OFFICIAL REPORT
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Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 5 December 2024

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
27th Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)
Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)
*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Ben Addy (Moxon Architects)
Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)
Vivienne Mackinnon (Scotland's Rural College)
Dr Joseph Maguire (University of Glasgow)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 5 December 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:45]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning and a warm welcome to the 27th meeting of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee in 2024. We have received apologies from Keith Brown MSP and his substitute is Jackie Dunbar MSP. Welcome back, Ms Dunbar.

Our first agenda item is a decision on taking business in private. Are members content to take item 3 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Review of the EU-UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement

09:45

The Convener: Our second agenda item is to continue to take evidence on the second phase of our inquiry in relation to the review of the European Union-United Kingdom Trade and Co-operation Agreement, focusing on trade in services. I declare an interest, as I am a member of the British Computer Society.

We are joined by Vivienne Mackinnon, director of veterinary partnerships in the school of veterinary medicine at Scotland's Rural College and junior vice-president of the Scottish branch of the British Veterinary Association; Dr Joseph Maguire, associate professor in the school of computing science at the University of Glasgow and co-chair of the Scottish computing education committee of BCS, the Chartered Institute for IT; and Ben Addy, managing director of Moxon Architects and member of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland. Thank you for your attendance.

I will open with a broad question. How has the TCA impacted your sector, in terms of trade in services, and what differences do you see between the situation pre-Brexit and post-Brexit? I will ask Vivienne to start.

Vivienne Mackinnon (Scotland's Rural College): Thank you. The UK veterinary profession is heavily reliant on EU vets. Pre-Brexit, there were huge numbers. In fact, about 50 per cent of new registrants to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons each year came from the EU. That declined dramatically post-EU exit. We are focused on the vets coming into the EU and to the UK because we are reliant on them to fulfil public health roles in terms of food safety, zoonotic disease and international trade certification of products of animal origin. In brief, the changes that we have seen have meant that we have seen a decline in numbers and an increasing impact on the veterinary workforce shortage that we are experiencing.

Ben Addy (Moxon Architects): Briefly, prior to Brexit we had portability of our qualifications on the continent and we do not any more. We also used to qualify to pursue work through the *Official Journal of the European Union*, which typically we do not now, unless we take other, more imaginative routes to try to access that market—those routes are quite difficult. I can talk later on about my personal experience of that with work that we do in Germany, Norway and Italy, but we have to work against the system, as it were, to acquire those contracts. Similarly to Vivienne, prior

to Brexit 50 per cent of the employees in our practice were EU nationals and now we have none.

Dr Joseph Maguire (University of Glasgow): From the perspective of computing in higher education it is probably not revelatory to say that there has been a change, in that the flow of students, researchers and general expertise between the UK and our neighbours is less now than it was before the transition. I suppose that it is not that different from what you have heard from others. I can expand on that in answer to the following questions.

The Convener: Thank you. Can we have the volume of the witnesses up a bit, please? Thank you. This room is a terrible echo chamber sometimes.

I will invite committee members to question the witnesses.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): You have already indicated the difficulties that you experience and you may have indicated that you have stopped trading or trying to negotiate or pursue things with European countries. Have any of you found anything that has in any shape, way or form been an easier process in any area? Is there anything, in any of your organisations, that has a benefit at all? You are struggling to find one. Is there nothing in architecture?

Ben Addy: This is a bit of a tangent, but there is now a mutual recognition agreement in place with the United States of America. Whether that has anything to do with Brexit or not is not for me to say, but we find it easier to become involved in work in the United States at the moment. In the eight years since the vote, however, it is astonishing to me that we do not have the equivalent with the EU, which is what we had before anyway.

Alexander Stewart: On the veterinary side of things, can you suggest any tangible improvement?

Vivienne Mackinnon: No, I am sorry; I cannot.

Alexander Stewart: What about you, Dr Maguire?

Dr Maguire: There is potential and there are certainly opportunities. Computing as a profession is not as regulated as some others. You can, broadly, go and work in other parts of the world as a software engineer or in related professions such as cybersecurity, data analytics and those different elements.

Having said that, whereas we may not be heavily regulated right now, the professional body that I am part of, the BCS, is trying to walk the discipline to a more regulated existence because that is to our benefit. In the UK, we have already had scandals such as the horizon scandal, which has the potential to bring our profession into disrepute, but so has Europe if you take Volkswagen and the emissions scandal and elements around that. The UK and Europe share the problems in terms of wanting to walk towards a more regulated environment, for the challenges of cybersecurity, if nothing else. In terms of those elements, there are certainly opportunities for people—individuals, politicians, professional bodies and a profession like mine—to work together going forward, to make that better. That is the potential or the opportunity, but it is not where we are right now.

