have still not had time to assess the full impact of the Covid pandemic, including school disruptions, which were probably worse in many instances in more deprived areas than in more prosperous areas. Nora Senior mentioned issues such as digital poverty and having a place to study. I think that people from deprived backgrounds had it much tougher during the Covid pandemic than people from more advantaged backgrounds. The impact of that has not really worked its way through the system.

My particular concern is not so much about people who are just on the threshold of higher education, because they were already on track; it is much more about people in the early years of secondary education or even the middle years of secondary education, who might never get on track to go to higher education, whether in a college setting or a university. I guess that it will take two or three years for us to see how that plays out, so that is a concern.

Bob Doris: Audrey Cumberford, would you like to comment on that?

Audrey Cumberford: I agree with all the points that Sir Peter has just made. Restrictions might have lifted but the impact of the pandemic will undoubtedly be felt well beyond this year. Potentially, we will need to wait until next year and the year after to see how things start to settle in terms of access, progression and so on.

To go back to the changing nature of demand, though, it is fair to say that where, previously, the journey through education from school to colleges and universities was often seen as quite linear, that journey is increasingly becoming much more personalised. It is about asking what people need, when they need it and where is the best place to access it. Therefore, people will dip in and out of the wider system as they go through a lifetime, potentially, of education and skills training, either in work or out of work.

Bob Doris: Can I push you a little bit further on that? The consultation stated that one aim of regionalisation was to enable colleges to offer

“a range of courses to the communities that they serve”,

which is what colleges were hoping to provide. In my experience, in Glasgow, they provide that, but local colleges tell me that a lot of the work that they do involves short taster courses in communities, which is labour intensive, with staffing on the ground being needed to build up relationships. Those types of activities, which can be quite expensive ones, were among the first to fall. You could not recreate that digitally. In the next couple of years, will some of the positive statistics that we have heard today start to decline? With challenging budgets, will we need more of a focus on that?

Audrey Cumberford: There is no question but that the provision that you have just described, which takes place right in communities, reaching the hardest to reach, is the most intensive, whether it is in relation to the wraparound support that needs to be put in place or its cost. There is also the importance of partnership working to consider.

Many local authorities are very involved in the provision of community learning and development, which is really important. The challenge is to ensure that we protect the communities concerned and continue to invest resource, time and priority in them, particularly the hardest-to-reach ones. We should do that primarily with the outcome of tapping into those people and getting them into colleges in the first instance and/or into work.

Bob Doris: How can we track progress? I get that it was disrupted for two years because of Covid, but what data exists to monitor the success of the intensive community work to get young people and others on to the education pathway through the college system and with partners? Can you point to data that says that, for example, one in 10 or one in 50 of the young people who are engaged with such work eventually find themselves in a full-time college course and go on to achieve a certain outcome? I am certain that that work is positive, but how do we track the data to prove that it is successful? It feels successful

and the colleges in my area appear to be successful, but how do we monitor that?

Audrey Cumberford: We track it. I do not have the specific percentage figure for Edinburgh to hand, but the data exists. Data is becoming much more important, as we all know, for getting intelligence and robust evidence about what is happening and the impact that it has. Data exists and is shared in the sector and between institutions where that is appropriate.

Nora Senior: The strategic board championed an understanding of the impact of post-school education and created a post-school education and skills impact framework. It was launched in 2019 and examines the benefits of the investment in education for students, businesses and the economy. It aims to provide evidence on the return on investment from higher education qualifications, further education qualifications and modern apprenticeships from the perspective of the individual, the Government and employers.

It is the first time that a project of such scale has been undertaken. It links education data with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs tax data and is being undertaken by Skills Development Scotland, the SFC and the Scottish Government, as well as the strategic board's analytic unit. Results are available from the first stage, which examines student earnings and employment as a result of having taken education and training. The full data has yet to be analysed, but something in the results might point to data on the impact of and the return on our investment in the system.

The Convener: We have heard a lot about the links with colleges and universities, and you have just given evidence about the provision in community learning. With regionalisation, I am curious about the strength of the links that colleges now have with schools.

