OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 15 November 2023

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 15 November 2023

CONTENTS

EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
29th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con)
*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)
*Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Peter Bain (School Leaders Scotland)
Greg Dempster (Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland)
Barry Graham (Wallace Hall Academy)
Graham Hutton (Grove Academy)
Pauline Walker (Royal High School)
James Withers (Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 15 November 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Education Reform

The Convener (Sue Webber): Good morning, and welcome to the 29th meeting in 2023 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. We have received apologies from Ruth Maguire and Willie Rennie.

The first agenda item is an evidence session with a panel of school leaders and representative organisations to understand how the curriculum is being delivered within the current framework and policy landscape. We will also look at the impact on the ground of recent reports and announcements.

I welcome, in no particular order, Peter Bain, executive headteacher of Oban high school, Tiree high school, Tiree primary school and Lismore primary school, and president-elect of School Leaders Scotland; Greg Dempster, general secretary of the Association of Head Teachers and Deputes in Scotland; Barry Graham, headteacher of Wallace Hall academy in Dumfries and Galloway; Graham Hutton, general secretary of School Leaders Scotland and former headteacher of Grove academy in Dundee; and Pauline Walker, headteacher of the Royal high school in Edinburgh.

We will move straight to questions, and the first questions will come from me. We are interested in learning a little more about the freedoms and support that you have right now to make decisions about your own schools, and we would like to gauge whether there is a consistent picture across the country and in all sectors of education. That is an opening question to get you talking and sharing your experiences. I will start with Graham Hutton.

Graham Hutton (Grove Academy): Thank you very much indeed for welcoming us to the committee and giving us the opportunity to speak.

To answer your question right away, the freedoms and support are not consistent across the country; the situation is a bit patchy. There are headteachers who, like us, took up the empowerment agenda and wanted to take that forward. The SLS council supported the reform agenda, and we believe that, if we explain why we need reform, people will follow. That is what we have done in our schools over the past five to 10 years.

The status quo does not fit and, without any shadow of a doubt, cannot go on. We have taken decisions in line with the empowerment agenda, knowing the young people in our care and the limits in local authorities. We try to be innovative, think out of the box, take the initiative and take things forward. We have looked at every possible way of ensuring that all our young people get a better deal.

The status quo, as I said, does not work. It does not work for the high flyers, because universities will tell you that those pupils expect to be spoon fed, so we need to make them think and teach them how to think in order to take things forward; it does not work for the middle 60 per cent, whom we really have to push to make sure that they achieve more; and it certainly does not work for the forgotten bottom third of pupils, who leave school without any qualifications whatsoever. It is really important for all the headteachers here that we make sure that we get those pupils through school and get them a qualification that will lead to a better quality of life elsewhere.

The traditional subjects that we all learned when we were at school, when there was a much narrower standardised curriculum, do not really fit the needs of all the young people in our care. In the school that I went to, there was no techie, no home economics and no biology. We expanded all those, which are now seen as traditional subjects.

At my school—it will be the same for Barry Graham, Pauline Walker and Peter Bain—I looked at what other subjects and courses could be run that would better suit the needs of young people. For instance, in my school, we abandoned advanced higher techie because we thought that the advanced engineering programme was a far better course for them to experience.

In that project, the young people had to design a remotely operated vehicle—a computerised vehicle that goes underwater in the oil industry—and they had to deal with the problems that erupted. The principal teacher of techie, who led the project, kept saying, “I hope and pray that, when they put it into the pool for the first time, it fails, because then they will have to learn how to sort the problem.” It is about problem solving, working together as a team, communicating with one other and doing some of their own learning. For example, one of them had to learn how to programme in Java. They had never done that in school, so they had to learn to do that themselves. It is about ensuring that it leads on to something else to improve skills.

I am taking up too much time, but I will say that some of those young people got into university.

They did not have the traditional higher qualifications but, because they were able to talk about their experience and skills, they got in. One young girl—this is my last point—went for an interview with Dyson. In the last five minutes, she was asked to talk about the project that she mentioned in her application. She talked for 40 minutes, and she was offered a job.

That is where we are going with this—we must ensure that we meet the needs of young people, because the current system does not work.

The Convener: You will have an opportunity to go into more detail on that when answering some of the later questions—I know that some of this is a bit prescribed. We are just digging down into whether you feel that you have the freedom and support right now to make decisions about your schools. It is great to hear that you are making those decisions about your learners.

Barry Graham (Wallace Hall Academy): Thanks for inviting us here today. As Graham Hutton said, there are lots of different models across the country, but a model works best when you give headteachers the room, the resources and the time to be creative. We see that working best when models are tailored to their communities. Later on, I might get a chance to talk about some of the things that we are doing in Dumfries and Galloway. It is about providing the time and resources to make the positive changes to our curriculum that help to meet the needs of all our young people.

The Convener: Do you feel that you have the capacity to make those curriculum choices? Has the situation changed or improved over the past 10 years?

Barry Graham: It has become more difficult because of the tightening of resources. When you want to bring in new courses, a lot of training is involved. You might work with other colleges to help, and there is staffing to go along with that. There are very hard decisions. We probably have a lot of similarities among all four schools with regard to national 5s, highers and advanced highers, but when you are trying to bring in more vocational courses that relate directly to the needs of your community, that is a bit of a challenge because of the resourcing that would go along with it.

Pauline Walker (Royal High School): First of all, there is not a consistent picture. I have the great privilege of being in a number of schools across Scotland as part of other roles that I have, such as associate assessor. The picture across all the local authorities is not the same with regard to having the freedom to make choices in your schools about your curriculum.

In Edinburgh, we do make those decisions to meet the needs of our young people, but we are constrained by what is considered to be a measure of success nationally at the moment. That is a points-gathering exercise, and highers are still considered to be the gold standard. We are not moving in any way towards a more inclusive curriculum for excellence, such as level 6, which would allow us to open out our curriculum more. That makes it difficult in my context, because I have to be careful that I meet the needs of all, including those who are going on to university. Universities have not moved a lot with regard to the qualifications that they accept. They are still very traditional in the qualifications that they look for, which affects what success for my local authority and the Scottish Government looks like.

There is also the issue of resources. Staffing is a massive issue. In the areas that we would like to develop—where we know that vocational courses would really encourage success in a group of young people who are a little bit disenfranchised by what we can offer—we cannot get staff. There is a huge shortage in areas such as technical studies, biology, maths and business. We have growth in those areas in Scotland, but we cannot match that growth in our curriculum because there is a lack of staffing.

We are constrained at the moment in our context—albeit not so much by our authority—but there are national considerations that are stopping us from growing. I feel that reform is needed for us to take the next step. I have probably gone as far as I can in my context within the guidelines on the Scottish curriculum, and reform now needs to move us forward so that we can take bigger steps.

This is about having a curriculum for equity and excellence. Our top 50 per cent of pupils should be performing as best as they possibly can as they leave school, but what about everybody else? What will the pathways look like, right through from the age of three to 18? We are not quite there yet.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that.

Greg Dempster (Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland): Good morning, everyone. I am different from the other four members of the panel in two respects. First, I am not a school leader; I am representing my members. I will not be able to talk about individual settings and the work that is being done there. Secondly, I represent primary, nursery and additional support needs schools.

The AHDS does a workload survey each year, and we ask members about the empowerment agenda and how they feel about each of the four dimensions of that agenda: curriculum,

improvement, staffing and resources and funding. On both curriculum and improvement, the vast majority of respondents—way up at about 80 or 90 per cent—say that they have an adequate degree of freedom in relation to those areas of their work or, rather, an appropriate degree of autonomy—those are the words that we use in the survey. When it comes to staffing and budgets, the picture is very different. Well over 60 per cent of members say that they do not have an appropriate degree of autonomy when it comes to staffing, and there is a slightly less negative picture—although it is still a very negative one—in relation to funding.

Some of the other answers have strayed into reform, rather than directly answering your question, so I will follow suit. Our members would certainly say that the gap is not in their empowerment and freedoms when it comes to curriculum and improvement; the gaps concern resources and staffing, particularly in relation to management time in primary schools, ASN support and alternative placements.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that.

Peter Bain (School Leaders Scotland): It is nice to see everyone again. I apologise if this is a bit repetitive.

The Scottish Government is, and has been for some time, keen to promote empowerment. The headteachers charter is a good guide, and many of our members would like to see a re-ignition of the promotion of that document, although there is one sentence in the charter that nullifies the whole document, which is on the ability of local authorities to overrule every other point in the document.

I am quite lucky when it comes to consistency. My local authority gives me a very high degree of autonomy and responsibility within the constraints of management circulars, local authority policies and, obviously, Scottish Government policy. I have the freedom to work with people in my local community to develop a curriculum that is appropriate for them. As you know, I work in four very different schools in different parts of Argyll. Oban is unique compared with Tiree and Lismore, for example. That flexibility and autonomy allow us, in partnership with the local community, to provide courses that serve the needs of those individual areas. For example, in Oban, a large number of courses are linked to the hospitality and tourism industry. There are engineering courses and hairdressing courses there, too, whereas, in Tiree, we use video conferencing to access business courses, because a lot of independent online businesses operate out of Tiree and people there like that type of course.

The permission to do that is very welcome, but it is not granted across all 32 local authorities. Through SLS, our members tell us that curricular constraints are placed on them, with local authority management teams having a strong veto on their curriculum. The problem concerns why that veto exists and why they use it.

09:45

Sadly, as I said the last time I was here, the issue is to do with the metrics that Pauline Walker talked about a minute ago. Some schools, local authorities and communities feel the need to ensure that the metrics of school performance are maintained. By that, I mean that there is a desire to keep hitting five-plus higher figures at the expense of providing a vast array of vocational courses that would best suit particular young people and individual unique communities. That is being put to the side in order to hit the five-plus figures.

The second constraint is to do with resources. That is the case worldwide, but we are all faced with budgetary concerns for a variety of reasons. Naturally, local authorities are pruning their budgets, which results in the pruning of school budgets, which, in turn, prunes teacher and support staff levels and resource levels beyond that. That is a difficult problem to solve.

The way to create consistency—even if we are all pruning, there is still an issue of fairness—is to devolve school management. The Scottish Government produces a guide for all local authorities and schools to follow, but the DSM policy is not being followed by local authorities across the country.

Again, I am lucky in that regard. I have to praise my local authority, Argyll and Bute Council, because we follow DSM in its purest form. We allow what is referred to as unlimited virement, so a headteacher has the authority and autonomy to move money between different budgetary lines. That means that, if they need to put more staffing into their support service because that is the nature of their school, they can do that. If they have less need for that but more need for resources in vocational provision, they can provide those resources.

More than 50 per cent of local authorities have constrained the Scottish Government's devolved school management guidance to the extent that they dictate the staffing formulas and resource budgets, which, in turn, restricts a headteacher's ability to use the autonomy and empowerment that were supposed to have been granted to everyone. Although I am lucky, and Pauline Walker and Graham Hutton are lucky, that is not always the case. That is the message that comes back from School Leaders Scotland members across the board.

The Convener: Thank you for those responses. I suppose that this is a bit more of a specific question and you may not all wish to answer it. How do you determine the knowledge content of the curriculum that you are presenting? How could national documentation support better integration of different types of the knowledge that you have spoken about in that curriculum for excellence?

Who would like to go first on that? Peter, you caught my eye. I always do that.

Peter Bain: No problem. That is a relatively easy question, based on what I have just said. The issue is about identifying the uniqueness of your community, talking to your community and analysing the market forces on and the desires of that community.

To use Oban as an example, again, it is a tourism destination, so we are going to put on hospitality courses, and there are lots of jobs in hairdressing, engineering and so on. The market forces exist for us to choose from a vast array of courses that are available on the SQA suite and we promote courses where we know that young people are going to get jobs. To try to push them into something where there are no jobs is just not sensible.

Additionally, we seek the views of young people and their parents with regard to what their desires are. There are many people who want to go into the arts, but—I will keep using Oban as an example—there are a limited number of jobs in music and performing arts in Oban, so, most of the time they would have to go down to the central belt or up to Aberdeen. They might go to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, to Aberdeen or to Motherwell to do drama. We know that we have a high number of pupils who have a desire to do that, so we put on courses that enable that to happen as well.

We blend the knowledge that we get from doing market research on where the jobs are and from asking families and kids what they want to do—because we are here to deliver dreams as well as jobs—and that is how we dictate what our curriculum is. It is as simple as that, and the legislation allows us to do that, provided that local authorities do not place any constraints on us.