Alexander Stewart: As you have identified, the possibilities of what can be achieved open up. As you have indicated, other countries may try to support or acquire or entice to do other things across the world. We know that the world has become a smaller place and that trade and opportunities have blossomed in some locations but declined in others. If we are to understand the complexities that we have found in this whole process, it is about trying to capture and manage that going forward. For me, it is about what you can achieve and where you can go but, at the same time, what should we try to do to alleviate and to support, so that we can attract people and try to manage some of the difficulties that you all experience? Your organisations still operate and progress, but they do things differently to how they did them in the past. What do you want for the future and where do you want things to develop? Where do you see opportunities for each and every one of your sectors to progress? Is there anything on that level that you can add?

Ben Addy: On the point that I made about the United States, I believe that the EU has or will soon have an MRA with Canada, which we do not have. I think that the MRA with the United States was on the cards anyway—I do not know about the causality there. At the moment, we have portability of our qualifications with Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland. We now work in Oslo, which is great for us but, again, that is a poor relation to what it was in the past.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you. Is there anything else from anybody?

Vivienne Mackinnon: Since the mutual recognition of professional qualifications directive changed with EU exit, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, which is our regulatory body, has taken measures to temporarily recognise veterinary degrees that were accredited by the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education, known as EAEVE, but that recognition is reviewed annually. It was developed

to recognise the fact that we were so reliant on EU vets to bolster the UK workforce. We have now reached a point at which a five-year time limit has been set on that arrangement, because the Royal College's standards for UK veterinary education have changed to become much more outcomes focused, so European accreditation and UK accreditation have diverged. We are now on a time-limited extension to try to manage the workforce issues that we are experiencing. The sector itself is taking a raft of other measures to try to improve the UK workforce issue; I will not go into those in detail here.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Clearly, there has been an immediate impact on the operation of businesses that work in your sectors, whether that relates to their ability to access work in European countries, share skills or in other ways. I will ask about the long-term impact of those barriers not just on folk who work in the sector but on how those sectors will develop if there is no movement and no youth mobility in particular. Who will come into those professions? How will they develop their skills? In what way will their networks with folk in other European countries develop or get hampered if there is no progress on restoring youth mobility? How much of an impact will that have in relation to how your professions develop in Scotland? How much benefit would be gained in relation to the development of those professions were some that youth mobility to be restored?

Ben Addy: I was going to speak for my profession. However, I will not do that and will, instead, speak for myself. The situation is a slow-motion tragedy. Architecture is a cultural and technological exercise—or pursuit, if you like—and it thrives upon cultural and technological interchange and exchange with peers in Europe and round the world.

As an architect, you look at the work of peers or former peers on the continent who are pursuing, for instance, the reuse of materials from buildings that are disassembled and put back together in different ways. That has been happening in France for the best part of a decade, but we are only now starting to explore it properly in the UK.

I can also speak to the theory and the artistic side of architecture. In the same way, that requires an interchange of ideas. The cross-pollination and the migration of those ideas tends to happen with the young.

We have not seen the full impact yet. I can certainly talk to the impact in my practice, but that is a small world in comparison. There will be a substantial impact on Scottish architecture.

Patrick Harvie: This is happening at a time when we need to be learning from the skills of countries that build homes to the energy performance that cold northern European countries require, which Scotland has not been doing.

Ben Addy: Absolutely; indeed.

Patrick Harvie: Are there any other perspectives on the same question about the long-term impact and the role that the restoration of youth mobility might have in ameliorating at least some of the harmful effects?

10:00

Vivienne Mackinnon: For the veterinary profession, the position is similar to what Ben Addy has already alluded to for architecture—that is, the cross-cultural pollination of ideas is important for advances in veterinary medicine and veterinary research as a whole.

We see huge benefits from young people graduating in the UK, going to work in other parts of the world to find out how it works elsewhere and then bringing back those improvements to the UK, and vice versa. That particularly happens with Australia and New Zealand, and it certainly happens in Europe in relation to the research fields that are involved in veterinary medicine. That helps our understanding of how to protect our borders from notifiable diseases, such as foot-and-mouth disease, that can decimate livestock populations, and from zoonotic diseases, which can impact on human health. Maintaining youth mobility is a vital issue.

Patrick Harvie: Is there anything to add from the computer science perspective?

Dr Maguire: In computing, there are many great opportunities in Scotland. On our strengths, we have lots of assets, such as our research, our environment—we are a relatively stable country—and we have lots of data. It is difficult to predict the future, but it is not controversial or difficult to believe that computing will continue to be a part of many professions.

On how to become strong in emerging applications such as computing and health, defence or the environment, movement or utilisation of migration at the top and bottom is important. That is important for attracting young people, who provide a diversity of perspectives, have different attitudes and are nimble when it comes to rejuvenating and re-engaging with our ideas.

