OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 22 January 2025

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 22 January 2025

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
3rd Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)
*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Ellie Craig (Scottish Youth Parliament)
Beinn Grant (Scottish Youth Parliament)
Rebecca Hanna (Scottish Association of the Teachers of History)
Andy Johnston (Scottish Association of the Teachers of History)
Beau Johnston (Scottish Youth Parliament)
Sophie Kerrigan (Scottish Youth Parliament)
Kirsty MacDonald (Scottish Association of the Teachers of History)
Jordana Rae (Scottish Youth Parliament)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 22 January 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Scottish Youth Parliament

The Convener (Douglas Ross): Good morning, and welcome to the third meeting in 2025 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. We have received apologies from Bill Kidd.

The first item on our agenda is an evidence session with members of the Scottish Youth Parliament. We will hear from Ellie Craig, who is chair of the SYP and member for Glasgow Cathcart; Beinn Grant, who is member of the Scottish Youth Parliament for Perthshire South and Kinross-shire; Beau Johnston, who is MSYP for Edinburgh Central; Sophie Kerrigan, who is deputy convener of the SYP education and lifelong learning committee and MSYP for Stirling; and Jordana Rae, who is convener of the SYP education and lifelong learning committee and MSYP for Cowdenbeath. I warmly welcome you all to the Scottish Parliament and to our committee. We are looking forward to hearing your views and opinions and your responses to our questions.

Ellie, I know that you would like to make an opening statement.

Ellie Craig (Scottish Youth Parliament): Good morning, and thank you, convener, for inviting us to join the committee today. As you said, I am chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, and I am delighted to be joined by my fellow members Jordana, Sophie, Beau and Beinn.

The previous Presiding Officer signed the first partnership between our two Parliaments, and I was delighted that, since being elected, the current Presiding Officer has decided to continue that partnership. Core to the aims of our partnership is the embedding of the views of children and young people in the work of the Scottish Parliament. I hope that today will be a shining example of that.

The Scottish Parliament voted unanimously to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—the UNCRC—into Scots law, signalling that we live in a country that believes in the rights of children and young people. The importance of that step should not be understated. Children and young people who are growing up today should know that their rights matter and are taken seriously by the people in power. This week, the first case using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 was shared by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland—so we can see the tangible impact that the act is having.

However, when the bill was first debated, we said that the aim was to make Scotland the best country in the world to grow up in. As important as incorporation is, children and young people in Scotland face significant challenges, and those challenges prevent that aim from being the case. I hope that we can discuss many of those today.

Clearly, our education system is not meeting the needs of the young people who are in it. Young people face a mental health crisis that has been exacerbated by a pandemic, without the support that they need. Young women, LGBT young people, young people of colour, young people with disabilities and many more face targeted discrimination. It is increasingly difficult for young people to find support outside school, given that youth work services are under pressure. We feel unsupported to tackle the current climate crisis. Child poverty continues to undermine attempts to address those challenges.

All of those are human rights issues. One reason why we have failed to address them is because, too often, decision makers do not understand the experiences of the children and young people who are impacted by the decisions that they make. As MSYPs, we try to fill that gap. Decision makers need to meaningfully engage with young people to genuinely understand the challenges that they face and to prioritise and invest in the solutions that best fit.

I hope that today's evidence session gives insight into our views and the views of our constituents. However, I encourage you not to leave it at that but to consider where else in your role you take decisions that affect young people, and how you consider our views in those spaces.

The Convener: That is an excellent opening statement, and I know that it covers a lot of areas that members want to come in on.

How do you set your priorities for the SYP and for the education and lifelong learning committee for the year ahead? How does that work? How do you form the views of the members and set your priorities for the year ahead?

Ellie Craig: I can kick off on the priorities overall, then pass to Jordana to speak on behalf of the education committee.

SYP is the democratically elected voice of Scotland's young people. We hold elections every two years, whereby tens of thousands of young

people from across Scotland vote for who they want to represent them. All SYP policy is supported by consultation with young people, primarily through youth work organisations but also through schools, colleges, universities and other networks that we can access. However, cuts to youth work services affect our ability to do our role effectively, especially at local and grass-roots levels.

This year, we have three main priorities, which we will get into. Those are youth work, mental health and gender-based violence. Every two years, MSYPs consult their constituents on issues from our national manifesto, then the top three issues that are voted on form our three national campaigns. It is all based on consultation with young people.