The Convener: Delivering dreams—I quite like that.

Pauline Walker: It is really easy to answer that question about the senior phase, because we are working within national guidelines about knowledge content, in line with Scottish Qualifications Authority or other course structures, and there is very little choice there. What choice there is very much comes from pupil voice. We are very strongly driven by what our community tells us, which has been very much about diversity and global issues in recent years. The drive for change has come from there.

The broad general education, from first to third year, is far more open. The framework is very much skills-based, but you cannot develop skills without content and knowledge, so we have to make decisions about pathways. We think about where those young people are destined for in the senior phase. We also use local knowledge: hospitality and leisure are massively important in Edinburgh, so there is a lot of drive towards those areas. We also have to look at recent issues. Health and wellbeing has been a huge concern for schools for quite some time, so we are looking at healthy living right across the curriculum.

The answer to your question is fairly straightforward. There is a lot of national guidance and documentation to support us, particularly for the senior phase. It is a little bit fuzzy for the BGE. Things can vary from school to school, although they tend not to, because we collaborate. There could be more national guidance for the BGE: we cannot develop skills without content and knowledge, so what content and knowledge should be in there? That area is much wider and more skills-based.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to comment?

Barry Graham: I agree with what was said about what we might call the traditional curriculum and the knowledge and understanding that goes with that, but we must also consider the skills that we are trying to develop in our young people to give them confidence to thrive in the 21st century.

We all try to tailor part of our curriculum to our local context. In Dumfries and Galloway, we have an orchard that was given to us by Buccleuch Estates and can get young people out there developing skills in growing apples and other fruit. We have invested in some polytunnels. We work very closely with local colleges and have developed national progression awards in farming. We have about 12 partner farmers, and pupils go out to a different farm every week. They get a real feel for different types of farming and a better understanding of what farming means in 2023 and how technology and research are used more now than in the past. We also try to link that to learning for sustainability and the environmental agenda, to ensure that there is a good understanding of those parts of the curriculum.

What matters is how you work with your partners. In Dumfries and Galloway, we have found that lots of people want to work with schools but they may not know how to do that or how their skills can best be used.

The Convener: Smaller businesses may not have the resources to do that.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Good morning. I will direct my initial question to Peter Bain, but anyone else who wants to contribute can catch my eye. You made some comments earlier about the number and range of subjects. How do schools decide on the number and range of subjects, and is that the same across Scotland? If that is done at an entirely local level, how independent is that and how much is it dictated by resourcing and by the availability of specialist teachers, which you alluded to earlier?

Peter Bain: The timetable is the biggest constraint on the number of qualifications that any school can deliver; it is that, more than anything, that drives choice. Traditionally, across the board there might be youngsters in the BGE—secondary 1, S2 and S3, although some schools have gone away from using the BGE in S3—and they would get roughly 13 to 15 subjects per week and have a period or a couple of periods of physical education, or something else, per week. That is very formulaic, and within it schools use whatever free resources or partners they have to add some interdisciplinary learning, spice, interest or project work to make it a bit more enjoyable, rather than just funnelling the kids around 13 to 15 subjects. However, sadly, funnelling is what happens in most schools in the country, so I suggest that we should reform the BGE at some stage soon.

However, as we move on to the certificated stage, which is what most people have an interest in because qualifications lead us to get our university and college places and our job interviews, we tend to find that in S4 it varies between a delivery of six, seven, eight or even nine subjects depending on how many minutes are given to each period. There is always the same amount of minutes in a week, but some schools choose to limit the amount of minutes that they give to each subject so that they can eke out, say, eight or nine subjects. I am aware of two schools that do nine subjects. Schools across the country mainly do seven or eight subjects currently. They reduce the time for each subject, and they backfill that by stealing time from the BGE, which means they do less broad general education. They are not supposed to do that, but schools across the country are doing it because there is not enough time to deliver the 160 hours per course that is needed. There is an SQA directive that says if somewhere runs an SQA course at the national 5 level or the higher level, it is 160 hours, and there is nothing that can be done about that.

Usually in S5 and S6, and specifically in S6, when youngsters might have acquired five qualifications at a level that is appropriate for their destination—for example if they are going to uni and they got five highers in S5—schools supplement those highers by doing a range of courses. In Oban, we offer more than 90 courses across multiple levels, from level 1 all the way through to foundation apprenticeship level.

We offer about 50 kids foundation apprenticeship-level courses. That is thanks to partners. We need Skills Development Scotland's support for that, and we get direct funding from it to do foundation apprenticeships. We need the support of the University of the Highlands and Islands Argyll, which provides tutors to deliver national progression awards in, for example, automotive engineering and marine engineering, cosmetology and health and beauty. We cannot fund all of that ourselves; the UHI provides the funding.

Between external funding sources from SDS, the support of UHI Argyll and from my ability to move the budget—as I said, Argyll and Bute Council gives me the authority to move my budgetary lines, so I can buy tutors in, and I buy in music tutors, dance tutors, engineering tutors and piping tutors—the courses are all paid for. That is what empowerment allows schools to do, and it allows me to deliver up to 90 subjects.

However, we need a combination of rejigging the timetable to maximise the hours that are needed for each course, thinking about pupil choice and deciding where and when in the timetable pupils can access that array of choice. They need that choice. Even five highers are not enough. They need five highers or the five national 5s—or whatever the entrance requirement to the job, college or uni is—but that is not enough, because universities are asking for experiences, which is great. I keep saying to the kids, "See your five highers or your five nat 5s? Those are one key, and that key opens the door to the next question, which is: what makes you interesting now?" and the personal statement or job application that says that someone volunteered in a group or did extra courses where they were a sports leader make the difference.

My son is training to be a PE teacher just now, and he got his five highers in S5, but the fitness, football, sports coaching and leadership qualifications that he picked up in S6—at the expense of highers—matter.

10:00

I am going to finish with this wee point, because this is what is partly killing the curriculum, choice and opportunity. In my school, I allow pupils to do what my son did, because the qualifications that were gained by my son—who is one of many; I could pick many pathways—were his first key. His second key is the breadth of experience that makes him more ready for work or, in his case, for

uni—that is what secures someone a position at uni or gets them a job.

However, through doing that for multiple people, my school stats go downwards, because people clock up fewer highers. I could say, "See all that extra stuff? We're not going to do it, because I need my stats to be up here. So, I'm going to make you do an extra higher in French, or an extra higher in geography, on top of your history and your modern studies."

A lot of people are concerned about the drop in advanced higher numbers. However, not that many people need advanced highers. What they need is a wealth of experience to help them get jobs, or positions at uni, and make their way in life. However, significant numbers of schools and local authorities still ask, "Why are advanced higher numbers going down? Why is that percentage dropping?" and we are asked, "Why are your advanced highers plummeting in the league table?" It is because few people need advanced highers and everybody needs experiences, and that is what we try to do.

I hope that that answers your question.

The Convener: Just so you know, Liam, Pauline Walker and Graham Hutton have both caught my eye and want to come in.

Liam Kerr: Thank you. What Peter Bain said does answer my question, and I am very grateful.

I will move to Pauline Walker on the same question, but I will direct a short supplementary question to her as well: if the secondary school changes the curriculum—if it does the sort of thing that Peter Bain talked about—how do you ensure that the primary schools are dovetailing sufficiently with those changes?

Pauline Walker: First, when it comes to the structure of the curriculum, the number of subjects in fourth, fifth or sixth year is a non-question. It does not matter. What we are looking for is that, by the time a young person leaves—which in Scotland, often, is after the sixth year—they should have a totality of qualifications and experiences to enable them to be successful post-school. That is what Peter Bain was talking about, I guess: it cannot be just highers, because that does not get you anywhere any more. We also know from 10, 20 or 30 years ago that young people who were highly academic but without skills were not necessarily successful in the workplace. We need to get that balance right.

That means that those experiences need to build all the way through, from ages three to 18. That is where we dovetail with our learning communities. I am associated with four primary schools in my area. We work together to look at the curriculum to see how we can build the skills all the way from nursery, right through, so that, when our young people leave our learning community, they are highly successful.

For example, we look at the results of our leavers with our primary schools, to show them where their young people went and to show them trends and patterns, and perhaps adjust where they need to be in the primary schools to make sure that success is equitable and excellent. A lot of work goes into that in schools across Scotland. All secondary schools in Scotland will have associated primaries, with which they will work in that way.

That is how the curriculum needs to look in its totality. We can map a young person's journey all the way from nursery to S6 and look at how they build skills, knowledge and qualifications on their way through. We can do that in general areas—for example, expressive arts, a maths pathway or a science pathway—and can make decisions to ensure that those pathways are supported. However, we will always have the random pathways that come out at the sides—the other experiences that need to be on offer, as we have talked about. That is why we have 90 courses on offer: to allow those pathways.

Liam Kerr: Thank you.

Graham Hutton, the initial question was about how schools decide on the number and range of subjects, which I know is a subject on which you want to contribute. When you do that, there is another question that I would like you to respond to. The committee has heard about the Finnish system, which seems to have a great deal of autonomy in its decision making, yet at the same time, the Finnish Government is more prescriptive about certain aspects.

Given what we have already heard and what you are about to tell us, is there more scope for consistency on what should be taught in schools—the Finnish system, for example, prescribes core subjects and a minimum time—while allowing for the flexibility that we have heard about?

Graham Hutton: It is difficult to say. You cannot take parts of the Finnish system and cherry pick them for our system, because that does not work. That is one of the problems with the Scottish system. We have adapted here and there and have bolted things on, and it does not hold together. If we are to take something from Germany or Finland, it has to be the whole system, because those systems work in those countries. There is also the cultural aspect—traditionally, they have been used to those systems, so there is a history behind how they got there.

Without a shadow of a doubt, there is something to be said for the view that certain subjects—

literacy and numeracy, for example, and health and wellbeing—have to be taught in school. However, what I offered at Grove academy was far wider than what was actually taken up by pupils. As Peter Bain said, we followed the pupil voice and considered local circumstances. We were moving to a greater focus on sustainability, because the sustainability industry is growing in Dundee, as is the games industry, so we introduced ethical hacking and games design. I totally agree with much of what Peter Bain and Pauline Walker have said. I never really worried about my advanced higher figures, because I knew that I could double them quite easily if I added advanced higher engineering to the curriculum**.** However, I did not, because we did the advanced engineering programme that I talked about earlier. There were no qualifications in that, unless pupils wanted to get a CREST award, but they gained skills and experience, which led to a much more positive destination for those young people.

One of my young people who wanted to do medicine got the first key, as Peter Bain would say—she got through the first door—by getting five highers. She went on to do the FITA fitness instruction training, and that is what got her into medicine on an unconditional offer because, as a result of doing that, she could work out how the body functioned. Doing another higher would not really have added to her cachet. That shows that there is more scope.

The more headteachers are able to adapt their curriculum to suit the needs of the young people in their care, the better. Obviously, local circumstances must also be taken into account. When you are offering subjects, first you have to think, "What staffing have I got?" For a while, I could not really offer home economics, because I was two staff down and I could not get a home economics teacher for love nor money—I couldn't even bake one—so it was difficult to offer more in that area. When I was at Braeview academy, we set up the hairdressing salon, because we knew that a lot of young people wanted to go in that direction. That took some resources and a bit of creative accounting—if I can put it that way—to make sure that the money was there. However, it was a winner because the young people could see that there was an end and a goal that they could reach. We had a wee bit of flexibility there and we used it, which is key.

Barry Graham: I will address the primary schools part of your question. I am headteacher of an all-through school, so I am responsible for the early learning and childcare, as well as the primary and secondary education, which gives me the ability to ensure that there are clearer lines of progression. All schools across the country look at the BGE, outcomes and experiences, and literacy and numeracy, but there are different approaches, and sometimes that creates its own challenges. About 20 different schools feed into Wallace Hall, some of which are part of my cluster. I have one school that is part of the school that I am head of, and there are others from other parts of the authority, all of which have a slightly different curriculum. You have to try to pull that together and look at how to move forward.

The main way that we do that is through the outcomes and experiences. That can work really well—for example, we share the facilities that we have that a primary school would not be able to access, we work together on initiatives such as developing the young workforce, including by sharing speakers, and we look at approaches to homework. Different schools have different approaches. Some take an approach whereby they do not encourage everybody to do homework, whereas I take a different approach: I like all students to do homework, because that allows them to progress and it allows me to ensure that I am raising attainment across the school.