That aspect is also quite important at the senior level as well. As Mark Logan outlined in his review of the tech sector in relation to start-ups, if we want to capitalise on elements of defence or health or on those other applications, we must have the leadership and the individuals to do so.

However, we do not have those in significant numbers. If we want to bring in those people and build a sector, there must be a warm environment in which to support that. Capitalising or utilising our nearest neighbours, as well as other countries, is important for computing to realise its potential in Scotland.

We have many assets and it would be disappointing to see them wasted because of issues such as that one, I suppose.

Patrick Harvie: I have a question for Ben Addy. We have a written submissions from RIAS. As RIAS was producing evidence for a Scottish Parliament committee and our job is to scrutinise the Scottish Government, most of the content of the last section on the way forward is about what the Government can do to try to support the sector or mitigate some of the damage that has been done. I appreciate that, but I wonder whether there is already an established or emerging view from the wider sector across the UK, including in Scotland, about the changes that the UK Government should pursue with the EU. Is a view emerging about specific changes that you seek to advocate for to improve or—as the UK Government sometimes says—to reset the relationship with Europe and to remove some of the barriers that have been put up?

Ben Addy: UK-wide, yes. Mutual recognition agreements with the EU would be a positive first step—that would be a reversion to the status quo ante, effectively, on qualifications and access. I put it as simply as that. That is a UK thing, not a Scottish thing. We can do things in Scotland as well, and I hope that we will come on to talk about that, but that aspect is key.

Patrick Harvie: I imagine that the sector that you represent, Vivienne Mackinnon, has a strong view on whether veterinary agreements, and on whether—this is way beyond my level of expertise—sanitary and phytosanitary measures, which cover everything that affects issues with a food or a biological component, should be a political objective for the UK Government.

Vivienne Mackinnon: I agree that it should be. Trade certification is a whole other area in terms of control of imports of products, and it is important to have adequate numbers of vets to do that and to keep our borders safe.

It would be beneficial for us to have a veterinary agreement that includes MRPQs with some veterinary schools in Europe that have a similar curriculum and syllabus to the UK veterinary schools. We then could have an agreement for labour to come in with the same standards, which would help with the workforce shortages.

Patrick Harvie: It is interesting that you use a phrase like “keep our borders safe”, which many politicians often use to mean keeping out people who could make a contribution. Biological threats pay no respect to borders. We need those skills and capacities to tackle those real threats.

Vivienne Mackinnon: Absolutely. Traditionally—and ironically—EU vets have come in to perform that function for us at border control posts. The skills that they bring are very welcome to us and are highly valued.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Mr Harvie referenced RIAS’s submission and the evidence about what more the Scottish Government could do. I want to ask you about that.

You have highlighted a lack of support from organisations such as Scottish Enterprise and Architecture and Design Scotland. Following the budget announcement yesterday, I understand that the latter faced yet another budget cut, making it £700,000 worse off in real terms than it was two years ago. Presumably, that will make it more difficult to provide that support. I also understand that the Government has frozen funding for a profile-raising exercise.

It is our role to look at the trading relationship between the UK and the EU and at how the Scottish Government will help the sector to navigate that. Does the Scottish Government recognise the severity of the issues that you have raised on behalf of Scottish architects? Have you engaged with it on the points that you have raised in your submission?

Ben Addy: I am here speaking to you today as, effectively, a private practitioner. I am an ordinary member of RIAS. I have had some hand in the paper that has been circulated to you. Any cut to Architecture and Design Scotland’s funding is regrettable. It is a valuable part of the ecosystem of architectural culture in Scotland and what it can do to promote it at home and abroad.

A much bigger, more fundamental aspect of how architecture in Scotland is conducted as a business comes down to procurement of public projects, which dwarfs every other aspect of this discussion. I probably speak for the profession when I say that how public procurement takes place in Scotland is highly problematical, and we can get into the detail of that if you wish.

That is relevant because public projects are a large part of the shop window for Scottish architecture. However, at present, our shop window is rather bare compared with that of our peers on the continent. For instance, architectural practice in Denmark has public procurement that enables new entrants, small practices and large practices—the gamut—to take part in that type of work. Therefore, when they come to export, they have a good portfolio to speak about, whereas

good quality architecture in Scotland is overwhelmingly reliant on the private sector.

I make a distinction between good architecture and less good architecture, shall we say. Procurement in Scotland is, in the initial stages, peculiarly targeted at achieving relatively small—even sometimes tiny—savings in the context of a project overall, rather than quality. I also contrast that with what happens south of the border, particularly London, where there is a much healthier appreciation of how to encourage new entrants, better-quality architecture and better-quality design. There is also an understanding that, at the start of a project, you want the design to be as good as it possibly can be, because, after all, buildings are expensive, big objects and you do not want to find that your design is deficient halfway through construction. There is a big discussion about public procurement that is relevant.