Jordana Rae (Scottish Youth Parliament): As the convener of the education and lifelong learning committee, I meet members of the committee monthly to get an idea of what they have been doing in their constituencies and to see whether they need help or support with anything that they are trying to do. Perhaps they are not being listened to or they have an idea but do not know where to start. Sophie Kerrigan, as the deputy convener, and I look at their ideas and say, "This is how we can help", "Who have you got in touch with?" and things like that.

During sittings of the Parliament, the committee holds sessions that are similar to this one. We do activities and have debates to get an understanding of what everyone is thinking and feeling. Our most recent session went very well, I would say—it was probably our best one. Many of our members really enjoyed it, and they felt that their views were being heard. We take what we get from all that to places such as this, so that we can share not just the views of our own constituents but views from across Scotland in general about how people feel about education provision in their own areas. We cannot know personally how it is in all the different areas.

We usually get our members to vote—for example, on the cuts to higher education, the negatives, how we can better the situation and what we need to address it. Sophie and I put together statistics, and we went to the Scottish Parliament sitting last year to speak about that in front of everyone. I will pass over to Sophie, who can talk more about the mental health side of our work.

Sophie Kerrigan (Scottish Youth Parliament): The issue that we chose to focus on was access and cuts to further and higher education. At our most recent sitting, we brought to the table a motion that said that we obviously disapproved of the cuts. In our session, we talked about which groups are affected and how they are affected. One thing that we brought away from the session was why the cuts are coming about. We understand that, but we truly believe that some things for certain groups should not be cut. That is basically what we talked about in the motion.

The Convener: One of the issues that we currently debate quite a lot in Parliament is the rise in the number of cases of violence in schools. Are you looking at that, either as a committee or more widely as a Parliament?

Beau Johnston (Scottish Youth Parliament): Yes, we—and, in particular, I—have been involved a fair bit in discussing that. At the start, the discussions were quite concerning, especially the use of the word "violence", which has an undertone of blaming children and young people rather than looking at the factors involved.

Violence is more of a symptom of the issue rather than the issue at stake. I do not think that it is a coincidence that it has potentially increased, given that there have been cuts to youth work funding—it has not come out of the blue. However, the discussion has taken a nicer step forward, and we have been looking at rights and a rights-based approach to the issue in particular. Ellie Craig and I took part in an event with Laura Lundy at the University of Strathclyde, in which we talked about the issue and taking a proportionality-based approach, rather than setting each other's rights—the rights of teachers and those of young people—against each other.

In our view, youth work is a big part of the solution. It provides early intervention support for young people who face difficult circumstances, as well as friendships and one-to-one relationship-based support. However, funding cuts are damaging the sector's ability to support young people. It is vital that we treat the problems themselves, such as youth work budget cuts and an education system that does not properly engage young people because it is not designed to suit them, rather than focus on the violence or behaviour itself.

The Convener: Beinn Grant, can I bring you in at this point? I represent a very rural region in the Scottish Parliament; other members represent urban constituencies or regions. You represent Perthshire South and Kinross-shire, which is more rural. How does that rural-urban split play out in the Scottish Youth Parliament? Is there any concern that rural issues are perhaps not prioritised, or do you feel that there is enough coverage of those points?

Beinn Grant (Scottish Youth Parliament): It is quite the contrary, really. I think that, at the SYP, we do a good job of getting a wide spread of members from across the country. Obviously, each Scottish Parliament constituency equates to

two Scottish Youth Parliament constituency members. At our most recent sitting in this Parliament, we had a conversation regarding the provision of Gaelic language education. There was a significant amount of conversation specifically around access to education in rural communities, including Gaelic education, among other topics such as ferries, access to the internet and all sorts. Those are pressing rural issues that we take seriously.

We acknowledge that the central belt often has a lot more Government attention as regards development. With regard to the rural side, however, I think that the SYP does a good job of bridging that gap and representing all areas.

The Convener: I certainly see that locally with the MSYPs that we have across the Highlands and Islands.

There is a final question from me. Ellie, you mentioned in your opening statement that there should be meaningful engagement with young people. Is that an indication that you think that there is engagement but it could go further? Do you think that the engagement that you currently have from political parties and Governments is at a suitable level?