There are approaches that can help to ensure that there are clearer lines of progression, and I think that that helps as pupils go forward into the BGE, S3 and the senior phase.

Liam Kerr: I am very grateful to you all.

The Convener: Greg Dempster would also like to comment.

Greg Dempster: To continue that point, working across clusters is extremely important, but primary schools operate differently for different reasons—they respond to their different communities. Where there are 20 primary schools linking to one secondary school—a situation that is repeated across the country—it is true that there is an absolute need for the primaries and the secondary school to work together to provide coherence in the learning experiences, but those individual schools are responding to the different starting points in their different communities. Complete alignment is not always desirable or helpful, but coherence is something to strive for.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, and thank you for the answers that you have given so far. The description that you have given us of education in your areas and the parts that you are responsible for sounds exciting—that is definitely the future that we should be gearing towards.

I want to pick up on a couple of the points that we have heard so far. Graham Hutton, in your opening remarks, you said that the status quo cannot continue, and Pauline Walker mentioned that it was having a significant impact on pupils from poorer backgrounds. Can you tell us what it is about the status quo that is causing the problem

for people from poorer or disadvantaged backgrounds? What in the reforms would change that?

Pauline Walker: What we need in Scotland is a curriculum for equity and excellence, but we do not have that. We have a curriculum that is very much about the middle. It is geared towards the top 50 per cent or so of young people who perform relatively well, get the right skills and go on to be successful. In schools, we are finding that we have an increasing number of young people for whom that does not fit their needs. They have very specific needs, and that is not necessarily what the Scottish curriculum looks like. In particular, those young people are from disadvantaged backgrounds, and they have potentially come from cycles of poverty for many generations. They are very disaffected by society, they see no purpose or point to education and quite often they vote with their feet—more and more, because of poverty, they do that within the school. They will come to school because we are able to offer heat, food and clothing, but they will not go to class; they vote with their feet.

The fact that they are voting with their feet in so many numbers is a cry out across Scotland that we are not meeting their needs. I see that on a daily basis. They need something different. They need access to culture, modern languages, history, modern studies and so on, but they need to have a purpose to see where it is going to take them in life. They really feel that they are coming to do things without purpose. They think, "I don't know why I'm doing this, so I'm not going to do it—I'll just walk."

We are constrained by a curriculum that does not allow us to make changes to meet that need. We need more pathways. We need our national curriculum to open up and allow us to make changes that we do not have to hide from the system or that we move aside if we have an inspection.

The curriculum should embrace the fact that many of our young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have the skills and ability to be successful, and it is our job to put in place courses that show them a way through and out of the poverty that they are in. That could be as simple as providing courses in hairdressing, which is an incredibly financially viable pathway. It is very skilled. Many of my young people would want to do that, because they know that they would be able to go on and work in that area in their community. That would hook them into developing the skills around, for example, business, because they want to run their own business and be self-employed. At the moment, instead, what I am having to do is provide an experiential curriculum in first to third year that does not meet their needs and, by the senior phase, to be quite frank, they are so disenfranchised that it is very difficult to bring them on.

We are working hard to make that different, but I feel constrained by the current system, even by something as simple as the stretch aims. I am expected to get every fourth year to get a level 5 course qualification and every fifth year to get a level 6 qualification, but those qualifications are very difficult to get in the areas that those young people are interested in. That means that they do not get those qualifications and it looks as though they have failed. Their success is not recognised or celebrated. They feel like second-class citizens, and they disengage further from society.

In terms of reform, I firmly believe that we need to keep excellence at the front and centre of education in Scotland, but we also need the equity side to come to the forefront. Right now, we do not have that; our ability to do that is constrained.

10:15

Resourcing is a big issue as well. Many of the courses that could meet those needs are available only for colleges. For example, there are a number of catering qualifications within level 6, but they require a cooking kitchen. Most schools do not have that; instead, they have a room with 20 cookers, so they cannot provide that course, and the pupils who want to do it have to go out to college. However, college is not their safe space; they are not yet ready for that, and they need to be in a school where we have support structures to help them to be successful.

Those are easy tweaks. We need to look at the financial viability of making provision for those young people within their communities, because many do not want to leave their communities. What would that look like? How can we put structures, systems and qualifications in place to allow that to happen?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you. I might come back to you in a second, but first we will hear from Graham Hutton.

Graham Hutton: I totally agree with what Pauline Walker said. It is incumbent on us to try to change the system. As Peter Bain said earlier, there is too much emphasis on the metrics of five-plus at national 5 and five at highers. The standing of national 4, which is a very good course, is not high. We need to change how that is looked at in comparison with national 5. People think that having a national 4 does not matter, but it does, because those young people have achieved something and have a qualification, even though they did not sit an exam. The alternative certification model worked well because it allowed

teachers to measure what the young people had done and gave them praise and recognition for it.

We also need to put vocational and academic subjects on an equal footing. A young person who does hairdressing—to use the example that Pauline Walker mentioned—has to achieve that at higher level. Higher physics is a different ball game altogether, but that is the level that they have to get to in that subject, whether the course is a higher or a level 6—incidentally, I much prefer the term "level 6", because people think of highers as the gold standard, but Britain left the gold standard nearly 100 years ago, and we need to look at what is relevant to the 21st century rather than the 20th or even the 19th.

Those young people have to have a purpose and a sense of belonging, and there need to be pathways that they will see as relevant and which will take them through school. Why do they come to school? After the pandemic, people said, "Well, we didn't have to come to school. We still learned, but we learned other things." What do we actually want them to learn?

I had a group of young people in S1—there was an article in *TES* about this—who really could not cope with school after the pandemic. Therefore, we got them on to a course run by a local company, Quest, to get them hooked into learning through football. Many years ago, there was a course in Dundee called kick-it, kick-off, which was very successful. Those young people were all footballers—they were all boys, I am afraid, although there was also a craft course that enabled young girls who were disillusioned and were loners who did not want to get involved in certain things to get involved in knitting and other things that I am afraid to say were regarded as traditional female subjects, but it was open to everybody.

The football course engaged those young men in improving their skills—not just their football skills, but their soft skills as well. It was about them being able to communicate better and work together as a team. As they came up through S2 and S3, I realised that there had to be something else for them in school, not just numeracy and literacy. Therefore, we approached a Dundee company called Alexander Decorating, which does lots of training, and we were able to get those young people in to start getting a trade. By the end of S3, they had a certificate that said that they could work on a building site—they could not actually work on a building site, because they had not turned 16, but they already had a qualification that they were really proud of. I am going to get emotional here, but they were really proud of it because it was something that they achieved through school. They were only in school half the time—the rest of the time they were out at Alexander's or at Quest—but they were still engaging in education, and that is how we have to move forward.

Pauline Walker is right about the cost of things. What I have just described was very expensive, but it was worth doing, because it made sure that those young people were engaged in education.

We need to look at how we spend our money and how we use pupil equity funding and other funds creatively to encourage better programmes of learning for young people that are not along traditional lines.

People talk about going back to the future, but I think that we will go forward to the past if we do not amend and change.

> "There is a tide in the affairs of men,
> Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune".

We are at that point now.

The Convener: Ben Macpherson has a wee supplementary question before Pam Duncan-Glancy carries on. Is that okay, Pam?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Sure.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Thank you for sharing that inspirational story, Mr Hutton. To follow on from what you said, it is important to emphasise that, although Pauline Walker and you have stated that interventions, alternatives and innovative programmes are expensive, we must keep in mind what they create in respect of young people contributing to society and what they save in respect of the Christie principles and potentially in respect of other services.

The Convener: That was more of a comment than a question from Ben Macpherson, but maybe Graham Hutton can address it.

Graham Hutton: I agree. The more we work with partners to develop things the better. I was going to say that earlier in response to Mr Kerr's questions. When people are building their curriculum, they need to know what external partners they can work with. I think that that approach has grown in every school. At one point, we worked with more than 100 partners at Grove academy. The more people can get in other people from the community, the city or the local authority the better. That will support our young people.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I thank both of you for those comprehensive answers. Do you think that the current reforms will get us to where we need to be?

Pauline Walker: That is quite a passion for me. I get quite frustrated by the pace of change. The reality is that young people sitting in our schools

need reform now, not in 10 or 20 years' time. I really worry about what society will look like if we do not do something very quickly. We need a timetable for change.

I think that the reforms are in the right direction. They very much consider pathways and different measures of success, and they definitely look at assessment. Assessment is horrific right now, particularly for our most disadvantaged. The ACM absolutely showed us that young people are intelligent, skilled and able but, for many reasons, they cannot demonstrate that in the traditional way that we expect them to. We disadvantage those with additional support needs with our current models.

I think that the reforms are in the right direction, but we need to get on with it, move where we can in the quick wins, and get a timetable for change in place so that we can begin to plan.

The Convener: Does Barry Graham want to come in on that thread?

Barry Graham: I agree 100 per cent with Pauline Walker. On my greatest fear, there is potential, and we have had all the reviews, but let us get a plan. Why do we not have a bit of a timeline already? We are having a bit of consultation on that. What will work? What are the bits that we need to get right? It is about involving teachers, headteachers and other school staff in the process. A key issue is that things should not be designed just by people who do not work in schools any more. For the approach to be successful, we need to ensure that key stakeholders in schools are very much at the forefront. For me, a biggie is looking at exams and assessment and accepting that assessments have a bigger part to play in the future for us.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: May I press on that final point, convener?

The Convener: I am sorry, but I am afraid that I am about to make a convener comment, if you do not mind.

I am looking at the clock. I know that there is a lot of passion in the room about what we are doing, but I really need more succinct answers and questions that are directed at individuals.

I know that Peter Bain wants to come in before we move on to Michelle Thomson.

Peter Bain: I am fine, convener. I hope that the committee will remember my very long answers on the subject of reform the last time I was here and that it will bear them in mind.

The Convener: Okay. We will reference those.

The smiles and the energy coming from the panel are catching, but I have a timeline, and I feel a bit nasty about following it. I will now go to Michelle Thomson.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I hear you, convener. On that note, I want to pick up on something that Peter Bain has already laid the ground for. I will go to Pauline Walker first to finish off the thread about your level of autonomy over your budget and how that frames the sort of curriculum that you can offer.

What is your feeling now about the level of autonomy? You might want to reflect further on the comments that Peter Bain made about local authorities and the Scottish Government. I would like to quickly check with Pauline Walker and probably Barry Graham and Graham Hutton as well.

Pauline Walker: There is mixed autonomy. I have complete control over how I vire the budget that comes to me. If I decide to have less or more staffing, that is my decision and within my authority. That is very helpful when making decisions about something that is relevant for me. However, quite a chunk of money that comes from the Scottish Government never makes it to our schools, because the decisions about how it should be spent are made by our local authorities. Quite often, it is spent on more global projects within the authority, which do not often make their way to us. As a result, sometimes, what the Scottish Government puts in place does not have an impact on the ground.

Michelle Thomson: Do you have the same flexibility with budget pots?

Pauline Walker: Yes.

Michelle Thomson: Barry and Graham, can you reflect on that?

Barry Graham: I get some autonomy, but not enough. I am trying to keep my answer really short. I would like headteachers to be given more autonomy over the money that comes into the authority, as Pauline Walker said. That would allow me to be creative. I find it quite hard that all the money goes to running the things that I have to do, which takes away that bit of creativity that should be a key part of a headteacher's job.

I am trying to keep my answer quite short.

Michelle Thomson: You are doing really well; thank you.

The Convener: I feel so nasty now. [*Laughter.*]

Graham Hutton: I agree with my colleagues. I had autonomy in my budget of £6.5 million, but £5.5 million was for staffing. The only way to make more money available was to cut the staffing in some way, but you are constrained by the staffing figure that the authority has to put to Government, because there is a limit. That is difficult.

In my role as general secretary, I am hearing concerning stories of authorities where PEF money has been top sliced by 10 or even 15 per cent to fill in gaps in the other budget and the cost of the school day money or curriculum money—which are supposed to cover home economics, art and design, techie and drama—so that young people do not have to pay any more for their supplies, such as food and wood.

That money is not going out to schools. It has been put out by the Scottish Government, but it is not reaching schools. That is a concern. We are all using the PEF money—I was certainly using it—and the cost of the school day money to make sure that we have a bit more equity in the school.

Michelle Thomson: To finish off this thread, what reform would you like to see? I do not want to put words in anyone's mouth, but it sounds as though you would like, at a minimum, the level of autonomy and flexibility that you already have and, potentially, more.