Neil Bibby: I know that you have called on the Scottish Government to reform the procurement environment to create a more sustainable home market that values design and designers. Has the Government indicated whether it is looking at reform or is likely to look at reform in the areas that you mentioned?

Ben Addy: Again, I do not speak for RIAS on that, but my understanding is that there is some very positive movement towards a more sensible or mature appreciation of fees and costs for design services—that is, a better way of marking the fee component of a submission in relation to public projects.

Neil Bibby: That is helpful to know. Thank you.

We have discussed a lot about the veterinary agreement in relation to trade in goods. I want to ask Ms Mackinnon about the impact of shortages of vets on domestic pets. Vets are highly skilled professionals and need to be properly remunerated for their specialist work. However, I have recently heard a number of examples of constituents facing what they regard as increasingly eye-watering vets bills. Are increasing charges something that you recognise as a general issue?

Vivienne Mackinnon: It is important to point out that there is no national health service for pets. Most people are highly unaware of the true cost of providing high-quality medical care. There have been phenomenal advancements in the quality of veterinary care that is provided to pets even over the past 30 years or so, which inevitably comes at a cost in terms of offering the best possible care for pets.

We work to the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. It has not been updated, so we work with legislation that is out of date. It regulates only vets, but legislation has since come in that allows practices to be owned by people who are not veterinary surgeons. However, those people are not held accountable; it is the vets in that practice providing the care who are held accountable. I note that a Competition and Markets Authority investigation on veterinary services for pets is under way.

A lot of that can be also related to basic supply and demand, as we have already discussed, and having a workforce shortage. Certain costs are attracted if there are fewer people to do the work. Salaries can go up as a result of that, and the cost of care can also go up as well. I do not feel that the labour shortage is the primary issue in terms of the veterinary fees.

Neil Bibby: Again, I note that vets provide highly professional skilled work and should be renumerated properly. Did you say that the labour shortage is not the reason behind the rise in fees?

Vivienne Mackinnon: That is not the biggest factor behind fees. The whole market has changed a lot with the corporatisation of the industry and with the hours that vets are expected to work. Out-of-hours service providers are increasingly used, which comes at an increased cost. However, those can also provide better care for pets in some instances. A lot of factors contribute towards the fee increases.

10:15

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I was interested to hear what Ben Addy alluded to in his earlier comments. You said that you had EU staff working with you and now you do not have any. Why? Presumably they were here before we left the EU and they had all the same rights afterwards. Why did they decide to go home?

Ben Addy: I will need to go back to them to find out precisely why they decided to leave, but it was all coincident with the vote and what took place in the years after.

Stephen Kerr: So you are just concluding that it had something to do with that.

Ben Addy: No, I am not concluding anything, but in our practice we do not have anyone from the EU any longer. Half the practice used to be from the EU.

Stephen Kerr: So the reason why is imprecise.

Ben Addy: Absolutely, it is imprecise. It is anecdotal, but I think that that is the case across the board.

Stephen Kerr: I think that you said that you had a hand in your submission, so I will ask you about what is in it. It says:

"For most Scottish based architects, working in Europe is uncommon"—

uncommon is another way of saying rare.

Ben Addy: Yes.

Stephen Kerr: Is that now, or was that the case before we left the EU? Was it rare before as well?

Ben Addy: Possibly. I can speak only to my own experience. We are now pursuing work in Europe, but we have to pursue it rather unconventionally.

Stephen Kerr: How?

Ben Addy: I am speaking specifically about my own experience

Stephen Kerr: Will that be typical of the sector?

Ben Addy: No, it will be atypical, because part of our practice occupies a specific niche that most other architects in the UK—let alone Scotland—do not participate in, which is bridge design. We do an awful lot of infrastructure work.

Stephen Kerr: I saw a lot of bridges on your website.

Ben Addy: Yes. We do an awful lot of infrastructure work and that is our passport, if you like. As you might imagine with bridges and large-scale infrastructure, the risk is predominantly in the engineering. We can make undertake that work overseas only because we come in under the wing of engineering consultancies that are domiciled in countries in the EU or what have you. We can make that step, whereas if you—

Stephen Kerr: Did that collaboration take place before we left the EU and has it been taking place since then?

Ben Addy: Yes, and increasingly so now, but that is because of the maturity of my business. However, that work is not accessible to most other practices. In a conventional—I say that in inverted commas—practice, you would have to work with another architect. As I said at the start, it is less attractive to a client to pay two architects when they can pay one. Collaboration makes sense only if it is for a specific reason—if you win a large international design competition and then partner up with a domestic architect overseas, for example.