Ellie Craig: Over the past few years, we have done a lot to improve our engagement with children and young people, especially with the culture change around the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and what that means specifically with regard to article 12. MSYPs have been campaigning on that since the Scottish Youth Parliament was created, and it is important that we continue to evaluate how we do participation and get feedback from young people involved to try to make it stronger.

We are definitely getting better in various areas—we will go on later to talk about our work on education and how we are engaged in that process. Across the board, we are definitely improving; the next stage now in implementing the UNCRC is to ensure that there is consistency in how young people are meaningfully engaged.

We have been doing a lot of work on that throughout our the Right Way project. The Scottish Government funded us to create a hub of resources for decision makers and duty bearers to use when they are consulting with young people on how to make that meaningful. We were getting asked the same questions over and over again about how we consult young people. We have all the answers, but we have finally been able to create that hub and strengthen the information that we can give.

We still have a long way to go, but we have definitely made progress.

Beau Johnston: On the back of what Ellie Craig said, to go back to the point about behaviour in schools, there is a real need to engage more with children and young people. I feel like, in spaces such as these, I have been one of the only young people there. I am there to speak for other young people, which is not necessarily the most meaningful participation, because I cannot speak on behalf of all Scotland's young people.

Another point about behaviour in schools is the need to engage and consult with children and young people to properly understand the situation. The issue has not been brought to us at the Scottish Youth Parliament, so we are not necessarily able to speak on it or say that it has presented itself as a big issue for children and young people. However, if action is being taken on it, children and young people must be meaningfully involved in those decisions.

The Convener: Yes—absolutely.

We go to Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To follow up on that point, Beau, when you said that the issue has not been brought to the Scottish Youth Parliament, are you referring to the issue of violence or behaviour? That is quite interesting, because we get a lot about that. We hear from a lot of parents and young people who have been on the receiving end of some of that behaviour, and from families who are feeling let down by a system that is not supporting their young people. I am surprised that you have not had that issue come up. Why do you think that that is?

Beau Johnston: It is probably just because a lot of young people come to us with underlying issues. In saying that the issue has not been brought to us, we are not denying that it happens, of course. It is probably more that young people come to us to say that they are not able to access their local youth club or to access mental health support, for example, and those are some of the most prevalent factors underlying such behaviour. A lot of young people come to us with the underlying issue rather than the symptom. That is why those issues are two of our key campaigns this year.

Willie Rennie: MSPs represent constituencies of a similar size to yours; you have a subset of our constituents. We do the job full time, and we find it difficult to fully engage with all our constituents all the time. Often, those who do not speak up are the ones to whom we most need to listen. What kind of support do you have to engage with young people to ensure that the views of those who do not speak up are actually heard? How do you do that?

09:45

Ellie Craig: We are all volunteers, so we do not really have the capacity or resource to hold surgeries in the same way that an MSP or MP would do, but we are supported in our local authorities or national voluntary organisations by youth workers—usually people working in community learning and development teams—who have connections into the schools and youth groups around the constituencies and in the local authority areas. They are our points of contact for connecting with young people. We also build a network and base around people who run youth clubs and various other organisations to ensure that we are reaching a variety of young people in the constituency. We link in with local young carers centres and things such as care-experienced groups that are involved with the Promise champions to ensure that we have different networks and routes in.

MSYPs make sure that they can consult in a variety of ways, and there are various checkpoints with young people. Before our national sittings, we have a list of issues that we are going to talk about, and MSYPs go out and consult on those issues. That consultation can be as simple as running a poll on social media or conducting a survey. It is really about giving young people a variety of ways to access you and making yourself accessible as a representative.

Beau Johnston: I was just going to say the same as Ellie Craig. We are all volunteers and we are all in education or have jobs and so on, so we do not necessarily have the same time that an MSP would have to run surgeries and things. However, we are in a unique position: we are children and young people, which means that other children and young people probably feel that we are more approachable. We also understand better their needs in terms of coming to a place that suits them at a time that suits them and making sure that the participation is more meaningful. That means that we do not hold events during the school day, and that we hold them in youth clubs where young people feel a bit more at ease and that they are in a safer environment. Obviously, however, that relies heavily on youth work services.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning. Thank you for joining us today. Ellie Craig mentioned the Promise champions. The Promise was set out by the independent care review in 2020 and is meant to be kept by 2030. How are Scottish Youth Parliament members involved in progressing that agenda and implementing the Promise?