Greg Dempster: I want to talk about the flexibility point. I know that you are asking in a secondary context, because it relates to subject choice and other matters. We get reported back to us a broad range of examples of how much control heads have over their budgets, from Peter Bain's example of full ability to vire from area to area, to other examples in which there is only an illusion of autonomy. In those examples, even if funds are devolved to the school leader, if they want to send a member of staff on a course, they have to ask for permission, even though it involves a budget that has been allocated to them. There is double decision making—it is referred back to the local authority to say, "Yes, you can make that decision with the budget that is devolved to you."

There is a real spectrum across the country.

Michelle Thomson: Okay; I think that we hear that.

Another area that the committee is interested in is artificial intelligence. It is an issue that we are habitually talking about, and I want to get a sense from you of how aware you are of the risks and opportunities that it offers in education generally. How do you see a pathway forward for making sure that we are equipped to move forward with that? I would appreciate your reflections on who that "we" is. Should it be local schools, local authorities or Government, or is it much bigger than that? I will come to Peter Bain first, as he did not contribute in the previous thread.

Peter Bain: That is fine—honestly. I felt that I contributed on that subject enough the previous time, so it is okay.

The subject of AI is virgin territory. I will be presumptuous and speak for many people in schools, mainly because I have chaired a couple of meetings on the subject with collaborative groups in SLS and an organisation called BOCSH—the building on collaboration, supporting headteachers group. We have had guest speakers who are certainly more knowledgeable about AI than I am.

10:30

We believe that a necessary forerunner to anything that we do is for Government to establish a degree of expertise and guidance that would guide education nationally, through into local authorities and then to schools, incorporating an understanding of AI—and not just by techie people. Sometimes, when I talk about AI to techie people, I am like, "What're you talking about? I dinnae get that. Somebody tell me that in layman's language."

We need employers, universities and colleges to be involved. We need a holistic picture of society to have the discussion about and understanding of AI. Ultimately, the job of a school is to prepare our youngsters for life and work and, unless we fully understand where AI is going in life and work, we cannot prepare them. We need to be at the forefront of the development, but we also need to be at the tail end of the discussion—otherwise, how do we know what we are aiming for? That is quite a dichotomy.

Michelle Thomson: Does anyone want to add to that?

Greg Dempster: Recently, I have been involved in quite a few discussions, meetings and events that have related to AI. That stems from generative AI ballooning and being all over the media and everybody being concerned that it is going to take over the world and kick us out.

The discussions that I have been involved in have all been about understanding the opportunities that can be taken from AI and how they can be used to improve the offering in schools, whether that is about helping teachers with consistency across year groups or helping groups of schools in how they work, or whether it is about lightening the administrative burden.

One of the keynote speeches at our annual conference last week was specifically about AI in education. The speaker had some really important and interesting things to say. Core to her message was that AI is being presented as a wild stallion rampaging through education, yet, in their own settings, school leaders have to take the reins.

They first need to understand a bit more about AI and its opportunities, so that they can then think about how they might want to use the tools and opportunities to address challenges that they have

identified in their schools for pupils' learning. They can then implement the tools, and they should not be swayed by all the bells and whistles and the excitement that sits around some of those developments. It is about defining how you want to use the technology and taking the best advantage of it.

Michelle Thomson: Are there any final comments?

Pauline Walker: Just from the geek in the room.

Michelle Thomson: Excellent—we like a geek.

Pauline Walker: My worry is that the technology will move so fast that we will be left behind because we take so long to do anything. We need to embrace it, as has been said. It is a technology that young people will start to use more quickly than us. It will absolutely change our lives. It will change our working lives for the better, and we must be prepared to be innovative in schools to be at the forefront of that. As Peter Bain said, we need to know how to be innovative, because it is so new, but we will have to take some brave decisions and embrace it so that we can learn together as a society.

This is a big innovation that will change our lives forever. It is a bit like getting mobile phones—it is that big. Things will really change. For many young people, it will change their jobs for the better. In the area of low-paid jobs, I think that people will have a much better working life because of how the situation will move.

Barry Graham: That is why we need national or international guidance on the opportunities and possible risks with AI, so that we can start to look at where we are going to make marginal gains and what the first steps will be to build the confidence of everybody who is going to be working with it.

The Convener: Thank you.

Ross, I see that you want to ask a supplementary. Is it a brief one on this theme?

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I hope that it will be brief, convener.

On the point that a couple of you have made about local authorities top slicing your budgets, I presume that, for local authorities, the theory behind doing so is that they are able to recruit quality improvement officers and others who can provide additional value to you. However, it does not sound like you feel that you are getting a lot of additional value from what authorities are spending that top slicing on. Is it fair to read that into your comments?

The Convener: Perhaps that question can be directed to Pauline Walker, who made that comment.

Pauline Walker: It does not have the impact that it could because it is spread too thinly. When you have a targeted approach in schools, the money is targeted directly at the young people whom you feel that you can make a difference with, and it makes that difference. However, when the money is top sliced, it is diluted, and it does not have the same impact.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I call Ben Macpherson.

Ben Macpherson: I will direct this question initially to Pauline Walker and Peter Bain, as they have already commented on these issues, but I am happy to hear from others, too.

We have already gone over this somewhat, but one of the key tensions lies in how we support a system in which there is a great deal of freedom to enable young people to realise their potential and develop their abilities while, at the same time, we have a system of accountability, with all the considerations in that respect. After all, Parliament will want to comment on the statistics, the media will want to write about them and commentators will want to talk about them, too. There has been some criticism—for example, in the Morgan review—that too much focus has been placed on attainment results in measuring the success of schools. At the moment, who holds schools accountable for their performance? Who supports improvement? How does the system work currently, and what would you like to be changed so that it works differently and better in future? Pauline, can you respond to that question first?

Pauline Walker: As headteacher, I am responsible for ensuring that every young person leaves my school with what they need to go on—and it is a great responsibility. I have to hold all my teachers, my faculties, my departments and the subjects that they provide accountable through measures of success, so that I know that, first of all, I am getting value for public money and, secondly, the young people are as successful as they need to be.

I am held to account by my local authority, and a quality improvement officer will regularly lift and sense check my results throughout the year. Annually, I have to report on how I am performing and whether I am meeting everyone's needs. That can be done at the top end—as my school is an academic one, I have a lot of young people who perform strongly—but I also have about 300 to 400 young people at the other end in quintile 1, and I need to show that they are progressing in the same way and are getting the same equitable opportunities to be successful. For example, with regard to the gap data, our current measure of success relates to the five national 5s and five highers, and how things are sitting in that respect.

There is also the inspectorate. We were inspected last December; we had not been seen for a long time—for 17 years—but the inspectorate's coming in actually provided a way to assure parents and the community that the school was moving in the right direction, and that what I was telling them was success was actually what national success looked like, too.

There are lots of systems that hold us to account, and I think it only right and proper that we are held to account. However, at the moment, our measures are possibly counterproductive. The areas of success in which we are being made to perform are the wrong ones, and we should perhaps be looking at skills, positive destinations and so on. I would even highlight the word "higher"—the fact that it is considered a gold standard immediately makes the level 6s second-class citizens. Not changing that wording makes things inequitable—straight up. There is no other way to look at it.

I think that the system works, but we need to look at what the measure of success for all young people in Scotland would be, to ensure that our success is celebrated. I feel that there are young people in our schools who are being very successful but who do not consider themselves to be so, because society, under the current system, is telling them that they are not.

Ben Macpherson: Until they leave and begin working.

Pauline Walker: Yes—and then they discover that things are different.

Ben Macpherson: That is when they flourish. I have seen that many times.

Pauline Walker: But they should be flourishing in school. They should not have to wait six years in the school system, only to flourish when they leave.

Ben Macpherson: Exactly. Do you want to respond, Peter?

Peter Bain: If you all cast your minds back to when you were at school and had to write essays in English—I am sure that you all had to do that at some point—at the end of that exercise, when the teacher gave you your essay back, it was probably full of red pen—or green pen if your teacher was a Hibee like me. There would be all those comments telling you how you could get better, but you probably never looked at that. You probably looked at the number on the front of the page. Did you get 25 out of 25 or 19 out of 25, or did you just miss the pass rate or whatever? The number became all-consuming and you ignored the comments that would have made the number go up.

That is where we are just now and have been for decades. We look at the number, and that is all that we care about—the five-plus percentage figure, which is published in *The Herald*—all the other newspapers follow suit—and which is shared with the parents, the local press, the elected members, the directors of education and then the heidies.

As Pauline Walker said, the five-plus percentage figure is really useful in gauging the academic attainment of those who are doing highers, and it is helpful for understanding how many will be going to uni and being a success there. For the other 50 per cent, or even 60 per cent depending on what school you are in, which is all the youngsters who will be going straight into employment and needing a wealth of different qualifications, things such as national progression awards and foundation apprenticeships, or skills-based experience that will get them a modern apprenticeship, are far more important than clocking up five random highers—or three random highers above English and maths, for example.

I agree with Pauline that we absolutely should go through scrutiny. That scrutiny comes primarily through His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education—I am an associate assessor, as well—and through the self-evaluation teams that the local authorities employ, in which people from various schools go into your school, do a mini-inspection and challenge you. However, we need to entirely change the metric to one that is based not on those random five highers but on measuring qualitative analysis of the success of a school in terms of youngsters going on to positive destinations and making a success of their school lives.

If our youngsters go through the school experience with, we hope, the support of the partners that we have all mentioned including local partners, SDS and universities, and they come out the other end better prepared for life and work, and if we can measure that in a qualitative and individual way and that can be signed off by independent scrutiny, the measure should not be about five-plus highers but about a new benchmark on what the health and wellbeing of the children in the school is considered to be. That should be a small paragraph, not a single word. That should give credibility, because it is external, and it should give a degree of comfort to the community that the health and wellbeing in the school for those young people is good or very good. I do not want a single word; it should be described as something that the community would deem as a success—

The Convener: Thank you, Peter. I am going to have to—

Peter Bain: —and so on. It would cover health and wellbeing, literacy, numeracy and so on, but it should be qualitative.

The Convener: Apologies, Peter. I really hate interrupting witnesses, but everyone wants to come in on these issues. Before we move on, I advise that we are going to extend the session, because we have an awful lot more to cover. However, I am looking for succinct responses if that is possible.

Greg Dempster: I will be more succinct than Peter, do not worry. [*Laughter.*]

The Convener: No comment.

Greg Dempster: Pauline Walker painted a really good picture of the accountability system that sits around schools. In primary schools with nurseries, there is another aspect of that; that is the Care Inspectorate, so they get the joy of two inspectorates. That relates back to a recommendation from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development review about simplifying the institutions, for clarity and coherence.

The position of our association is that we have a relationship with the local authority, which is charged with improving the quality of education in its area. Headquarters teams in local authorities have diminished massively over time, so their capacity to do that has been reduced by a significant degree. However, our position is that inspections of individual schools that provide a moment-in-time snapshot with a summative report with the scores on the doors, as Peter Bain is talking about, is not the way to improve the system. Inspecting once every 17 years tells you nothing other than the situation once every 17 years.

10:45

Instead of inspecting individual schools once in a blue moon, the inspectorate should inspect local authorities' capacity to know about and support improvement in their schools. I am sure that that would result in some pretty tough messages for local authorities about the need to invest in that capacity. On a similar point, the approach of having two inspection bodies coming regularly into nursery classes and nursery schools needs to be simplified so that one body inspects those services.

Barry Graham: I think that we all agree that attainment should be looked at when a school is inspected, but achievement and participation should also be considered. We already have the national improvement framework in the system, and I welcome the most recent change to look at rights, closing the gap, health and wellbeing, and positive destinations. When the national improvement framework was brought in, there was greater focus on it, but a meeting that I was at a couple of weeks ago suggests that we seem to be stepping back from those other priorities. Maybe there are things in the framework that we should judge schools on.

Graham Hutton: I agree with what my colleagues said, and particularly with what Greg Dempster said about inspections. I am not convinced that inspection or scrutiny every 17 years works. What is far more valuable is the role of associate assessors, who come in from another school and have relevant experience of what a school looks like. Their criticisms and support are far more valuable than those of a permanent inspector who has been out of the game for a long while. I am sorry to criticise such people, because in many ways they do a good job, but it is more relevant to hear from people who are in the job—they have their finger on the pulse and know exactly what is expected.