Stephen Kerr: Was that not common before? I should state as a matter of interest that I have a daughter-in-law who is an architect working in the single market, but I do not claim to know any more about it than what I have just stated: I have a daughter-in-law who is an architect operating in the single market. Was that kind of collaboration across borders between architectural firms not common before?

Ben Addy: Certainly, but the difference now is that you have to go in effectively under the wing as a subconsultant, whereas previously you could pursue those opportunities. You could win the opportunity and then you could partner up if you need needed to.

Stephen Kerr: However, that would be rare for Scottish architects. When hunting down opportunities, you have a niche with your bridges, but, generally, would it be rare for Scottish architects to do such work?

Ben Addy: Presently, that is absolutely rare.

Stephen Kerr: You mentioned the mutual recognition agreement with Canada. Does it give you hope that the EU might be open to such an agreement, given the fact that prior to our leaving the EU, we had mutual recognition with it? Does it give you hope?

My daughter-in-law studied at the Glasgow School of Art as part of the seven years that she studied to be an architect. There is no doubt about the veracity and the quality of the qualifications. Are you optimistic that mutual recognition appears to be achievable?

Ben Addy: We had that previously, so yes.

Stephen Kerr: Can you think of any reasons why that would not be achievable?

Ben Addy: No, but I cannot think of any reason why it has not happened already.

Stephen Kerr: Good point. The UK recognises European qualifications—

Ben Addy: Indeed it does, yes.

Stephen Kerr: Would it have been more helpful if we had not?

Ben Addy: I do not know. That is for the politicians to answer.

Stephen Kerr: Yes, but from a negotiation point of view, we have given away the house before. That is stating the obvious, is it not?

Ben Addy: Yes.

Stephen Kerr: I did not get the other of the two submissions in time, so I am focusing on you, Ben. I apologise.

You said something—I found this to be quite interesting—about architects coming into the UK. The view seems to be that that is difficult to achieve in the current visa environment. As a matter of interest, the current salary qualification for a work visa in the UK is £38,700, and the point that was made in your submission is that that would be too high for a qualified architect. I found that quite bizarre. I have this idea in my head that after studying seven years at university and being a qualified architect, someone would probably be earning more than £38,700.

Ben Addy: Like anything, salaries vary across the piece, but we are talking averages here. That particular point comes back to my other point about procurement of public projects in Scotland and the UK more widely. In the architecture profession at the moment, you can see quite wild differences between high-end salaries and low-end salaries. That average is largely a consequence of the procurement environment in the UK as a whole.

Stephen Kerr: Is that right? Do most architects not earn more than £38,700?

Ben Addy: Sadly, yes. I believe what is in the document.

Stephen Kerr: Wow. I might be the only person surprised at that, but I genuinely thought that after seven years—I know how hard that qualification process is—architects would be earning more than £38,700.

The Convener: Ben Addy has answered the question to the best of his ability, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: Yes. I am trying to verbalise my shock at this discovery.

Ben Addy: We can have a conversation afterwards.

The Convener: There would be a difference between the salaries of business leaders and other people in that area of work, such as Mr Addy. We are not talking about profits here, to be clear.

Stephen Kerr: Okay—I am going on what is in the paper.

You see the rest of the world as an opportunity. I absolutely accept the argument about of the exchange of ideas. It is obvious that the whole profession exists on the basis of new ideas and new thoughts. Does that happen with the rest of the world but not the EU?

Ben Addy: It probably happens with the EU to the same extent as it happens with the rest of the world. We are talking in Edinburgh, but in the rest of the UK—in London, for instance—you would previously find that practices were well complemented by European staff. That has diminished.

Stephen Kerr: Has plugging into that maelstrom of ideas, innovation and creation been lessened because we have left the EU?

Ben Addy: It has been lessened in the sense that there are fewer Europeans, but it has not lessened in relation to countries beyond Europe, if that is what you are driving at.

Stephen Kerr: Yes. Has the quantum of energy within the profession been diminished in Britain and Scotland?

Ben Addy: I am now speaking anecdotally. I think that it has diminished. It has not been rebalanced by people coming from the Americas or Asia or what have you.

Stephen Kerr: Are you equating exchange of ideas with mobility?

Ben Addy: Yes.

Stephen Kerr: Is it not greater than mobility? Is mobility the key element of it? Is the cross-fertilisation of ideas dependent on mobility, or is it bigger than mobility?

Ben Addy: It is both. Mobility is a huge part of it, even in the world of Teams and Zoom and going online.

Stephen Kerr: What about conventions and conferences?

Ben Addy: That is a very important aspect of it as well, and we can talk to that.

Stephen Kerr: Please do.

Ben Addy: Fundamentally, meeting and working alongside people for an extended period is far and away the most effective for engendering that cross-pollination.