Sophie Kerrigan: We have MSYPs in Who Cares? Scotland. I asked what they thought about the issue, because, obviously, it is a matter of first-hand experience for them and we should be using their voice to advocate for them. Basically, they said that advocacy is the number 1 priority that they took from the Promise. Advocacy helps care-experienced young people to have their views heard and valued in decisions that affect them directly. More importantly, it ensures that their rights are not violated early on.

Ensuring that advocacy is a right in the proposed bill on the Promise would help all local authorities to ensure a proportionately adequate amount of advocacy, so that there is no postcode lottery, especially with all the cuts that we are currently seeing.

Ensuring that advocacy is independent ensures that the advocate for the care-experienced young person is independent from the decision maker and the family. They should act only on behalf of the care-experienced young person, and should do so if that person feels alone or scared to speak up or in circumstances in which they feel that they cannot talk to anyone.

Ensuring that the right to advocacy is lifelong means that the care-experienced young person will not age out of it, recognising that they might need extra support in life in relation to housing, funding or the development of a genuine sense of belonging.

Miles Briggs: Has your organisation been involved in the development of the bill? It is likely to be presented to MSPs ahead of the summer recess.

Ellie Craig: We have had some engagement, but we always advocate for the most engagement on issues such as this to be done with young people who have lived experience.

On the work that we have done nationally, we have hosted a consultation workshop, engaging with the team that is working on the bill and getting young people's views from a national perspective. Of course, the bill team had already engaged with young people with lived experience.

The MSPs from Who Cares? Scotland have been involved in running those types of workshops for us. We still have on-going involvement, as it is an issue that affects our constituents, but it is not our main issue, because we do not feel that it is our place to have the biggest stake in that.

Miles Briggs: That is an important point. On the engagement, it has not been easy to ensure that those people's voices are heard.

In your opening statement, you mentioned the UNCRC. What impact has the incorporation of the UNCRC had on children and young people so far? You mentioned the Right Way project. I do not know a huge amount about that or about what people are asking for with regard to a framework

for the delivery of the UNCRC. Could you say more about what that includes?

Ellie Craig: MSYPs have been campaigning on the UNCRC since the beginning of the SYP. I started to campaign on it when I got involved in the SYP about five and a half years ago. Before then, I had never really heard of the UNCRC and I did not know about my rights under it. That is the case for a lot of young people.

Now that there has been a culture shift in Scotland, children and young people know about their rights from a younger age. That is one of the biggest impacts of the legislation: it raises awareness and tells children and young people that their rights matter.

The previous Children and Young People's Commissioner, Bruce Adamson, has said that children and young people should not be in the courtroom. That is a last stage of recourse. What we want is for adults to respect children and young people's rights.

I mentioned the Right Way project, which specifically focuses on article 12 of the UNCRC and on meaningful participation. The project has a website: a group of young rights champions came together and created resources to support participation processes, based on their lived experience of meaningful participation. We also did some research into some of the Scottish Government's policy areas to look at how participation should work in them.

We are currently in phase 2 of that project, and we are updating those resources, doing more research, and doing an upward mentoring scheme with directors in the Scottish Government. We are trying to create a culture change from the top level of decision making, because we think that we need to set an example at the highest level of decision making if we want it to feed down and to bring about a culture shift across Scotland.

Miles Briggs: Maybe you could share those resources with us once they have been updated so that we can see for ourselves what is being provided.

I want to return to the questions that the convener and Willie Rennie asked. For all of us committee members, there is real cross-party concern about school environments in general and the violence that is often reported to us. What surveying has been done since the pandemic about where young people are at? How are you feeding into that?

I have had several meetings with different organisations that have described that there is a very challenging situation for many young people now—young people who are picking how long they want to stay at school and sometimes just wandering school corridors. Obviously, they are disaffected with their learning environment following the pandemic. How is your organisation capturing young people's solutions for some of that problem that could feed into the work that we are doing and the plans that local authorities have been tasked with putting together?

Ellie Craig: I can come in first on that question then maybe pass it to the others, if they have something relevant to add.

All the issues that we have been campaigning on are linked to the school environment. Our three campaigns are on youth work, gender-based violence and mental health. Those three issues are so linked to the education environment.

Mental health is a really big issue, and I will let Sophie Kerrigan talk about that in a minute. The pandemic exacerbated existing issues in young people's mental health, and, since then, I do not think that they have recovered from the isolation that they faced.