Audrey Cumberford: Colleges have always had a really close working relationship with local schools. I will take Edinburgh as an example of what has happened with regionalisation, but the story will be repeated across Scotland.

Our footprint is three local authorities and 37 schools in total. We are looking at increasing the opportunities for school pupils across the full regional footprint to access college provision at a range of levels, including primary schoolchildren who come to college and focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics, which is a big focus for us. With the introduction of foundation apprenticeships, we are starting to consider the wider apprenticeship family and how we can get work experience as well as skills training and qualifications for school pupils.

A range of programmes are being developed not just with colleges but with our university

partners. We work closely with each of the four universities in Edinburgh on school provision. To return to Nora Senior's point, we are clear that we are taking a collective perspective on what the demands and needs are to ensure that we get provision right at the right time, in the right place and at the right level.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):

Will you comment on how collaboration with schools can help to hang on to pupils and keep them in education? I am thinking about the combination of academic and vocational studies that can be made available.

Audrey Cumberland: A massive strength of the college sector as a whole is that it covers not only vocational, technical and professional qualifications but skills training. We hear directly from not just pupils but schools that part of the attraction of colleges is that they are not schools and that they provide a different experience. It is really important to literally show pupils, particularly when they are at school, potential career choices or choices around areas in which they want to learn. That can start to lift the aspirations of those pupils and show them what is possible. That relationship is hugely important, because it is part of creating a solid pipeline of people. Another aspect is accessing people as young as possible so that they can see clearly what opportunities and choices are available to them.

Ruth Maguire: Has regionalisation impacted on your reach into schools?

Audrey Cumberland: It has in the sense that it has increased opportunity and choice, but there is still work to do. I will again use Edinburgh as an example. We span three local authorities, each of which has its own priorities and responsibilities for schools. We are working with the authorities on whether there are better outcomes and greater value and impact to be gained by taking a regional perspective on school provision and on school links and collaboration with colleges, as opposed to working separately with three individual authorities. Your gut instinct would be that there must be more opportunities in doing that. That is being discussed at the moment, and I am sure that that approach is being replicated across colleges in other regions.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Audrey. We move to questions from Graeme Dey, now.

Graeme Dey: My questions are directed to Professor Scott in the first instance. In your annual report, which you published this week, you note:

"Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland established a National Articulation Forum which produced its final report in 2020. Yet very limited progress has been made."

Will you expand on that and tell us why you think that that has, disappointingly, been the case? Perhaps you could highlight areas in which you think that progress could be made to the greatest benefit.

Professor Scott: Progress has been disappointing. The key area is that, at the moment, the attitude tends to be that students themselves need to justify why they should be given advanced standing. Therefore, in a sense, the onus of proof is on them. The default position should be the other way round—essentially, it should be assumed that a person with an HNC should enter the second year of a degree programme and a person with an HND should potentially enter the third year of a degree programme.

I know that, in some subjects, the curriculum fit between the HND and the degree is not that good and therefore there might be a need for some students to repeat some work or take on some stuff that they previously have not covered. Sometimes, the overlap is the other way—things are covered in the HND that are not covered in the first or second year of a degree programme. Therefore, there are genuine difficulties. One of the problems is that many people in the more traditional universities are relatively unfamiliar with higher nationals, so it is important that the standing of HNs is better understood by people who take key decisions in universities.

Progress has certainly been too slow. As I mentioned, the Scottish Funding Council has a target of 75 per cent of HN students getting advanced standing. That target has stood for some time, but we are still way below it. I think that, in one of my reports, I described progress as rather glacial, and that is probably still a fair description. There is a need for much greater urgency in that area, because—

11:00

Graeme Dey: That is very useful. Would it be fair to say that colleges need to tweak their curriculums and that there needs to be a change in culture and attitude in universities?

Professor Scott: We always have to remember that higher nationals are, in a sense, free-standing qualifications in their own right and are highly valued and well understood by employers. Higher nationals should not simply be seen as transitional courses that lead to degrees, because, in many cases, that does not happen. However, in areas in which a significant number of HN students go on to degree programmes, more attention needs to be paid to matching the curriculums. That matching should not be done in just one way. Colleges should not always need to adapt their

curriculum; on occasion, universities might have to adapt theirs.