Stephen Kerr: Significantly, Ben, you said that for most architectural firms in Scotland, the opportunity to work alongside EU colleagues in the EU is rare.

Ben Addy: Yes, it is rare.

Stephen Kerr: Vivienne Mackinnon, with regard to the rest of the world, as opposed to the EU, what has been the impact on your sector? You describe how fewer vets come in our direction. Vets definitely left the UK, particularly during the COVID period. Many of them from central Europe have gone home and discovered that their economies have been transformed in the last couple of decades and now they are working at home. What about the rest of the world? Do we have vets coming here from the rest of the world?

Vivienne Mackinnon: We do, but it is a small fraction of the total number of registrants in Scotland's Rural College.

Stephen Kerr: Is there any problem with mutual recognition, with regard to the accreditation and qualifications of people coming here from the rest of the world?

Vivienne Mackinnon: There are three ways that a vet can practice in the UK. They can go to a UK vet school with a recognised RCVS degree, they can go a vet school elsewhere that has a UK-

recognised veterinary degree or they can sit the statutory membership exams.

We have some vets who are working here who have come from other countries. Some can be veterinary students who have come to the UK. Our veterinary education system relies on the funding that international students provide. The Scottish Funding Council does not adequately fund the veterinary medicine degree, because it is one of the most expensive one. Some of those students stay on to work if they can do so under the right visa conditions. By and large, we have been most reliant on our EU colleagues.

Stephen Kerr: Other than the issues that you have raised in relation to our leaving the EU, what are the reasons why vets from the EU would not come to the UK now? Can you think of any others? I mentioned the Polish vets, for example.

Vivienne Mackinnon: Vets can come if they come from what we call an accredited European school, but because they are now treated in the same way as vets who come from the rest of the world, they also have to conform to the International English Language Testing System language requirements, which is a higher standard of English, and that can be difficult. We have temporary measures that mean that vets working in abattoirs do not need to reach the same English language standards, but that requirement still acts as a barrier.

Stephen Kerr: What about the salary threshold that I mentioned?

Vivienne Mackinnon: You are absolutely right. The normal salary threshold is £38,700, as you know. The going rate for vets is bumped up to £48,100. However, a dispensation allows those under 26 who are paid between 70 and 90 per cent of the standard going rate to qualify. The threshold does not work for us because it is a high threshold in relation to what people are earning when they come.

Stephen Kerr: Is that a barrier? I am not following you.

Vivienne Mackinnon: It is a barrier. Vets coming in to work, for example, in public health, which is a lot of what the EU vets do, do not get a salary that is 70 per cent of the threshold.

Stephen Kerr: Is that the case despite the shortages? Have the shortages not driven up salaries?

Vivienne Mackinnon: No, they have not.

Stephen Kerr: That is interesting—a market failure there.

Vivienne Mackinnon: Salaries are not going up at the rate that you might think. As the convener alluded to earlier, going-rate salaries are set based on an average across the board, so they count the salaries of the most senior and most well-remunerated people in the profession. The salary range is huge compared to—

Stephen Kerr: There is a range of positions and at the lower end of the salary scale—

Vivienne Mackinnon: An inexperienced new graduate will not reach those salary thresholds.

Stephen Kerr: Okay. That is very interesting.

Joseph Maguire, I have one question for you, which is on data flows. When we left the EU, it was thought that we would have massive disruption in data flows, data processing centres and all the rest of it. What is your experience? What is the anecdotal experience with regards to that ability to exchange information across borders with the EU?

10:30

Dr Maguire: I cannot comment on that so much from my personal experience. Large multinationals have their own protections and can get different binding corporate elements to mitigate against elements and threats. Trying to predict the future is always a dangerous business.

Other countries or blocs are almost viewing data as an economic asset to build on, and something that can be used to shape and steer investment into their economies. Larger blocs such as China, India and the US are realising the potential and the significance of data, and they are forming their laws around that, such as localisation and different elements.

Estimating the impact on Scotland, the UK and Europe is difficult. How does the UK or Scotland capitalise on the data that it has while maintaining global relevance? Looking ahead, ensuring that you have a good relationship with your nearest partner and your trading bloc is broadly advantageous, probably, purely because you likely to compete with other large blocs. That consideration also informs things such as investment in data centres, where they are positioned and how you go about positioning them. That is influenced and shaped by legislation.

Stephen Kerr: This is a hugely important aspect for the running of any economy now. Data is the oil, as it were, of the 21st century in this respect. Since we left the EU, has the exchange of information and data flows between us and the EU been impeded in, for example, the field that you are in—academia?

Dr Maguire: In academia, it is difficult to speak about larger organisations, because they have always been better equipped to put in place the

protections and different elements required to have data flows.