We keep saying that cuts to youth work services are really detrimental with regard to those issues. We need support in place for young people. Maybe the school environment, as it currently is, is not fit for a lot of young people; we need to have qualified youth workers and CLD workers to support those young people so that they can still achieve their full potential—whether or not that is in an education setting.

We have spoken to our constituents in general about education, which is something that we are always consulting on. It is a very hot topic for young people, as I am sure that you can imagine. We know that they do not feel that they have agency in their school environment. A lot of that is not prioritised because there is a lot of pressure on them in exams, qualifications and tests. Most schools have student councils and youth voice networks of some kind, but the feedback on how meaningful those can be is very mixed—which is not to mention the fact that they are not really seen as a priority because young people have highers and other exams and qualifications to worry about.

We need to prioritise giving young people skills such as leadership and teamwork so that not only can we make the school environment fit for young people, but they feel that they have agency and control. Agency comes up in relation to a number of issues, such as access to period products and school toilets. There are so many issues that may be linked to behaviour in schools, but that are actually more linked to children and young people's basic human rights.

Does anyone else want to come in on that?

Sophie Kerrigan: Ellie mentioned our mental health campaign, which I am part of. Basically, we are aiming to promote and create good mental health training and educational resources for teachers and young people.

As Miles Briggs said, after Covid, we faced a massive issue as a society and in education. I went through Covid at the ages of 11 and 12. I am 17 now, and I am facing my advanced highers and highers. I went back into school facing my national 5s. My year was the first ever year not to get any hints about the exam papers, which I thought was completely unnecessary, and there was a backlash against it.

On violence in education and in schools, we have a group of teachers at my school—McLaren high school in Callander—who are looking at violence in schools. We are trying to take steps, such as restricting mobile phone use, to ensure that social media is not one of the factors that are affecting the violence.

In SYP, we probably campaign about social media in every meeting; in the education and lifelong learning committee it comes up every time that we meet. It is a massive issue for young people, which they face every day, and there is a backlash against it.

I will pass on to somebody else to say a little bit more about that.

Beau Johnston: On the back of what Ellie and Sophie have said, I do not think that it is a coincidence that the subjects of our three national campaigns have been selected at the same time that you are noticing that violence is on the rise.

We also have our campaign on gender-based violence. We have been looking at how to improve legislation to end gender-based violence. That includes making misogyny a hate crime and incorporating a gender-mainstreaming approach in all policy processes. Therefore, when you look to create policy, a key part of that process would be, from the very start, to think about the impact that it will have on gender-based violence, as a lot of people will be discriminated against if we do not consider that.

Another aspect is the need to improve education on and understanding of microaggressions in order to create healthier and safer working and school environments. Off the back of youth work, for example, my school had support for a learning base that incorporated youth workers from the local community. If we increase funding to youth work or at least secure the current funding, we will be able to tackle that more directly in a way that better helps young people.

Beinn Grant: Fundamentally, we are talking about a polycrisis in the system. We have faced years of real-terms cuts to the national health service, youth work and community services. We are seeing a degradation of community services all round. When that happens, obviously, services are diminished and the inevitable result is that the education sector has to pick up the slack. Of course we must look at the symptoms of the problems, but we at SYP are trying to look at the root causes of why those issues are issues and what tangible steps we can take to resolve them.

Ellie mentioned agency in schools. We know that the situation with student councils varies a lot, so this is not necessarily an issue everywhere, but in many schools young people do not feel like they have a choice in what they are doing. We have an exam system that was set up in the 1880s and has barely changed since. From the ages of five to 17, we live in a system that is dictated by bells and timetables, with pupils having very little say in the matter. In recent months, I have heard a lot about policing by consent, but why do we never talk about education by consent? After all, education is where we spend the majority of our lives until the age of 18.

We need to think long and hard about pupils' mental health in school and the effects of education. Frankly, a two-year waiting list for child and adolescent mental health services is not acceptable. If someone is having to wait two years for an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnosis and however many years for an autism diagnosis but they cannot get support in mainstream education, it is no wonder that they start to feel alienated and cannot cope in school. That is not the fault of the kids or the teachers—it is the fault of the system.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I want to ask Sophie about social media and mental health. I would have hated to have been a young person in the social media age. I probably would not want the world to fling back in my face some of the things that I might have said when I was 16 or 17. I will use the example of Mhairi Black. When she was 16, she said that she hated maths. Ironically, her mother and father were maths teachers—maybe that is why she hated it. She did not think that she was going to be an MP when she was 21. All the things that she said on social media came back to haunt her later on.