To some degree, there is a difference in culture. The argument has been put to me that university students are more autonomous learners than college students. That is a terrible stereotype, but these old stereotypes go round in people's heads and influence their attitudes, making them more positive or less negative, so we need to address the culture and those stereotypes.

Graeme Dey: It is quite disappointing that, all these years into the process, we are still in this situation.

Professor Scott: I do not overestimate the issues that people in universities face. Obviously, they want to ensure that their students succeed and get good outcomes in terms of not only degrees but employment opportunities. To some degree, the emphasis on continuation and success rates can act as a bit of a drag on taking risks, as universities might see it, when it comes to admitting students. I sympathise with the universities' point of view, but more pressure should be put on in that regard.

The default position should be flipped so that HN students are given full credit for what they have already achieved unless there are reasons why that would not be appropriate in their particular circumstances or there is not that good a fit between their course and the university course. We should remember that some students will be switching to an entirely different subject area. In those cases, there is more justification for saying that they need to start at an earlier stage in the degree programme. However, when students are continuing in the same subject area, the argument for that is much weaker.

Graeme Dey: I think that it would be reasonable to bring in Audrey Cumberford, given her lived experience of what we are discussing.

Audrey Cumberford: I do not disagree with much of what Sir Peter Scott has said. There is no question but that advanced standing has improved. In Edinburgh, there has been a 22 per cent increase in the number of our students with HNCs or HNDs who move on to the second year or, in some cases, the third year of a degree programme. That is often dependent not just on the student's relationship with the university at institutional level but on the curriculum area and provision.

Sir Peter Scott made the important point that the purpose of HNCs and HNDs is not to create a pipeline of articulation to universities. Going on to university is right for some people, but that is not the main driver, because those qualifications exist in their own right and are very much focused on

work and, increasingly, on people in work who are looking for upskilling and reskilling opportunities.

It is complex to get underneath the reasons why there has been slow progress, but there is definitely progress, although I agree that there could be more and faster progress.

Graeme Dey: I presume that there is a mixed picture across the country. There will be areas such as yours where there has been progress but, on the basis of the findings of the commissioner's report, I presume that, overall, there is an issue, or an issue remains.

Audrey Cumberford: Again, it is difficult for me to speak specifically about other regions but, certainly, the sector as a whole has been working closely with Universities Scotland and the university sector to look at how we can collectively improve the position.

Graeme Dey: With respect, despite the number of years that you have been working on this collectively, Sir Peter Scott still produced a report that suggests that progress has been "glacial"—I think that he used that word earlier. It has been slow, has it not?

Audrey Cumberford: Yes.

Graeme Dey: Can we anticipate a quickening of the pace in the years to come?

Audrey Cumberford: Certainly in my experience locally, there is a willingness and a commitment to make that happen, so yes.

The Convener: We will move on to questions from Michael Marra.

Michael Marra: My questions follow some of Mr Dey's. I am trying to evaluate the idea of regionalisation and what the next steps are, and I am keen to focus on outcomes for young people. A lot of the evidence that we have had is about inputs, such as the number of young people attending universities. In 2020-21, the successful completion rate in Scotland was 61.3 per cent, whereas the roughly comparable figure in England was 89 per cent. Why does that gap exist?

Audrey Cumberford: Are you referring to a particular level of study? Is that FE or HE?

Michael Marra: It is FE, from which 61.3 per cent of people left with the qualifications that they started out to achieve and a further 11 per cent did not achieve the qualifications that they desired when they started their courses. It is about who is being recruited and who is completing courses.

Audrey Cumberford: It is slightly difficult to draw a direct comparison between the situation in Scotland and that in England, because the structures are not the same and the whole system is different. In England, there are sixth form

colleges, technical colleges and probably at least five other types of institutions that we would refer to as colleges—I cannot remember them all. At FE level, which is the lower level of qualifications and often involves individuals who have the greatest need for additional support and all sorts of challenges and barriers to overcome, you are correct that the figure has remained pretty static across the country for a number of years. Again, it is complex to understand why that is and what could be done to improve the situation.