I could not speak to this, but the BCS could probably provide more information that might be interesting on those smaller-to-medium-sized organisations that do not have such resources and have to operate within standard contractual clauses and other different elements with regard to data flows and how they can compete.

Stephen Kerr: It has always been a reality, of course, in any given economic structure that small organisations with fewer resources will find things a bit more difficult.

Dr Maguire: That would seem a reasonable position, but if we are trying to make predictions, it would be interesting to know the concerns of smaller organisation.

I am trying to think of different elements. For instance, the latest law in Australia around social media—

Stephen Kerr: Oh yes—the law relating to children aged under 16.

Dr Maguire: That will require the use of age verification. A company in the UK might want to provide the artificial intelligence and machine learning for that, which might be trained on data that we have collected here in this country. In that domain, it will become more relevant over time to explore the size companies and how they can start to support other countries. Understanding their needs is important in advancing their position.

Stephen Kerr: That is the give-and-take of trade generally, but the key point that I am trying to get to is whether there been major disruption in the flow of data and information in your particular field. I do not want to lead the witness, because that is against all the protocols, but I do not hear any obstacles. It seems to have gone better than everyone thought that it would.

Dr Maguire: It would be fair to say that it depends on who you speak to. What is a major disruption? It almost comes back to the wages. It depends on your mileage. Some businesses will have been impacted.

Stephen Kerr: There are no legal impediments, though?

Dr Maguire: Could data flow be eased by changes in the law? It probably could for certain sectors, but I could be corrected on that.

Stephen Kerr: That is great. I thank all three of the witnesses for their contributions.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning. Mr Kerr is always entertaining. He makes me laugh. He does not want to lead the witness in any shape or form—of course, I thought some of it was quite leading, in certain parts.

Ben Addy, I am trying to get my head around how the situation affects your industry, and I will use this building as an example. It was designed by a Scottish firm but the architect was Catalan. Would it be very difficult or impossible to have that arrangement now?

Ben Addy: No, it would be perfectly plausible. Enric Miralles was the architect, having won the competition, and the Scottish Office employed RMJM Architecture to work alongside him.

George Adam: You said—I am trying not to lead the witness here; I am just going on the evidence that has been given—that your firm no longer has the European connections that you had in the past. Is that the case for other firms? I believe that Miralles had a connection to a Scottish firm—I cannot remember who the firm was—when he made the submission.

Ben Addy: It was RMJM, based in Edinburgh. However, I hope that you will forgive me if I say that the Scottish Parliament is an atypical project to use as an example, because it was an important capital project in the capital city—

George Adam: I was trying to use something that people would understand and see what would be different now.

Ben Addy: The scenario that you describe is how we would need to pursue work on the continent as well but, even more so, as we need to effectively be a subcontractor to a European practice.

George Adam: It is more difficult now, then?

Ben Addy: Yes, but there are atypical projects such as the Scottish Parliament building, and we are pursuing large, open international design competitions on the continent.

George Adam: I was going to ask about that next. If you were to do compete for those projects in Europe, would it be difficult?

Ben Addy: It would be no more difficult now than it was previously, because those projects are quite different from the bread-and-butter public projects that you would hope to pursue as well, but which it is not worth pursuing now. However, you would absolutely go for something like a Parliament building in a capital city.

George Adam: So, the effect in your industry is in line with what everyone else is saying about problems with communication and understanding and working with those in Europe. Is that the main part?

Ben Addy: It is more awkward.

George Adam: Dr Maguire, you specialise in security and privacy. I am trying to work out this question in my own head. The general data protection regulation would be a big issue for you and for how we continue. Currently we have convergence, so we approach things in the same way, but if we get to a stage where we do not have that convergence, that will cause security problems and problems with data going back and forth. That will be a major issue for us, so I am surprised you have not been asked more questions about it—Stephen Kerr asked a few, but it was mainly poor Ben that was getting it.

At the end of the day, divergence in that regard is a major issue for us. Is it already an issue at the moment with data going back and forth? Mr Kerr spoke about that. That could be a major issue for companies, businesses and services in general.

Dr Maguire: Probably a good way to start is with what Richard Horne, the chief executive of the National Cyber Security Centre in the UK said this week about the fact that the gap between the resilience of business and the threats that it faces is increasing. Addressing that involves a combination of improving the quality of regulation of my profession—computing software engineering-related careers—and improving the culture that those organisations operate within. We need to ensure that there are sufficient skills to improve the security of infrastructure and various elements. There is also an issue around the mindset of building things quickly and getting them out quickly—the "move fast, break things" attitude. What you want to ensure is that you are investing in infrastructure.

Coming back to bridges, if the Queensferry bridge was to fall down, we would probably have an opinion about it, based on our feeling that the engineers and the architects behind that were regulated and controlled. However, when it comes to the development of the critical infrastructure to do with data, we do not have greater requirements with regard to the regulation of the individual engineers who are involved in that.