A school's story has a narrative—we should not have just a snapshot of what a school was doing. How did a school get to that point? At Braeview, we went through inspection after inspection and were under the cosh for nearly three years, but there was a whole story of how we transformed the school. What matters is not just a snapshot but the story of what the school, the young people, the staff and the community have gone through.

The Convener: In the interests of time, I have to move on to the next theme.

Ben Macpherson: I am content with that. I thank the witnesses for all their answers.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I will try to ask some questions that are easy to answer, which should not do any harm. Having listened to everything that the witnesses have said, I am rather sorry that I am not going to school now rather than when I went to school—I did not always go to school, but I should have. This is me being quick, by the way, convener.

I listened to the concerns that were expressed about the provision of vocational qualification routes and the lack of available staff to fill such posts, which Peter Bain mentioned. How can teachers and headteachers change perceptions among pupils and their carers—their parents or whoever—about the value of vocational qualifications? To my knowledge, the approach has always been that people should go for their highers to get on in society, because that is the only way forward. How do you convince people—if they need convincing—that the vocational route is the correct route to follow at school?

Barry Graham: That is a difficult thing to do. You are absolutely right that there is a perception

that the academic route is good and that anything else is not quite as good. We try to get people to understand that there are lots of jobs out there and lots of pathways that they can take. I work in a rural school in Dumfries and Galloway; I often talk about how the average salary for a dairyman in one of the dairies is £60,000. A dairyman has to work long hours and probably does three sets of milking a day—they are very busy—but they get a house along with that.

There are opportunities; it is probably for us to ensure that people know about them. There are routes into engineering that are not the academic route that involves a degree at the University of Strathclyde. Other pathways, which start from different places, can get people to the end point.

Bill Kidd: You make a strong argument. That would be a good way of presenting things. Peter Bain strongly looks as though he wants to answer.

Peter Bain: My very short answer is that we are blessed in having a huge number of professionals and a variety of agencies that support us. Developing the Young Workforce is a fantastic organisation, the different parts of which promote vocational opportunities strongly across the country. I spoke to Klaus Mayer, who leads DYW for Education Scotland. He is busy working with schools at the moment. SDS and its careers advisers are promoting vocational opportunities. A brave headteacher who is not afraid of the metrics will heavily promote equity and parity of esteem for vocational qualifications rather than just push students through highers, as was mentioned earlier.

Bill Kidd: You mentioned that you had had difficulty in getting staff for some of the courses that you wanted to run.

Peter Bain: That is quite common. It affects the more traditional subjects, too. Graham Hutton mentioned that it is very difficult to get staff to fill positions as home economics teachers. These days, it is also difficult to get maths teachers, science teachers and English teachers. You have to be quite tailored in what you offer, depending on who you can get. I am quite lucky in Oban in that I am able to employ engineering staff, music staff and dance tutors, because my area is into that and there are a lot of such people about. Equally, however, we want to do a lot more in hospitality and catering, but I cannot find staff to do that. My kids are crying out for that.

Bill Kidd: That makes sense.

At last week's meeting, the witnesses suggested that we should not necessarily wait for an agreed consensus in order for a decision to be taken on the future of qualifications—in other words, a decision might have to be imposed, but such consensus has to emerge. What is the panel's view on that? Do you think that we need to break the consensus approach so that people can have a bit more power to decide things locally?

The Convener: I will bring in Greg Dempster first, to mix things up a bit.

Greg Dempster: As an observer who comes along to meetings that relate to qualifications—lots of meetings end up relating to qualifications—I know that there will not be a consensus. A decision will have to be taken at some point, because there are so many different and opposing views about the best way forward. The decision needs to be made, and we need to take as many people as possible along with us in that direction.

Bill Kidd: Thank you. Does anyone else want to comment?

Pauline Walker: The difficulty with education is that everybody thinks that they know how education should work because they went to school. That is the reality. The decision that is taken needs to be an expert decision that takes on board the views of the experts and moves us forward as a society. You would not go to your dentist and tell him how to pull out your teeth, nor would you expect your doctor to still use the same practices that doctors used 50 years ago. We have to innovate and we have to reform.

Parents are scared for their children's futures. I get that—I am a parent. Of course, we do not want it to go wrong, but we will not get it wrong. We are a profession that is good at change; we are good change agents. Let us do the right thing for our young people, but it will take somebody to say, "No—this is what we're doing. Let's move on." We will never agree.

The Convener: I apologise to Peter Bain, but we must move on to Stephanie Callaghan.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I hope that you will get an opportunity to come in in a moment, Peter.

Twenty years ago, I worked on an education initiative project for young people who did not attend school. Graham Hutton spoke about going forward to the past. Some of the stuff about developing the young workforce was happening then, too. Pauline Walker mentioned the need for young people in deprived areas to have a purpose. The point about soft skills and engagement is a really important one to take on board.

There are parents' nights, and we get report cards that tell us how kids are doing in working towards qualifications in their subjects, but how do you identify young people's ambitions and check in with pupils to ensure that they are getting the opportunities to fulfil those ambitions, and that the flexibility exists to enable them to go on and

pursue the careers that they are really interested in in an inclusive way? That is quite a big question.

The Convener: That is a massive question. We have only six minutes left in this session, and another line of questioning to fit in. I ask the witnesses to bear that in mind when responding. Thank you.

Pauline Walker: Young people will have a key person who knows them well and knows their ambitions, and can talk them through things. Quite often with young people, in particular those from deprived areas, you ask them what they want to do and it is, "Ah dinnae ken—I don't know—I've no ambition." There are very skilled staff in every school who can help them to find out.

Graham Hutton: Every secondary school has guidance on that. There is a question whether there should be guidance for staff in primary schools too; I think that there is a very good case for that.

The guidance staff and pupil support staff should know their case load—provided that they do not have too many cases. What the case load should be is another wee issue. They should be able to see the pupils in their case load every day, speak to them and get to know them. As Pauline Walker said, there has to be a known person. SDS is involved in every school as well, so there is a lot of guidance and careers advice.

I think that we have moved on. I remember that, when I was in sixth year, I met my careers adviser for five minutes. That was totally useless—it obviously guided me in the wrong direction.

Pauline Walker: And here you are.

Graham Hutton: I wanted to be a pop singer, but I cannot sing.

Anyway, I think that there is a lot more advice, and a lot more on offer to our young people today to guide them. We have talked about pathways. When I was at school, we had a complete booklet full of pathways that would take young people forward to some sort of career, but pathways can veer off and change, and at that point there still has to be flexibility. Nevertheless, giving young people more support and advice is important. As we have talked about right from the start, you have to know your young people in your school in order to take them forward.

The Convener: I will bring in Peter Bain, then Barry Graham, on that question.

Stephanie Callaghan: Peter, it would be helpful if you could touch on the practical level, looking at what we need to get rid of and what we need to be doing.

Peter Bain: I will definitely touch on what we need to be doing. I do not agree that there is no consensus. The OECD and the Muir, Withers, Hayward and Morgan reviews are all very much singin fae the same hymn sheet, as was the panel at committee last week. I think we should move quickly to the implementation stage of the Scottish diploma of achievement—

The Convener: Can we answer the question, please?

Peter Bain: Part of the SDA is on the personal pathway, and that would be an official, measured way of ensuring a check-in for what you are describing.

The Convener: That was a response to the previous question, but that is fine.

We will move to questions from Ross Greer.

Ross Greer: Quite a lot has been covered already with regard to how inspections could work, looking at the new inspectorate aspect of reform, and we have talked about the qualifications and assessments themselves. However, I am interested in the panel's perspective on what the governance and structures for the new qualifications body could look like. What would address the issues that are regularly cited with regard to how the SQA operates as an organisation?

I will put essentially the same question on Education Scotland, which is being reformed rather than replaced. What organisational, structural and governance reforms would address some of the issues that you have been talking about?

I direct the Education Scotland question to Greg Dempster; I suppose that you have less locus on the new qualifications body. I would be interested in hearing from Peter Bain, in the first instance, on governance structures for the new national qualifications body.

The Convener: Greg?

Greg Dempster: He said that Peter could go first. I am just thinking—sorry.

Ross Greer: Peter, go for it.

Peter Bain: That is possibly the most contentious aspect—

The Convener: Which is why I was looking for some time.

Peter Bain: Right—okay. On reforming the SQA, we have, first and foremost, to accept that a huge amount of criticism of the SQA arose during the pandemic basically because of the time delays when decisions were taken over what to do with exams. The whole profession felt that those decisions all came too late.

To be fair to the SQA, it was in a unique set of circumstances and you could understand why the delays happened, but the decisions came too late, and that had a negative effect on our youngsters.

What we learned from that was that the alternative certification model worked for the schools that were prepared for it. By that, I mean that not having exams, with the ability for teachers, moderated by other teachers in other schools, to take youngsters through an assessment model that accurately measured their levels of performance, worked. There is a high demand for that type of assessment model to be re-established in the new agency—that has come out in a number of the reviews.

That must be a principal aim of the new organisation—it should not be just a reshuffling of the chairs. That is the biggest challenge for reforming the agency. We are too busy talking about who is going to lead it and what it will be called. Is it the QSA or the SQA? If we can get down to what we are trying to achieve rather than who is going to run it, we will be better placed to understand where we are going.

11:00

However, at the moment, the profession has no faith in reform of the qualifications body, because there is no clear vision, ideology or understanding of the importance of parity of esteem and of the need to reform the whole qualifications system—to move to something like the SDA that is proposed by Professor Hayward's group. Until the vision has been established, the agency discussions will forever be mired in controversy. That is my view and that of many of my colleagues.

Ross Greer: I will use that answer to pose a question to others on the panel. What is the role of the profession in the new body? A lot of the criticism—which also predates the pandemic and has included reports to the committee—is that the current SQA has been hostile to the feedback and input of the teaching profession. How could we structure the new organisation and what could the governance arrangements be in order to address the concern that, at the moment, teachers are not heard or respected by the body?

Barry Graham: I have talked before about greater representation in the strategic groups. You have to make sure that headteachers and teachers are directly involved, so that people can hear about what is happening on the ground. Sometimes, decisions are made and people are not directly aware of the impact of the decisions.

Graham Hutton: I second that, having been involved in the national qualifications working group for the past four years, or however long it was. Half of the committee members, whom we did not always see on screen, were SQA members. There was a lack of headteachers. At one point, I was the only practising headteacher on the group that was talking about exams. There needs to be wider representation of headteachers and, in particular, SQA co-ordinators. I had a meeting with the SQA last Friday, along with six deputes, who are all SQA co-ordinators. They said that their day-to-day dealings with ordinary SQA staff are fine, but their complaint is about how decisions are made and how they come through. There is a lack of transparency and, therefore, a bigger role for SQA co-ordinators, headteachers and people who know exactly how things are. The appointees are actually in school. There are thousands of appointees—principal assessors, deputy principal assessors and so on. They all have a role to play, but they could also have a role to play in influencing the way that the SQA—or the new body—goes.

Ross Greer: Greg Dempster, do you want to come in on Education Scotland? I do not mean to cut Pauline Walker off if she has a comment on the NQB.

Greg Dempster: The key thing is that, before you talk about governance, you need to talk about the roles and responsibilities of the organisation and to be absolutely clear about what the organisation exists to do. It is important that the new body is focused on supporting the profession and identifying gaps, so that the agency can get in and support professionals, schools and local authorities.

The outputs that come from Education Scotland need to be directly useful to schools, but the crucial thing is that lots of good work is already going on within Education Scotland, although there is not necessarily time to engage with it, or awareness that it is there. That time to engage is important.

When we are thinking about organisations and governance, in the outline that we have had so far there are quite a few elements about the centre for teaching excellence, but I am not clear about where the separation or the differences would be between that and the new agency coming out of Education Scotland. A lot of discussion still needs to be had about roles, responsibilities and synergies across those two bits of work.

Ross Greer: I accept that time pressures and workload are the major concerns, but the awareness point has also come up quite a few times—not just in relation to Education Scotland. In a lot of the reviews that have taken place recently, the feedback from classroom teachers is, "Well, nobody asked me for my input on that." As far as the people who were running the reviews were concerned, they distributed all the material to local authorities and schools, but it had not filtered

down. Is there an issue with the structures that our national bodies use to communicate directly with teachers? Does a structure for enough direct communication not exist? Does communication go through too many layers of filtering?

Greg Dempster: The approaches that have been taken by consultations and reports have often been quite different, but we still get the same criticisms. Lots of different mechanisms have been tried.