To go back to an earlier point about building on regionalisation, I believe that there is an opportunity at a regional level for us collectively, as a group of partners, to get right underneath the reasons for those outcomes. In Edinburgh, the universities, schools, local authorities and industry partners can consider what outcome ambitions are right for our region and the people, economy and communities there, and we can then consider how, collectively, we contribute towards achieving those outcomes. That would be a big shift forward in building on the foundations of regionalisation.

Michael Marra: We should do that work prior to a further round of reform, should we not? If we are talking about outcomes, we should plan what we want to achieve and find the pathways to do it. Would that be the sensible approach?

Audrey Cumberford: Absolutely.

Michael Marra: I take on board your point that it is difficult to find an exactly comparable figure, because the systems in England and Scotland are different, but it still seems to me to be a pretty stark gap in outcomes. The most equivalent figure that I could find in England was that 89 per cent of young people come out the other side with a qualification. You talked about the Scottish situation, but is there more that we can learn from models elsewhere? We are in a process of reform, so is there more that we could do to try to achieve better outcomes?

Audrey Cumberford: As I said in my written submission, I am involved in a four-nations group that includes principals as well as Government officials and ministers.

It is fair to say that many of the challenges that we face are very similar, albeit that there might be nuances and differences across the four nations just because of the structures and systems. In Northern Ireland, there are six colleges, which are much smaller and which work much more closely together. However, we have the same challenges, and the recent reports from the UK commission demonstrate that there are common, shared challenges across the whole of the UK.

You are correct in saying that some of the approaches that have been taken in the nations have been different. The commission found that

the other three nations looked to the regional structure in Scotland, the benefits that that had realised and—this is probably more important—the benefits that it could realise.

Michael Marra: I will perhaps bring in Nora Senior, as well, off the back of this question. The success rates, as I have qualified them, of large colleges range from 52.7 to 73.6 per cent, and those of small colleges range from 59.7 to 70.4 per cent. There is a lower floor in larger colleges. I recognised one statistic; there will be a wealth of other things that we could look at, but the statistics seem to indicate that the direction of travel in recent years, in respect of the outcomes, is that there is a pretty significant gap of 7 per cent in young people getting qualifications to help them to advance in their lives, and the floor is a lot lower in the larger colleges. There seems to be a greater propensity for people not to achieve. Do you recognise that?

Audrey Cumberford: There are specific characteristics and challenges associated with larger colleges that are likely to be different from those associated with smaller colleges. I will use Edinburgh as an example again. There are four campuses in Edinburgh. Having a single campus might be easier in respect of the concentration of support and so on. One lesson that has been learned from the Covid experience is about how we can use technology-enabled solutions to get the targeted support that is needed to individuals where and when they need it.

A lot of learning is done across the sector. If, from looking at the figures and outcomes, certain colleges seem to be more successful, a huge amount of professional dialogue will go on between staff on the ground in the colleges to find out what is different, whether the issue is the make-up of the course, how it is being taught and delivered, or whether it is the support to try to get underneath exactly what the issues are.

I share the frustration. There has been a pretty static position for a number of years, and we need to get on top of that.

Michael Marra: Does Nora Senior have any comments on that?

Nora Senior: Audrey Cumberford answered the question in her last point. She talked about the comparator across colleges. Colleges Scotland should be looking at why one college has a greater success rate than another.

I want to go back to the earlier point about the approach to skills alignment and looking at skills planning and provision. Some people might start out on a college course but then they might get a job, and their education or their skills education might then be transferred to workplace learning rather than institution-based learning. One of the

things that the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board looked at was the whole area of skills alignment and skills planning, and who does what across the system. There are three on-going pilots—in north-east Scotland and the south of Scotland, and on the implementation of the climate emergency skills action plan. I refer to what Audrey Cumberford referred to earlier. Those pilots are bringing together higher education colleges, private providers, local authorities and so on to plan out who is best placed to deliver what, based on the skills demand in various regions and areas or the skills needs, so that there is a greater propensity of people who are graduating or coming out of the system and are skills ready to move into jobs.