The BCS is ensuring that people involved in the discipline are aware of the need of regulation and accreditation, and the importance of that within education and training. However, if you were to require individuals who are involved in large projects to have those chartered qualifications, you would run into a problem, because not many individuals have them. That reduces the pool that you can employ people from, which means that you will not necessarily get enough people, or the people who you get will cost a lot more. However, if you do not mandate it, professionals will not feel the need to seek those qualifications.

That same tension exists in Europe, and the opportunity exists to refine what we expect in terms of education, training and so on. From that perspective, there are lots of different elements here such as data privacy and security. We can have positive data flows, but it is problematic If the data flows go into insecure environments. Again, from the point of view of making sure the UK is a destination for both research investment and economic investment, we have to ensure its environment is viewed as valuing and recognising the importance of the investment that it makes in its digital infrastructure. That is a problem for many countries. You could pick literally any country in the world and it will have a security issue—I get my students to do it. Everyone has their problems. The concern is when you start to break away from the pack because you have more problems than other countries. If you are viewed as less secure, people do not want their data to be kept in your country or their investments to be made in your country.

My passion is computing science education. I will quote some statistics. The BCS says that, across the UK, 94 per cent of girls and 79 per cent of boys drop computing by the age of 14. That is relevant with regard to the investment in computing science education across Scotland. Even people who do not want to be computing scientists, data analysts or anything to do with the profession—for example, vets, architects or citizens in general—are going to have to know something about computing science. Even though we are talking about European issues today, I want to highlight the importance of computing science and the need to ensure that we are preparing our nation for the future.

George Adam: I could go into a lot of issues around that, but that is probably more to do with my remit in my role as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. I have nothing else to ask at this stage.

The Convener: I have a specific question about our recent visit to Brussels to present the first part of our TCA inquiry report on trades and goods. In the discussions that the committee had there, we heard loud and clear that reaching a veterinary agreement would require the UK to align with all EU animal and plant health law. How is the BVA tracking EU law? Have vets based in Scotland been given any advice on how they should keep pace with developments and standards in the EU?

Vivienne Mackinnon: Through our membership organisation, we seek the views of vets in Scotland around the best way forward in that regard. The area of most interest is around the supply of medicines into Northern Ireland in particular—that is a big focus for us. There is a lot of lobbying activity on the part of the BVA in relation to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, at a UK Government level.

The Convener: I have a similar question for Dr Maguire. The EU has introduced a law in the area of AI regulation, which will be important for the sector. How will we keep pace with what happens in the EU if the UK does not adopt the same principles on AI regulation and other data regulation coming from the EU?

Dr Maguire: Could you repeat the question?

10:45

The Convener: To be able to work in the EU, the sector would have to align itself with the EU's AI regulations. We have seen progress there with an EU bill being proposed, but the UK Government is somewhat behind in that regard. How important is alignment of regulation in those larger areas and, indeed, in data and GDPR? How important is it that the IT industry aligns with the EU?

Dr Maguire: Broadly, it is important. From that perspective, when trying to ensure that we have the trust of citizens across Europe and that we perform correctly, it is important to align with the EU, mainly because we share many of the same values in that respect anyway, in our region. In terms of the work that we do as researchers and educators and in terms of economic growth, it is important that we recognise where we agree and what we think is important, and that we project that across the world. That does not necessarily mean that we have to agree on absolutely everything; it just means that we would likely agree on a large part of the tenets of the approach.

In the 1980s and into the 1990s, the UK displayed leadership on data protection, which had an influence on the GDPR and so on. On things such as AI, cybersecurity and data analytics, it is important that, if nothing else, the UK is able to influence what is going on and have its voice magnified by having a relationship with such a powerful trading bloc. In that sense, an alignment with that bloc can be viewed as a megaphone for our own ideas and things that we want to project. From that perspective, I do not want to lose that opportunity because, even if you have a great idea, if nobody has heard about it, it does not make a difference.

The Convener: Mr Addy, you talked about having to fly under the radar with a partner to do work in Europe now, and how that did not used to happen. The committee has heard a lot about how our detriment has been Ireland's gain, as a lot of companies have registered themselves in Ireland, particularly in service areas where we do not have the same arrangement under the TCA as we have with the trade of goods.

Have you seen Scottish firms losing out to architects from Ireland, who are winning contracts abroad because they have similar advantages to us with regard to speaking English and having those recognised standards?

Ben Addy: Personally, no, I am not aware of that.

The Convener: Okay, that concludes the committee's questions. I thank you all for your attendance at the committee this morning, and we will now move into private session.

10:49

Meeting continued in private until 10:57.

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