I do not have an easy answer to the question and I do not want to be quick to criticise or lay blame on those who are trying to communicate with the profession, but the message that I frequently get back is about time to engage.

The Convener: Barry Graham and Pauline Walker were both nodding away at that. Do you want to come in?

Barry Graham: The normal way to engage with the profession is to send a questionnaire to a busy person. It will appear in their inbox and they might get to it, but sometimes they are just too busy to do it. Maybe it is about recognising that that is not the only research method in town. I know that there are others, but that is the normal way of starting the process. There are other ways of doing research, such as getting focus groups together, that might give us a bit more depth on the messages that are coming from the profession.

Pauline Walker: There needs to be a change management strategy. Because of the flow of the communication year in a school, there is no point in asking secondary school teachers for their opinion on anything in March, because all they are thinking about is qualifications. However, March is often when a lot of communications come out, because the local government cycle means that that is when change management is brought forward and made ready for April's changes. Authorities need to look at when is the best time to ask and what is the best way of asking, so that they actually get people's views of the system. It depends on the school. Mine gets lots of time to do that, but I know that other schools get none. They are really pushed for time and have to take time from something else to do these things.

Ross Greer: Convener, is there time for one more question?

The Convener: Yes—if it is one question and it is directed.

Ross Greer: Pauline Walker, I will direct the question to you, if you do not mind, although that is somewhat arbitrary. Communication has to be two way. A lot of criticism of Education Scotland has said that it produces huge amounts of resources that teachers did not ask for. Some are good and some are not, but they are fundamentally not what teachers were asking for. How do we create a structure in which the work of Education Scotland, however we rename it, is being directed by what teachers say they need? If we want bottom-up communication, what structure do we need to put in place for teachers to be the ones who direct the work of the body that is supposed to produce resources to support them?

Pauline Walker: That is a hard question, because lots has been tried. You need to get practitioners together to work collaboratively across Scotland, and that needs to happen in a much more coherent and advanced way than it does now. Even if it is just about a subject change, you need to ask the people who are teaching the subject on the ground what it would look like. Again, it is about the change management system. There needs to be some sort of approach that works for all so that decisions are not taken that create long-lasting problems. For example, not being able to teach national 4 and national 5 science courses together is very challenging.

The Convener: I am going to have to draw this morning's session to a close. I know that it got quite tense at this end and I am looking at the clock, so I apologise if that came over. I thank you for your time and your contributions.

I suspend the meeting for seven minutes to allow for a change of witness before we reconvene to consider our second item of business.

11:08

Meeting suspended.

11:17

On resuming—

Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape

The Convener: The second item on our agenda today is an evidence session with James Withers on the independent review of the skills delivery landscape.

We will move straight to questions. I have a broad opening question. It has been some time since your review was published. What assessment have you made of the response to the review so far?

James Withers (Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape): First of all, thank you for the invitation to speak to the committee today. I spent some time at the Economy and Fair Work Committee a couple of months ago, and it is good to speak to members here today.

How would I characterise the response to the review? In general, I am heartened. I met the cabinet secretary and I have subsequently met the minister a couple of times to discuss progress with the implementation of the review. There was an early signal that they welcome the general direction of my recommendations. I have landed them with a big job to reform a complex system. There were initial announcements on skills planning going back into Government, which is one of the recommendations, and having a single funding body.

This might sound counterintuitive, but I am heartened by the fact that some time is being taken to consider the review, rather than there being a rush to say, "Yes, we agree all the recommendations. Let's go." That is because it is such a complex area and there will be unintended consequences. When you lift the lid on one thing, you find other things for sure. Considering the series of recommendations for big structural and operational reform that I came up with, alongside the work that Louise Hayward has done, which supplements the work that Ken Muir has done and that Grahame Smith did on careers, that approach makes sense to me.

My one nervousness is that momentum might be lost. Anyone doing such a review fears and dreads the idea that the review will just sit on the shelf. I do not get the sense that that is what is happening, but I think that keeping up the momentum is critical.

The Convener: You said that you have met some members of the Scottish Government, which has published "Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills", which it says is the initial response to your review. Is anything major missing from that response?

James Withers: No, it is a really helpful document. One of the main areas of concern that I had was that, within the whole skills system, there is no single definition of what "good" looks like. I was asked to look 10 years ahead: how do we build a skills system that is fit for the future? My first question was, how would we know that we have a skills system that is fit for the future? The reality is that there is no single definition of what is good or what success is. Worse than that, many different parts of the skills and learning system had their own version of success and they did not necessarily talk to one another.

The advantage of the purpose and principles document is that it starts to set out some of the values that we are trying to embed in the whole learning system. Although my report suggests big structural reform, I identified a few key steps that could be delivered early, one of which was established in the purpose and principles document. I am pleased to see that that work is being done.

The Convener: Thank you, James. We will move on to some questions from Ross Greer.

Ross Greer: James, you have said that you are somewhat heartened by the fact that the Government has not just rushed into a response to your recommendations. However, your overarching recommendation is that this should be seen as a coherent package rather than a pick 'n' mix. How concerned would you be if the Government did not accept your recommendations in full? If the Government takes a more selective approach to what it wants to take forward, how could that be managed?

James Withers: I think that cherry-picking elements of the review would worry me if it was driven by what might be expedient or felt easiest to do. I do not have a sense that that is where the Government is going from my discussion with ministers, but the reason why I positioned my findings as a coherent whole is that I was seeking to build a more coherent system. My overriding observation, having spent nine months inside the system, was the scale of fragmentation. I was expecting to see complexity and some fragmentation, but the scale of fragmentation within the system surprised me, in a way.

If you want a joined-up system, you need to join it up, and that includes all the moving parts. To me, having a single qualifications body without having a single funding body, and a crystal-clear approach to who is delivering business support, who has leadership on careers, and who has leadership over skills planning, would mean that it

would remain a fragmented system—hence the need for the system to be looked at as a whole.

Ross Greer: It sounds as though the most important response is that of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the minister, which have been broadly pretty warm. You certainly seem optimistic about that.

What do you detect the response from within the system to be? Part of your report is—entirely fairly—pretty critical of elements of the system and of how they communicate and interact with each other. Part of the discussion with the previous panel of witnesses was about the issue that overrides a lot of education reform at the moment—that might be an unfair way of putting it, but you will get what I mean—which is that the people who have been responsible for a system that has come under a lot of criticism are then responsible for changing that system. If they do not buy into and do not accept the premise of the need for change, we can end up with a rebranding exercise rather than the more fundamental changes that are required. What responses have you picked up from those who are involved in delivering the system as it currently stands?

James Withers: It is a risk to ask the same agents, who might feel criticised for what has gone before, to deliver comprehensive change. I tried to position what I had done as a forward-looking exercise; it was not really about scoring anyone's homework or carrying out a performance appraisal. However, I came to the conclusion that our skills system is not fit for the future. Even if it was firing on all cylinders, it could not possibly be fit for the future because of the scale of change that is coming. When I started this work in September last year, no one wanted to talk to me about AI; now it is all that they want to talk to me about. The pace of change is remarkable.

The response that I have had from parts of the system has been mixed. Generally, there has been a pretty warm welcome for the diagnosis. The prescription depends on your part in the system and what has been prescribed for you. I have met a lot of practitioners who have an appetite for reform. In fact, I did not meet a single person in nine months who felt that the system was working optimally, and most people called for a pretty radical reform of the system. However, if, for example, Skills Development Scotland is to be substantially recast, as it could be, into our national careers agency and to provide leadership there—I think that it has the chance to deliver a transformational impact by doing that—we need to be careful that such a body is in the mindset of embracing change and is not in any way hurt, concerned or scarred by the fact that it is losing other functions. Ultimately, whether they are in the right mindset to drive that forward will be for the judgment of ministers, but it is a legitimate risk.

Ross Greer: I recognise that this is a somewhat different bit of work, so it is fine if you are not across the detail of it. Are the processes and structures that are being used for setting up the new qualifications body and reforming Education Scotland similar to what you think would be required to deliver on your recommendations? Looking at what is happening in that space, would you be concerned if that was the approach that we took to implementing what you have recommended?

James Withers: To be honest with you, I am not close enough to it. I spent more time in the education system than I had planned to at the start of the process, but the evidence took me there, particularly in careers, apprenticeships and the future of the curriculum. I spent some time with Louise Hayward on the work that she was doing, because there were very similar themes across our work.

My plea is that, throughout the reform process in education and the wider skills system, we keep absolutely arrow focused on the customers and users of the system. Sometimes the reform process, understandably, gets bogged down or disappears down rabbit holes, talking to the delivery agents rather than the customer end.

My review had strengths and challenges, and I probably succeeded in some parts and failed in others, but I tried to take that whole-system approach, step out of the whole thing and think, "In 10 years' time, where do we want to be?" That kind of mindset and approach is critical, but I am not that close to the detail and structure that has been set up to deliver the educational reforms.

Stephanie Callaghan: The report states that your interpretation of success is about everybody having equitable access to learning opportunities and being able to reach positive destinations in their work and life that can help Scotland's economy to flourish. How should we measure that success during the implementation period of the recommendations? Should we use qualitative data, quantitative data or a mix of the two?

James Withers: It is probably a mix of the two. My definition of a positive destination is defined by the individual and not by Government or society. For example, our universities are incredible and world class, but our entire education, schools and learning system is still dogged by the idea that university is the golden pathway and that any other pathway is a varying degree of second best. There is pressure to achieve five highers, because that is deemed to be the golden success in school—that is the culture—but, in many schools,

that probably leaves at least half of the pupil population behind.

For me, that is a system that is not achieving success. There are other metrics out there. University attendance across multiple socioeconomic groups remains a valid way of measuring things, and a higher attainment level remains a valid measure of success, but it cannot be the only game in town.

In many ways, the challenge of measuring other forms of success is that they are subjective—a sense of wellbeing, a sense of contribution, a sense of hope or a sense of personal satisfaction. Economists find it very difficult to count such things. You can count jobs and grades, but you cannot count a broader sense of wellbeing or a sense that you have reached a positive destination.

That is a wider economic issue, but we need to find a way of trying to do that, because, at the moment, we have jettisoned a broader sense of truly measuring what might be a positive destination for an individual—it might not be a university or a collection of grades—in favour of just measuring those things. It leaves a lot of people behind and, crucially, stigmatises an awful lot of learning pathways that will be massively important for us going forward.

Stephanie Callaghan: Should we ask the young people themselves?

James Withers: Yes, that would certainly be a good start. I thought about that in relation to the conversation that I had last night with my son about what he is going to do after sixth year. Young people at 16, 17, going on 18, do not really know how they would measure success in their lives or what they want to do next. There has to be continual monitoring of that throughout their lives.

One key issue in the skills work that I did was the need to take an all-age focus. There is an understandable focus on young people, which is obviously critical, but we need to have an all-age focus on skills development and equipping people to maximise their own potential.

11:30

Stephanie Callaghan: We heard last week about the real need for a culture change, but change takes a long time and this one could take up to 10 years. What would be a reasonable timescale for embedding change and is there anything that you think would help to expedite that culture change?

James Withers: A 10-year horizon is not unrealistic for the scale of change and reform that we are talking about. To go back to a point that I made earlier, there is no agreed definition of what success in our skills and learning system looks like. In the absence of that, I attempted to write a version, which is that everyone should have equitable access to the learning opportunities that they need in order to reach a positive destination.

It is important to establish a definition of success and a vision that all parts of the system can buy into. I found a system that is full of good people who are passionate about equipping people with skills for the future, but they define success within their own particular lane. Those who fund universities focus on universities; those who fund apprenticeships focus purely on apprenticeships. There is no broad view of how the system works together, so it is absolutely critical to establish that vision.

Thereafter, this might be a long haul. If I am nervous about anything, it is about the fact that the public sector requires at least two things—time and tolerance—to be able to reform properly, but it rarely has either. It is rarely given much time and there is rarely much political tolerance. The benefits of the scale of reform that I think needs to be seen will not be seen quickly, and that could be pounced upon by those who resist change.

Stephanie Callaghan: I have a short follow-up question. Would equipping the leaders right at the top of education with skills in systems thinking and systems leadership have positive influence?

James Withers: There is a dearth of systems thinking within the broader public sector. That is entirely understandable, because people are measured by the key performance indicators that sit on their desks, which tend to be entirely related to their own particular role and do not take a broader view. For example, I do not see passes at higher as being a KPI that we should necessarily focus on, because that is a process point. The output comes from looking at what an individual does with the highers that they achieve, or, if they do not achieve highers, what they go on to do.