11:15

Michael Marra: In the light of the written evidence that has been submitted, I worry about the fact that although we talk a lot about coherence and about how different parts of the tertiary sector work together, we have an Audit Scotland report that discusses the issues that Nora Senior has mentioned and which is utterly damning of the Government's approach and the complete lack of leadership on skills alignment. As well as the Cumberford-Little report and "The Scottish College of the Future" report, we have the Scottish Funding Council review of coherent provision and sustainability. In addition, we have a team in the Scottish Government, which has swollen to more than 20 civil servants, that is desperately seeking an idea about what to do.

The Convener: Will you ask a question, please?

Michael Marra: Yes, I will, convener. We also have a team at the SFC that appears to be working up an alternative piece. Does anybody have any idea whether the SFC and the Scottish Government are working together on the same blueprint for the future or whether they are developing completely different plans? There seem to be a lot of plans. Do you have any idea whether the people involved are talking to one another?

The Convener: I am not quite sure whom that is directed to.

Michael Marra: I am looking for an insight, convener. People have said to me that there is real frustration. They see those developments going on in different places and they wonder whether the policy making is coherent.

The Convener: Audrey, your light is on. Are you in a position to answer that?

Audrey Cumberford: My view is that the Scottish Funding Council and colleagues in

Government are working closely together. A commitment has been articulated that, over the coming months, the Government will work to set out a very clear statement of intent, and a vision and purpose, for not just the college sector but the wider system. I hope that, if that statement of intent and purpose is clear, questions will flow from that, such as, "Where do we need to put resource?" and "Where do we get the best return on investment?"

Michael Marra: Nora, do you have anything to add?

Nora Senior: As a businessperson, speaking personally, I have a lot of sympathy with what you have said. I think that there is a disconnect, for a whole raft of reasons, such as change of personnel and not seeing policy through.

The SFC has been in a difficult position, because it is a funding body. It does not and cannot mandate the institutions; it can direct and give guidance, through the outcome agreements. The strategic board highlighted the fact that we did not think that the SFC had real insight into or control over the measurements relating to, and the return on investment on, the funding that it gave to institutions.

The SFC review has worked with the Government to address those issues. I think that the outcome agreements will change, or have changed, in order to direct institutions more towards guidance around which kind of courses they do. At the end of day, institutions are businesses in their own right, so they will make their decisions on the basis of what will help their success as institutions. I think that that is a barrier to system-wide response. There is the point that was made earlier about whether there is one body that brings all this together, so that we do not have different silos across the system.

That is my personal opinion, and it should not be attributed to any body.

The Convener: I have a question on the same subject. Nora Senior mentioned the pilot that relates to the country's net zero ambitions. I have come from the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, and Audrey Cumberford spoke about some measures that she has been doing with NHS Lothian.

What can the sector do to further improve our outlook with regard to what is really needed for the Scottish economy, Scottish businesses and Scottish jobs and to arm our young people and our older learners to help fill the gaps in all those sectors that are desperately looking and calling out for staff? Audrey, could you take that question?

Audrey Cumberford: I was just about to say that Nora Senior could respond.

Nora Senior: I am happy to.

I would just make a couple of points. We are always hearing that business is never happy about the skills situation and that we have skills shortages, but we cannot always articulate where those shortages are. A good example of that is the financial services sector, which is saying, “We don’t need specialists in any area. We need people with certain qualities, capabilities or personal attributes and we’ll retrain them.” On the other hand, there are other sectors such as propulsion engineering where there are huge opportunities, but we have neither the people nor the courses to train them.

Again, the strategic board recognised a big disconnect between the skills that we are putting out there and what business actually needs. We carried out a review of the industry leadership group sectors, which we have now brought together in a round-table forum. We have also looked at a review of and guidance on how best we can get the data and knowledge in each of the industry leadership groups and then feed them into the system.

Moreover, the Commission on the College of the Future has recommended the establishment of employer hubs to allow each of the colleges and universities to have closer engagement with others. By “engagement” I mean not just with their local communities; after all, universities are not local in the sense that colleges are—they are national, if not international, bodies—although they do have a local perspective. We need to be able to identify from businesses across the piece national priorities in, say, net zero, advanced manufacturing or propulsion engineering, and that is the sort of thing that industry leadership groups can then feed back into Government in the hope that it will be directed at colleges and universities.