Does that extra challenge for young people have an effect? There is the whole idea of someone being a young person but also trying to deal with the world, and there is now social media on which people say all kinds of things. Do you guys deal with that issue quite a lot?

10:00

Sophie Kerrigan: Absolutely—there is no answer other than that. Nowadays, society is driven by social media such as Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok. It is an astronomically impossible issue to tackle, because it is not like we can cancel all Snapchat and Instagram accounts. Nowadays, especially in an educational environment, the main contact with your peers is through your phone. When you want to hang out with somebody, you have to text them; unfortunately, you do not walk up to their door to ask whether they want to play in the street anymore.

George Adam: You would never have heard me say that. [*Laughter*.]

Sophie Kerrigan: That is what I used to do when I was a little kid and running about.

Nowadays, with social media, there is the pressure to act like somebody who you are not. In schools—as the SYP's education committee has talked about many times—the majority of bullying happens on a screen either through social media on your phone or through texting random people you will never know.

Social media is such an unsafe place that education should cover it as a topic, because young people truly do not know what they are getting into when they press the button to accept those terms and conditions. However, it is an impossible issue to tackle.

George Adam: From our perspective, some of the abuse that we, as MSPs, get is pretty brutal, but we are all full-grown adults and as grown up as we are ever going to be. I have more people on mute on Twitter than just about anything else, because I cannot be bothered to listen to their nonsense. However, when you are young and just trying to make your way in the world, that will really affect you. Is the Scottish Youth Parliament doing any projects in that regard?

Ellie Craig: We run a project called Mind Yer Time—it is in quite a late phase now; we have run it a few times—which is a resource to help young people to be mindful of their social media and screen time. There are different resources to help them to manage that time, because, as you said, social media can have such an impact on young people's mental health and can exacerbate existing bullying issues. We hear that all the time. It used to be that, if you were being bullied, it would be in school, but now it follows you everywhere. Young people see that happening. It must be difficult for teachers and other professionals in schools to adequately support young people, because they have access to social media when they go home and, if stuff happens outside of school, it can be really difficult to manage that.

Young people face challenges not only on their own social media. They see the culture of social media and how things unfold on it, and they see the way in which adults treat one another on social media. As a young woman in politics, I think about the way in which women in politics are talked about in the media and about the hate that all politicians get. I am sure that you all know that it can be quite a toxic environment, which can be quite off-putting for young people who might be interested in getting involved in those spaces.

Beinn Grant: It is somewhat undialectical to assume that we can suddenly get rid of phones and technology. Obviously, the cat is already out of the bag, so we have to figure out ways in which we can work with social media and with children to get around such issues.

Ellie Craig mentioned the Mind Yer Time campaign and other ways in which the SYP and society as a whole are grappling with the issues. It is true that, on average, children spend more time on their screens than they do in education. That is a massive issue, so we have to look at why education itself is not interesting or as appealing and why people spend so much time on their phones. We have to think of ways to integrate social media and technology with education, use a more holistic model and find better ways to educate people of the dangers of social media and long-term screen use.

Beau Johnston: On the back of what Ellie Craig and Beinn Grant have said, our Mind Yer Time project is youth led, as is all our work. The best thing about that is that resources are being created for young people by young people.

As Beinn Grant said, we need to look at why the education system is not engaging people. Is it out of date? I argue that it potentially is. Does it include young people? Do they have agency to create their own education system? If not, why not?

On social media and mobile phones, there is a need to engage with children and young people to properly understand the situation—including, for example, policies on mobile phones in school. Reasons why young people might need phones in school are being missed. For example, I get a lot of important phone calls to do with hospital when I am in school. If I miss them, that means that I am denied my right to know about my healthcare. There is a need to engage with young people generally to consult on the issue.

George Adam: On what Beinn Grant and Beau Johnston said about the education system, I feel your pain. I was educated in the 1970s and 1980s and I felt that it was like a prison. When I was 16,

the teachers gladly opened the door as I walked out of the place. It was basically like that for pupils. It is interesting to hear that you think similarly and that young people think that way now.