I tried to take a whole-systems approach to the skills system. That is not easy, but it would be good to embed systems thinking in the public sector.

My final point is that we should not necessarily assume that the public sector has the skills for broad reform.

Ben Macpherson: The review mentions other recently published reviews of education and skills, and you have spoken about your engagement with Professor Hayward. How can the Scottish Government best oversee this period of reform? How quickly can we move forward? In your opening answer, you talked about being glad that some time is being taken to consider implementation but said that there should a balance.

James Withers: There should. Mr Greer asked about responses from practitioners in the system. There is a fair degree of cynicism about what will happen afterwards, because this feels a little bit like death by review.

There is a real opportunity to find the common threads between my review and the others, and you do not have to look too hard to find them. There is a need for a curriculum for equity as much as for a curriculum for excellence and for parity of esteem. There is a need to recognise that the chase for grades is only one part of the system and that boiling 13 years of education down to how much someone remembers for two hours in an exam hall might not be the smartest way to determine their future potential. There is also a need to recognise that individuals can have a whole heap of skills that will not necessarily allow them to flourish in traditional academic routes.

To answer your question, it is important to recognise the common themes in Grahame Smith's work on careers, in Professor Hayward's work and in mine. I am less close to Ken Muir's work. Those themes of parity of esteem and equity of access to opportunity are there and are clear.

The other key thing is to provide a much greater degree of autonomy and to trust the people on the ground who deliver. In my case, that was about giving regions much greater power over funding and establishing educational provision in their areas, giving them the ability to work with business and there being a lot less control freakery at national level. A national agency telling an individual college how many apprenticeships it can have on a particular course seems mad to me. We should give greater freedom.

I did not hear much of the evidence from the previous panel of witnesses, but I imagine that the average headteacher would welcome greater autonomy and the ability to be more creative. There is a need to devolve greater power to the individuals and put greater trust in practitioners to deliver what is appropriate in their setting. That is a common theme that runs through other reviews.

Ben Macpherson: You talked about momentum earlier. Should there be momentum for pressing on and making progress on change and implementation in relation to the common themes that are shared between the reviews?

James Withers: Yes. Take my report as an example. I set out a clear aspiration that there should be absolute clarity of responsibilities.

I found a system that is incredibly complex. I take great heart in it being complex, because it has an incredibly complex set of customers from different backgrounds with different requirements and aspirations, so it should be complex. The problem was a lack of clarity. Having multiple different agencies involved in qualifications, funding, business support and careers provision makes the landscape murkier than it need be for practitioners and, ultimately, customers of the system.

There are steps that could be taken. We could say that we will make the system clear. We could have a crystal clear lead on qualifications, funding, careers, business advice and skills planning but also recognise and be honest that we are talking about cultural reform. That refers to the mindset of parents as well as young people, businesses and the system as a whole.

There are things that can be done that set a direction of travel, including defining what good looks like and clarity of responsibilities and roles, but we also need to be honest and recognise that that will involve cultural reform, which will take time and the benefits might not be visible for some years.

Ben Macpherson: Mr Withers, you said earlier that public sector reform takes time and—please excuse me.

James Withers: Tolerance.

Ben Macpherson: Tolerance. That is the word that you used, wisely.

A common theme that we have heard from a number of people who have given evidence to us recently is that the political arena needs to create the space and have the maturity and tolerance to enable the change that needs to happen. Do you want to say anything more about that? It is a responsibility that we and our colleagues need to share and about which we need to be serious.

James Withers: I am politically an optimist. I noted that my review was part of a debate last week. I have seen a strong cross-party consensus and I engaged with most of the parties—I certainly reached out to all of them—during the process. That there needs to be reform is not up for debate. The how is where there will be division of opinion.

I will make a purely political observation. We have at least two years before we might enter another Scottish Parliament election. That feels like a window of opportunity to harness that cross-party consensus and drive change forward before things get spicier politically. Although I say that a longer-term, cultural, decade-long journey is starting, there is a window of opportunity to try to make the momentum unstoppable.

Ben Macpherson: Then parties will need to be responsible as to how they position themselves before 2026.

James Withers: They will. I am sorry, convener, can I make one final point?

The Convener: You have lots of opportunity to make lots of points, Mr Withers. You are okay. Carry on.

James Withers: The change will require a strong ministerial stomach, too. It is big reform. I have already seen parts of the system putting their defences up. Complex systems naturally evolve on their own. They have done that and there has not been sufficient ministerial direction of the system. Although such systems evolve on their own, however, they do not reform on their own. This reform will be difficult and lots of people will be able to say, "You can't do this because it'll do that," so it will require real ministerial bravery to drive it through. I hope that cross-party consensus will make having that courage less fraught or perilous than it might otherwise seem.

Ben Macpherson: That is a really helpful and important point. Some of the feedback on the review that I have received in my capacity as a constituency MSP has been on ensuring that we meet the needs of industry and the economy in a tight labour market—something that we have discussed in different capacities in the past—that is the result of external factors. What engagement needs to happen with the business community to ensure that, in that overall scenario, we nurture and consider its needs as well as young people's abilities?

James Withers: That issue comes back to the theme in my work around regionalisation and giving greater autonomy to individual areas to drive forward the establishment of educational provision and shape the kind of frameworks and qualifications that are developed.

Where I got to was that the DYW network is great and has real potential but that it is still a story of unrealised potential. I want to see the establishment of a network of regional employer boards and a national employers' board to help to shape the entire learning system.

One of my recommendations that has proved quite controversial, I suppose, for those who currently perform that role of apprenticeship approval—the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board—is that that board should be wound up. That is not because it has not done its job but because it has proved that employers can shape part of the system. However, unfortunately, the apprenticeship system has been carved out from the rest and put on one side; it has not been mainstreamed. I have suggested that we wind that function down and embed the principle of employer involvement in shaping our learning framework in every single part of the learning system, not just apprenticeships.

That is why I would like to see the DYW boards resourced and taking on more responsibility to really drive that at a regional level. There will be different views within DYW but, personally, I would also like to see the "Y" element dropped from DYW, because it has the potential to help shape the system for all ages, not just young people. There is huge potential in using that as a mechanism for business and industry to help to shape the future of the whole skills system.

Michelle Thomson: Thank you for joining us this morning. I think that you used the term "death by review" earlier. Do you have any concerns that your review will get lost in the multitude of other worthwhile reviews and documents as time is taken, by necessity, to look at them?

James Withers: Yes, because it has happened before. I have spoken to people who have done reviews such as this, and I have been involved in such reviews before. They fall by the wayside because priorities change and events arise. My instinct is that there is enough commonality across the reviews and enough general momentum to ensure that the system has to change because of what is happening out there, including changes in the economy, society, technology and the new industrial revolution. There is no longer a question whether there should be reform; the question is how it is done.

I would be lying if I said that I did not have a human fear that you do all this work and it ends up not going anywhere. All I can do is take in good faith what I am told by ministers and, probably, also what I have heard from a lot of people who are involved in the delivery of the system, which is that there is enough in the work that I have done—alongside the work of many others who came before me—to create a momentum that might be unstoppable. However, yes, I have certainly had dark moments when I have thought that I might have wasted nine months of my life—hopefully I have not.

Michelle Thomson: We have talked a wee bit about where we are in the political cycle and you mentioned "time and tolerance". How do you square off—as you expressed it—time and tolerance against the urgency that you have undeniably put across today and in your report, bearing in mind the political cycle and all the other potential barriers and resistance to change?

11:45

James Withers: It is an incredibly difficult balancing act, and I am not sure that you can square it off. You need to make a judgment as to whether you are willing to sacrifice some progress in the short term, because there is a bigger, longer-term dividend that can be grasped.

As I said, I identified five early steps that I felt that the Government could take to develop the

purpose and principles; get the new skills planning process motoring and embedded in Government; determine a new model for funding to embed equity of access and parity of esteem; and carry out an audit of qualifications, which are a mess of terminology.

Again, this is personal, but, in helping my son to choose his sixth-year courses, I found an alphabet soup of acronyms, with NPAs, FAs, SFW—national progression awards, foundation apprenticeships, skills for work—highers and advanced highers. Those are all beautifully mapped out on the SCQF framework, from level 1 through to levels 10 and 11. How on earth have we managed not to use that framework and not to refer to levels 6 and 7 and instead have come up with different terms? That blows my mind. That solution is sat there; we could embrace that, and we could establish the employer boards.

There are steps that can be done quickly but within an overarching framework and definition of what good looks like. While we are working on individual areas of improvement or implementation, there should be an understanding of how that feeds into the longer term, so that we stitch together the urgency of action and the longer-term game. That is the only mechanism that I would use to stitch the two together: identify what we can do quickly and be crystal clear about how that feeds into the broader, perhaps decade-long, journey.

The Convener: We go to Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Good morning—I think that it still is morning. Thank you for answering our questions so far and for the work that you have put into your report. I will start with questions that are on the same theme that we have already discussed—leadership and reform—and then I will move on to funding. How will the Scottish Government taking responsibility for skills planning bring about the required culture change?

James Withers: There is an important point around skills planning, and I would divide it into a game of two halves. It is a difficult challenge, but there is a need to identify some critical national priorities for skills planning that are relevant for all parts of Scotland and to which every part of the country will need to respond. I have not said what they are in my review. There will be different views on that and on whether the priorities should be net zero, green skills or digital.

Beyond the critical national priorities, we need to release the regions to do the rest. There might be two or three national priorities and we would expect all parts of the country to develop their version of skills plans to respond to those. My instinct is that, now that we have city region deals and eight economic regional partnerships in place, we should use them. If we are trusting them to manage billions of pounds-worth of investment, we can trust them with the skills plan that sits alongside that and free them up to determine what the plans look like.

On the balance between national and regional, I do not think that Scotland is big enough to have 32 or even eight different skills frameworks. There should be a national framework, but the detail of that could be driven by regional areas, and at the moment there is not enough autonomy at regional level for that.

There is an element of leadership at national level around the two or three priorities. That is a tough call because, if you get them wrong, you will get hammered. It is difficult to pick three winners. After that, you are not jettisoning everything else—you can focus on individual elements. Hospitality is important to the Highlands and Islands and Argyll and Bute because of the tourism industry, so let them develop their plans on that, working with businesses, colleges and others. However, get the balance right between national and regional. Does that answer the question?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: It does—I appreciate that. In a similar vein, do you agree with Universities Scotland that some of the changes that you have suggested, including those that you have just described, can happen without legislative change? What decisions could be taken now around funding work-based learning or upskilling and reskilling, without legislative change?

James Withers: Yes, I agree with that. Skills planning does not require legislative change, and I am no legislative expert. To establish a single qualifications and funding body, I have suggested that a recast SDS should be founded in legislation, which it is not at the moment, to deliver careers.

Some of that would require legislation. However, some of the cultural aspects around levels of autonomy, thresholds for authority and releasing the regions to crack on do not require a legislative framework. In my mind, it is more the way of working that needs to change.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Could that be done quite quickly?

James Withers: Yes. One of the first things that the Government talked about was bringing skills planning in-house. A lot of skills planning work is happening, so there are good skills plans in place. South of Scotland Enterprise has done great work with SDS and other agencies and colleges. There are good plans in place that should not be torched or put in the bin—they can crack on. However, where there needs to be greater autonomy to deliver some of that, that could be done, but it would require a real mindset and, to some extent,

political bravery to release the reins a little bit, to trust those on the ground to make some of the decisions, and to recognise that, when we do so, some things will go wrong. It is guaranteed that they will go wrong, but the overall benefit will outweigh the odd case study where stewardship of money has not been absolutely perfect.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you. I suppose that that links back to your point about the ministerial stomach, which is important.

I will move on to ask about the role of colleges and universities, and the funding in that space. Colleges Scotland said that the skills framework that you have outlined, and skills in general in Scotland, rely on a strong college sector. Do you agree with that?

James Withers: I do. I worked in and around the skills system for maybe 15 or 20 years, but in quite a narrow lane—from a business and trade body perspective. There were large parts of the system that I did not know in depth, but I have got to know them over the past nine months. The college sector is in that category.

I have been blown away by the potential of the college sector. I spent time inside colleges, and I was excited, enthused and came away buzzing at their potential. They are rooted in their communities, connected to businesses and well connected to high schools, and they deliver real practical skills and learning to individuals who were viewed—and might still be viewed—as having somehow failed academically because they had not collected a bunch of grades.