However, the system is, in my opinion, flawed. We can gather all that information, but nobody then takes it and uses it to direct colleges and universities across certain areas or nationally so that they can drive the direction or balance courses in a way that meets economic need. Universities, in particular, but colleges, too, are strapped into the notion of teaching according to their lecturers’ capabilities, but if we do not have enough people or lecturers teaching digital skills or engineering—perhaps because they are working in industry where they can get more money and are better remunerated—we will never strike the true balance between skills and demand. The issue has not yet been resolved, but it needs to be.

The Convener: As a follow-up, would it be possible for colleges and industry to collaborate on some sort of day-release scheme in which the experts working in the field could come and teach the young people? I do not want to put any solutions into your mouth.

Nora Senior: One of the things that the industry leadership groups have highlighted is the need to make it easier for business to connect with schools, colleges and universities and, indeed, for school, college and university staff to spend time with industry to ensure that their teaching is actually current, which is not always the case. Business also needs to be involved in co-designing and co-creating courses, and we need to create the routes that allow that involvement to happen, instead of creating barriers. Sometimes, it is very difficult for local businesses to gain access not so much to colleges but certainly to schools, because that sort of thing is not seen as part of the curriculum.

To go back to the point that I made earlier about the careers system, we need to think more openly and flexibly about how we engage at a much earlier stage and get industry involved in co-creating and co-designing the types of courses that will meet its needs. However, we need to do that quickly, otherwise we lose economic opportunity.

Audrey Cumberford: It has to be a two-way thing. That industry engagement cannot be just about colleges and universities producing people who are ready to hit the ground running with the right skills. It has to be that symbiotic relationship.

At Edinburgh College, we have just opened our new renewables and energy efficiency training centre. I probably should not plug a company, but Worcester Bosch has invested in and installed absolutely state-of-the-art equipment, which is not even commercially available yet, although it will be at some point. That particular company has invested in the specialist facility in the college, so that we can train not only school pupils, college students and apprentices but Worcester Bosch staff on that new equipment. That creates that pipeline for when it is needed, by creating the skills training and content together.

What Nora Senior has just described is absolutely critical; it is about creating the right policy and funding environment that drives and supports industry, colleges and universities to work much more collaboratively.

It goes back to where we started. At the moment, we are funded to teach by volume and activity, so we have to find creative ways of developing those really important relationships with industry. We want to get industry to invest

back into the system, as opposed to just taking from the system.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have a couple of questions that are probably best directed first to Audrey Cumberford. I am afraid that they are a bit negative.

Acknowledging that regionalisation has had its benefits, would you characterise the fact that, in the past eight years, we have had seven years of industrial action as a failure of regionalisation? Is there a relationship between those two?

Audrey Cumberford: No. I cannot think of any evidence or thing that would make me draw a causal link between regionalisation and strikes.

Ross Greer: Do you believe that, if we had not gone through regionalisation, we would have been in a pretty similar situation with regard to industrial relations across the sector? I know that regionalisation and the introduction of national collective bargaining are not the same thing, but they are roughly concurrent processes that happened in the same period of reform.

Audrey Cumberford: No, I do not see that, actually, and I will explain why.

Before regionalisation, which essentially is before mergers, colleges negotiated and had very strong and robust local relations. That is how I would describe the relations, and I hope that my union colleagues would describe them as that as well. There was a very local emphasis. We worked in the same organisation and all had the same purposes, which were to be the best college in Scotland and to give our staff the best pay, terms and conditions that we could afford. The relations were predominantly built around trust, confidence, relationships and people, and that is easier to do locally.

When mergers—and, as Ross Greer said, regionalisation—took place, managers, principals, boards of management and union colleagues suddenly found themselves in a situation like mine, in which there was a merger of three colleges and three sets of union colleagues. That led to a large institution that was made up of different cultures and where nobody knew each other. We had to quickly try to rebuild, almost from nothing, new relationships, trust and confidence to work together collaboratively for the benefit of our organisations. I am really proud of what everyone involved in that work achieved at that point, including union colleagues, management, the wider staff and boards of management. We quickly harmonised pay, terms and conditions at a regional level. That is easy to say but not easy to do, and it took a huge amount of commitment, work and effort to do that with, in the main, good relations. I cannot remember strikes taking place.