What ideas do you have? We hear about that issue from stakeholders in education, but nobody seems to do anything about it. We always say that it is a landscape with many stakeholders and everybody has an opinion on it, so it becomes difficult to make any changes. What key changes would you guys make?

Beinn Grant: As SYP and as young people, we have been involved in a number of discussions throughout the years regarding education. All the way back in 2021, I convened the education committee at the Scottish Youth Parliament and was involved with the independent review of qualifications and assessment with Professor Hayward. SYP was heavily involved with the national discussion on education and the learner panel, which Ellie Craig will come on to in a minute.

In the independent review of exam reform with Louise Hayward, we looked at models across the world and came to a striking conclusion about what the issues are in education in Scotland and some fundamental aspects that have to change to allow it to thrive. It is true that it does not thrive currently. We seem to have an obsession with trying to hammer square pegs into circular fittings when it comes to education in this country. We have a system that is geared towards 10 per cent of students and does not work for the majority. It is about time that we recognised that.

Professors Campbell and Harris spoke to 38,000 people. I can say with confidence that, in the Hayward review, we spoke with several thousand practitioners, young people and other stakeholders across the country. As well as the learner panel, we consulted a host of young people.

Therefore, what young people think about education is clearly documented. There are masses of reports and documents to state that. We have seen time and again that education is failing young people and that education in Scotland is not performing as well as it should or could. Some of the ideas were already outlined in the Hayward review and in the national discussion. It is about time that were bold and started enacting some of them and following some of the recommendations that were made through massive consultation with the whole country, including thousands of young people.

The Convener: If it is okay, we will quickly jump back to social media, because Miles Briggs and Ross Greer have questions on that.

Miles Briggs: Most mental health charities are outlining that we need to try to get people off phones and social media. Given the Australian Government's recent decision, has the SYP taken any view on that matter and the message of getting off devices? How do we facilitate that in Scotland?

Ellie Craig: We have not done robust consultation with young people on their opinions on banning social media. However, through our Mind Yer Time project, we want young people to be empowered to make their own decisions about their social media use and about managing and being mindful of their screen time. If the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government explore banning social media, young people need to be at the centre of that discussion.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Sophie Kerrigan mentioned the importance of learning about and discussing social media in school. That reminded me that, nine years ago, the committee took evidence on that as part of a review of personal and social education, which was a long-running Youth Parliament campaign that we implemented.

A key part of that was the idea that PSE in schools should be co-designed by young people so that it was relevant to them. Social media was the specific reason for that. Feedback from teachers said that they often were not on the same platforms as young people, or that, if they were, the algorithms were showing them something totally different.

Eight years ago, Education Scotland decided that PSE would be co-designed by young people. At that time you were all at school: most of you are still at school now, or were there recently. Was that your experience? Did you have an opportunity to co-design PSE and to talk about topics like social media?

Sophie Kerrigan: At the start of my SYP journey I took part in a workshop about PSE lessons. I am so happy that you have mentioned that subject. Last week, the pupil parliament in my school started a project to co-design our PSE classes. There is a curriculum that you need to hit that includes sex education, drugs and stuff like that—you would not believe how many lessons I have had on alcohol use. However, there has been nothing on how important advocacy is in my life. Many people my age do not know how to do stuff like taxes—they think that it is so boring—and how to take the next step in life or how to budget.

PSE lessons definitely need to be co-designed. As Ellie Craig said, young people need to be at the centre of that. It is our education, and we are currently in the education system, so we should have a say. That work should be led not by 70-

year-olds who were in education decades ago, but by the young people who are our future. We need to give them a toolbox of core skills that they will need if they are to live successful and positive lives once they are outside the education environment.

Beau Johnston: There is a disproportionate implementation gap on such matters. Across schools, there are differences in terms of how youth-led pupil parliaments are. In some it is very tokenistic, but in others it is brilliant. Then situation is very varied.

Agency and co-design need to be applied much more broadly than just in PSE. They need to be in the education system in general—whether that be young people choosing the texts that they study in English, to make them more modern and engaging or, as Beinn Grant said, their taking part in the independent review group that he was part of. That definitely needs to be looked at more, because there are such discrepancies in schools' approaches.

Beinn Grant: I echo what Beau Johnston said. There are massive gaps across the country.

To be completely honest with you, I point out that during my time in high school, which was a few years ago now, I did not receive much in the way of PSE. I was taught about puberty when I was in primary 6, then there was a gap until about secondary 4 before we had sex education or anything of that sort again.