The potential of the college sector is phenomenal, but I worry about it. It is a burning platform in relation to finance and sustainability. I worry that we might see a more chaotic reorganisation of the sector, based on the law of natural selection—who is most vulnerable, who might fall and who might not—which might need to be looked at in time.

Given where the economy is going, what businesses have told me and what I have seen in relation to the skills that are required, the college sector is an absolute jewel in our crown, and the more that we can do to support it and, crucially, embed it at the heart of regional skills planning, the better—I have met some colleges that felt that they were not around that table. The sector is a huge asset.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I share your concerns about the sector's funding, as do colleges and universities. For example, Universities Scotland said that it is not necessarily the methodology that is the problem but the fact that university places for Scotland-domiciled students are chronically underfunded in Scotland and that there is more and more reliance on international students. Of course, the numbers of international students coming to Scotland are dropping. Does that context for universities and colleges concern you in relation to skills for the future?

James Withers: The whole funding piece was a really interesting area for me. It would be fair to say that, when I was appointed to do the review, I was given a very free hand. There was an underlying message of, "Don't come back with something that's going to cost a lot more." That is entirely understandable, given the fiscal position that we are in. That said, we spend £3.2 billion every year in this area, which must be 5 to 7 per cent of the Government's entire budget.

I do not think that the problem is underinvestment, but there is duplication and inefficiency in the system. That said, you cannot ignore that you have a line of university and college principals and staff who are worried about funding. I think that more can be done to release some of the shackles. Universities should be free to determine, for example, how much of their provision they want to put into full-time education versus delivering graduate apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships through an earn-and-learn approach. At the moment, graduate apprenticeships are capped every year, their funding is uncertain and they are separated off into a different system. Why do we not trust universities to use that funding as they so wish? I think that elements could be released, but, as in probably every sector of the learning education system and of the economy, funding is a concern.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: My final question is, what duplication did you notice in the system?

James Withers: That comes back to a lack of clarity. Multiple agencies were involved in qualifications development; in funding, of itself; and in the development of some of the educational frameworks. At the moment, it can be difficult for a business that is interested in workforce development to know whether to go to Business Gateway, the local enterprise company, Jobcentre Plus or Skills Development Scotland. There is a natural duplication in the system. It is born not of any bad intent but of a system that has been allowed to evolve, is fragmented and does not collaborate as tightly as it could, as well as a lack of political direction to shape the system.

The Convener: Stephanie Callaghan, do you want to ask a supplementary on that?

Stephanie Callaghan: Yes. Earlier, James, you said that we have to accept that things can go wrong when power is handed down regionally. That makes me think about political and ministerial accountability. What are your thoughts on that? When an aeroplane crashes, a team goes in to look at why that happened. Given your business

background, can you say in what kind of direction accountability would not be an issue?

James Withers: Business culture and political culture are often very different. Most business schools will talk about permission to make mistakes—that we learn more from our mistakes than we do from our successes. It might be incredibly naive to say that we could achieve a political system that would allow for that. Certainly, if I was the accountable officer for a major agency, I would live in perpetual fear and terror that something would go wrong and I would be in front of an audit or other committee, being scrutinised as to why money in one area did not deliver what it was supposed to, or—worse—ended up in the wrong place. That is just the way of life.

My observation is that, overall, the benefits that will be achieved by putting greater trust in the people who deliver things on the ground and who are connected to businesses, colleges and universities will far outweigh the problem. However, more political and media scrutiny is on the bits that go wrong, so I might just be incredibly naive.

Liam Kerr: Good morning, Mr Withers. On a similar topic, one of your structural recommendations was the establishment of a single funding body that would cover SDS, the Scottish Funding Council and, potentially, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland. I think you said that the rationale for that was a "fragmented" system at the moment that impacts the ability of providers to deliver. What are the risks of not going forward with a single funding body?

James Withers: I will use apprenticeships as an example. They are an incredibly important part of the whole learning system. The establishment of apprenticeships as a critical part of our learning system required a distinct focus, distinct funding and, probably, distinct agency ownership. Those things are exactly what is now holding apprenticeships back. As long as apprenticeships remain carved out from our wider learning system—over on one side, with a separate agency, separate funding, separate KPIs and uncertain annual funding—they will remain separate from the system and will not be mainstreamed.

Dividing university and college funding into SFC and apprenticeship and training funding into SDS crystallises a false divide between "education" and "vocation"—the idea that education delivers learning and vocation delivers skills—whereas, in reality, the position is much more nuanced. Clearly, education delivers skills for the workplace and vocational routes deliver broader learning on problem solving, innovation and other things. To be glib, if you want a joined-up system, you need to join it up. Having funding brought together into one place makes sense.

There are real risks in that, though. One of the risks is that, unless we have a culture that recognises the enormous value of apprenticeships, putting them inside a body that has hitherto largely looked after university funding risks diluting the focus on them. The timing is critical. On balance, in order for apprenticeships to be properly mainstreamed, they need to be plugged into the mainstream of funding, qualification development, curriculum development and careers provision. Although I have not stipulated it in my report, we might need some safeguards there. There are certain thresholds of funding that have to be ring fenced for certain parts of the system. Overall, though, I felt that, by bringing funding into one place, we are more likely to end up with a joined-up system.

12:00

Liam Kerr: I am grateful for the detail.

The committee has been alerted to another risk. Universities Scotland gave us a very useful submission, in which it suggested that, with a single funding body, there could be a risk to the status and autonomy of universities and their Office for National Statistics classification. It would have exactly the opposite effect in that it would restrict universities' ability to respond to needs. Were you aware of that risk when you made your recommendation? If so, why did you nevertheless make the recommendation? If not, does that cause you to reflect on whether it is the right recommendation?

James Withers: I understand that the creation of a single funding body does not, in and of itself, present that risk. It is more about what the status of that body is—in other words, whether it is a non-departmental public body. I deliberately did not get into what the governance status of that body should be, partly because it looked like a bit of a rabbit hole and was incredibly complex. I walked away from that.

The only body on whose legislative or governance status I made a specific recommendation was Skills Development Scotland, in relation to its future. That was for two reasons. First, I was specifically asked to do that in the terms of reference. Secondly, SDS's unusual status as a public company that is limited by guarantee, rather than one that has been established in statute or is an executive agency—an NDPB—did not feel appropriate for a body that is ultimately about delivering a public service and being accountable to ministers.

I did not take a view on what the governance status of the new funding body should be, but I

hope that it will be taken as read that I would not want that body to be set up in any way that jeopardises the status of universities or their relationship with the ONS. If that requires it to be an NDPB—I will leave that to others who are better versed in public sector models for agencies—then that is what it requires. However, I do not think that that in itself is an argument that we should not bring funding together under one body.

Bill Kidd: Thank you, Mr Withers, for an interesting background and for the review, of course.

On the back of what you have just been talking about, the review suggested the importance of setting national priorities. You might not want to point the finger at who should take responsibility for that, but what are your thoughts on how those priorities could and should be divided? What should be taken into account?

James Withers: That recommendation, as much as anything, lands Government with a difficult issue. Everyone agrees with prioritisation until they are not a priority. That will be challenging, not least for different sectors of industry. I used to work in food and drink, and the idea that food and drink would not be a priority would be a declaration of war to businesses in my old sector.

Who should make the decision is one question. Obviously, we have a national strategy for economic transformation and a national strategy for economic transformation delivery board, which have a pivotal role. However, one of the reasons why I recommended establishing not only a network of regional employer boards but a national employer board was to help to inform that process. It needs to be informed by business and also by third sector and other groups. How we might establish those priorities, though, and for how long a priority should remain as such will be political calls.

My observation on NSET is that having a longer-term, 10-year horizon for economic ambition is a very good thing. My criticism would be that it prioritises everything that currently exists and everything that is coming down the line, which then does not feel like prioritisation. There is a need to define the areas of Scotland's competitive advantage. Alongside business voice, I would add insight and foresight on where the economy is going and identifying where Scotland has competitive advantage and strength, where it has competitive opportunity, and which areas of significant change will affect the four corners of Scotland. Although I have been asking other people to be brave, I have not been brave enough myself to identify what those are. I would probably use the example of the transition to net zero as one aspect that would be in there. At the moment, we have lots of reference to green skills but I do not know what they are. No one has drilled down to say what they are.

Bill Kidd: Most people have the idea that the Government should eventually take responsibility for many things. Should it be led along a path of working with other organisations and groups in society that have experience of the green skills and business elements to bring responsibility across a board before those are put into policy?

James Withers: There is a real strength to doing that. Thinking back to my experience in the food and drink sector, the Government used to write the strategy for the industry, which did not make any sense to me. The Government has its role, and it does not strike me that it is in the best place to write a strategy for any industry. However, it can be quite easy for industry to allow that to happen, because then, when things go wrong, it is the Government's fault and there is no ownership of it. There is an important principle about industry and business taking ownership of their own strategic directions.

How we embed such a structure into day-to-day Government work is something that Governments wrestle with. We have advisory boards, steering groups and stakeholder groups by the dozen, which help to inform that process, but they are a valuable part of the approach.

The other important aspect is the need to compare our approaches with those of other countries—what we might call comparator nations. Patently, we are not the only small country that is trying to work out how to transition to net zero. We must look at that more broadly than our relationship with other European Union countries. In my previous work I studied skills systems from elsewhere, such as those in Germany, Switzerland, Singapore and Ireland. In the food and drink sector, most of the good things that were done, and most of the successes, involved ideas taken from elsewhere.

Bill Kidd: That is very helpful. Thank you very much indeed for that.

The Convener: Mr Withers, at the outset of the session you mentioned how, at the beginning of your review process, people were not really talking about AI but that, now, it is all that they are talking about. As your review is sitting there, I am curious to know how adaptable it is to the pace of change that we see happening externally.

James Withers: I would probably use that example to justify why I did not pick my winners out of all the priorities, because technology moves at such a rapid rate. I had hoped to consider how we could build a system that could pivot to absorb whatever the priorities, opportunities or challenges

might be on a particular day. I hope that my review has made some contribution to that.

In all the work that was done between me and the secretariat that supported me, I tried to follow the evidence. It was clear that people wanted a more agile and flexible system. That is easy to say but really difficult to deliver. Having a system that gives greater autonomy and ownership to places and regions to determine what is right for them allows them to pivot when an opportunity occurs. For example, if a big inward investment is made in an area and a company lands there and has a particular skills requirement, we should free up the system to allow it to work in a more agile way. Such an approach will work regionally rather than nationally.

My hope is that, in taking a whole-system approach and building such a system, we can create a machine, in a sense, with agility and flexibility built in, that will be free to move with changing priorities and opportunities.

The Convener: Is there anything that you were hoping to present to us this morning that you have not had a chance to say? I know that that is an open question.

James Withers: No, I do not think so. We have touched on the culture of reform, for instance. I think that we have covered most areas.

To refer to what your first panel focused on, I view educational reform and reform of the curriculum and of what is happening in schools as absolutely integral to the broader skills piece. It is a cliché to talk about starting as young as possible, but parity of esteem and equity of learning opportunity are the ball game here. Culturally, practically and financially, the system does not embed that. It serves too small a proportion of the pupil population and the wider population of the country.

Scotland's working-age population is shrinking, and the ONS thinks that our population will shrink faster than that of any other part of the United Kingdom. The immigration situation is different now that we are out of the European Union. The need to make the most of the skills and the potential of our population requires us to reform the education system as well as the post-school skills and learning environment. The two go hand in hand, and I think there is a lot of good in what Professor Hayward is proposing that I can relate to, from what I have seen.

The Convener: What do you think the Scottish Government should do next?

James Withers: I go back to the point about establishing a vision for what good looks like, which should be the north star, so that we are clear about where we are headed.

I caught the end of the previous panel discussion, and it was said that we are never going to achieve consensus, so we should give up on that. We should be bold and take some decisions, with the certainty that there will be people who will be upset and nervous about that. In my experience, the people who will be upset, nervous and discombobulated by that will not be customers of the system; they will be people involved in the delivery of the system. Care less about them—that is my message to the Government. Keep the momentum and try to make that momentum unstoppable. That means setting out the vision and starting to take some of the early steps. I have identified five that I think could be taken to make it much more difficult to reverse out of reform than to carry on with it.

The Convener: That is super, James. Thank you for your contribution today.

That concludes the public part of our proceedings. The committee will now consider its final agenda items in private.

12:13

Meeting continued in private until 12:42.

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