Pay went up by 12 per cent on average across the sector. It is a huge achievement to be able to say that staff in colleges across Scotland have received an average pay increase of 12 per cent. There was also no detriment to terms and conditions within the regions.

11:30

After that, it was Government policy to introduce national collective bargaining. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. I was involved in the beginning of national bargaining and, unfortunately, there was no blueprint. There was no template that we could take off the shelf to see how a sector that was, in essence, private could nationalise collective bargaining and do it well. There was nothing—it had never been done before.

An opportunity was missed at that point to have all the stakeholders—Government, funders, colleges as the individual employers, which we still are, and our union colleagues—sit down together and consider what they wanted to be the outcome and achievements of introducing collective bargaining, what the funding envelope would be to make it happen, what the likely costs would be and what positives could come out of it.

The strike action that has, as you pointed out, been going on regularly is multidimensional, and there are a number of reasons for it. First, it does not help that we have annual funding and go from year to year not knowing the detail of the funding that we will get. That makes it difficult. I am keeping everything crossed that, in the next few days, we will announce that we have reached agreements with the teaching and support unions—I really hope that we do. However, I would not be surprised if pay claims go in a week later for next year's pay. We do not know for months and months what we will be funded. Something has to change fundamentally.

Part of the issue is that there seems to be a mismatch of expectations in some of what is happening nationally from the union perspective and what is happening from an employer's perspective. Since becoming the principal of a college, I have always wanted to pay my staff the best that I could possibly pay them and have the best terms and conditions. If you compare across the UK, you find that we are the best for pay, terms and conditions.

That is a wonderful thing to achieve but there is a massive however. The big however is that my and my board's responsibility is to ensure that Edinburgh College does not tip over and that it is sustainable. We have a responsibility to protect provision for students, places and jobs. Sometimes, as is now happening, the demands on pay do not align with the sustainability of the

colleges, the jobs, student places and student activity. Something has to give in that.

If I am being optimistic, I believe that there is potential that, if the mindset was present, the individuals round the table could work together towards a goal, but there has to be an understanding of the wider picture. It would be lovely to say yes to everything, but I and other principals cannot do that because of the funding situation that we are in.

I completely respect the right of staff to strike. It is disappointing that it has happened every year. It should always be an absolute last resort. It has not happened with our support staff union colleagues. I was involved initially in bargaining with them—I am not involved now—and that certainly felt more collaborative. There was a more collegiate sense of trying to work together to get the best that we possibly could within the constraints that we all understood. We still have a wee bit to go in relation to some of the other discussions that are going on.

I hope that that answers your question. The issue is not regionalisation. Local relations and local negotiations are easier because they are local, which means that you can build relationships with people. As soon as you put it on to a national platform, it is like starting again but at a national level. Of course, with colleges, we are still the employers—individual boards are still responsible for employment and protecting their college, provision, jobs and staff, but at the same time they are negotiating nationally on pay. Sometimes, that can be a very fine tightrope to walk but, as I said, I am keeping my fingers crossed that we have finally reached an agreement.

The Government has done a lessons learned exercise, as you may be aware, and my reading of that is that there are a number of recommendations that I believe would help to get the situation on to a different footing.

Ross Greer: There is a huge amount to pick up on in there. I think that you are right to highlight pay harmonisation as one of the key successes on workforce relations in the past decade. However, from my perspective, having spent most of the past six years in continuous discussion with unions and employers, the interpersonal relationships around national collective bargaining have not got better over that time. We have been in a constant cycle of negotiations breaking down and escalating to industrial action, with compromises being made as a result, followed shortly afterwards by a fresh dispute on essentially the same issue.

There is clearly a need for a reset of those relationships. Without pre-empting the lessons learned exercise, what is the best way to go about

such a reset at this point? As you mention, the relationships at the local level were varied but, broadly speaking, relatively positive. How do we reset things at the national level, where the relationships have clearly broken down?

Audrey Cumberford: That is an important question. It is about looking at why that is happening. It is multidimensional. Some of it will be down to people and their behaviours and relationships. It is down to individuals to try to make a commitment to collectively make the process work. I get hugely frustrated when I hear people using terms such as “sides” and speaking about the management side and the union side, as though this is an immediately confrontational environment.

There is an issue about personalities and behaviours but, more importantly, there is an opportunity to look at how the employer representatives and union colleagues can quickly get a clear understanding of things such as the financial environment, which we now know about, as of yesterday’s statement. Looking ahead, what will that mean in reality? What will it look like on the ground? We are all committed to the fair work agenda and we should be working in collaboration on that. Let us look at those important big-ticket issues of fair work and a wellbeing economy. What does a wellbeing economy mean from a union colleague perspective and an employer perspective?

There is a real opportunity to change things. Again, this is my personal view, but a very simple thing to do would be to create a level of independence to the process. An independent chair of the negotiations might be a way forward. There could be a tripartite group made up of the Funding Council or Government, together with college and union colleagues, looking at the evidence base—the data that is being used—to make sure that everybody can be confident in it and agree, for example, on funding, and what that actually means.

There is genuine potential to move into a different space, because nobody wins when there is strike action. The staff going out on strike do not win, and the colleges, students and principals do not win. It is a lose-lose situation, so we need to commit to improving. As I said, the relationship is far stronger on the support staff union side, so there are maybe lessons to be learned from looking at how that is working and whether we could transfer some of that approach.

Ross Greer: That last point is important.

My final question is on the role of the multi-institution boards. I understand that the position of Edinburgh is not the same as, for example, that of Glasgow or Lanarkshire. However, putting aside

the issues that are dealt with nationally around pay and conditions and so on, have the regional boards provided any additional value in terms of industrial relations and workforce representation? Are they providing a useful forum for some of the discussions about local and regional issues, or are those issues still primarily dealt with at an individual institution level or through national relations?

Audrey Cumberford: Actually, I am not close enough to the specifics of the role of the regional boards, which cover multiple colleges—I am thinking of the University of the Highlands and Islands, Glasgow and Lanarkshire, which you mentioned. My personal view on the governance structure is that it was right for the time in that it created cohesion across big regions with multiple colleges. I argue that the success of that approach should mean that those boards are no longer needed. In my view, we must ask whether we have reached the point at which those boards have achieved what they set out to achieve. Cohesion, which has been mentioned a lot today, goes beyond simply the colleges in those regions; it involves universities and local authorities, too.

I am sorry that I cannot answer your specific question.

Ross Greer: I understand why, given Edinburgh's position. The question of the value that the regional boards now provide is something that I am keen for the committee to explore through this process.

The Convener: I have a final question. In response to Ross Greer's questions, we heard about how multiyear funding might be beneficial. How might multiyear funding allocations aid planning in the sector? That is a big question for a short period of time.

Audrey Cumberford: The college sector has been calling for that for what feels like a long time. The obvious benefits of having some certainty on funding include being able to plan strategically, invest strategically and work with colleagues on transition issues such as what the college workforce of the future needs to look like. To a great extent, we are constrained in all of that. It feels like we literally lurch from year to year with a short-term and siloed approach to funding, with each pot of money having its own scaffolding, bureaucracy and reporting requirements. There is huge potential for making the process much more efficient and streamlined. I know that the SFC's report made a strong call for multiyear funding, which we hugely support.

The Convener: Michael Marra wants to ask a very brief final question.

Michael Marra: I think that the horse has bolted on multiyear funding. The assumption was that we

would see something about it in the spending review yesterday, but that only goes down to level 2, which means that colleges do not know how much funding they will have in the coming years. Are you renewing those calls today?

Audrey Cumberford: Yes.

The Convener: I thank everyone for their time today. It has been a great session—my first one as convener, and I have thoroughly enjoyed it.

The public part of today's meeting is now at an end. We will consider the final agenda item in private.

11:43

Meeting continued in private until 12:03.

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