That experience has been echoed, certainly among the people whom I have spoken to across Perth and Kinross and by other MSYPs, who have expressed similar concerns. Some schools do a very good job of implementing PSE and teaching pupils about world issues, but others are completely failing in their responsibility to deliver PSE properly.

That partly goes back to what we have mentioned about youth work and community services being cut. The PSE curriculum is often taught by guidance teachers. They are having to pick up more and more work and to look after students who should be receiving specialist care from the national health service or support in schools from additional support teams and so on. Instead, that burden is falling on class teachers and guidance teachers, which reduces the time that they have available to teach PSE properly.

I have seen very little being taught on agency, either in PSE or in school subjects in general. Many schools have some form of article 12 group or student council. However, those often lack staff backing due to time constraints. Senior management sometimes does not give them enough space and scope to effect meaningful change or to discuss tangible issues in the school environment. As I have said, though, experiences vary a lot across the country.

The Convener: Jordana, has your committee looked at that, or would it do so in the future? If there is good practice that is not being shared across the country, would that be of interest to members of your committee?

Jordana Rae: It has not been fully mentioned in our face-to-face committee meetings, but it is occasionally brought up in video calls.

In my constituency of Cowdenbeath, I have held a few consultations that are about how high schools are specifically getting young people's views on anything that they do. My school, Inverkeithing high school, in particular is relatively bad at getting young people involved.

10:15

We recently got a new headteacher, and everyone has been told not to post negative things on social media. Before I even came to the school, people said, "Don't talk to him—just don't." I had to ask deputies for boards and registration notices to get consultations out to people, and it got to the point where I just went to the headteacher's door.

We have made a lot of progress, and he really wants young people to be involved. We are trying to include youth councils in the work, but our school, like many in Fife, does not have a youth council. There is no proper group; it is more that those of us who are MSYPs—there are a few in Kirkcaldy—come together with support ambassadors from schools and say, "Right—there's this issue, and there's that issue."

We are trying to create a group, and we have sent things out in my school to ask who is interested in having their voices heard, and that sort of thing. We have actually had a lot of people reply, which surprised many of the deputies because they had never asked them. Now loads of people are taking the opportunity to say anything that they can.

After this meeting, I will probably be going into more schools in Fife—not just my own—because although there are youth councils in many schools across all of our areas, including Fife, a lot of them involve older people saying what they think the councils should do, and they do not understand why parents and young people are angry about what they sometimes do.

It is not so much the case that we speak about PSE in education committee meetings, but it is brought up occasionally, because we all have to go through it during our education.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I will bring Beinn in. I am conscious of the time, but you are all giving very good answers.

Beinn Grant: To add a wee bit of context, I point out that the education committee, when I was convening it, ran quite a lot of consultations on PSE. As Ross Greer mentioned, it was one of the SYP's fundamental campaigns a few years ago.

We have since somewhat shifted our focus away from PSE as a single issue towards the education system as a whole. As I mentioned when I was involved in the work with the independent review group and Louise Hayward, the SYP recognises that PSE is an area in which there has to be reform—other points on that have been mentioned in relation to the SYP's campaigns—but it is seen as one aspect under the wider umbrella of the massive educational reforms that we need. That has been the education committee's more central focus, recently.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Good morning. I was going to ask you how much say children and young people have on the culture, policies and options of schools, but from what I am hearing, the answer—I do not want to answer for you—seems to be, "Not an awful lot."

What are the barriers to being heard, and how could we, as a society, get rid of them?

Beinn Grant: Unfortunately, as we have said, providing agency and choice to young people in schools often ends up being a tokenistic afterthought.

My experience, and that of a lot of young people in Perth and Kinross, is that schools half-heartedly implement some sort of rights-respecting school programme, article 12 group or student council that does not have any power, which does not give young people the capacity to effect change.

Oftentimes, management decisions are made behind closed doors by the senior management team. The teachers have little say in how schools are run and, if that is the case, you can forget about the students getting a say in matters. People have an odd kind of disciplinarian stance towards schools at the moment, and they hammer square pegs into circular holes. We need to recognise that young people have a voice and that they have valid concerns and criticisms of the system, but there is no scope for them to voice those concerns because of how the system is currently set up.

As I said, we have lived with an outdated exam system for a very long time. On the barriers, the priority in schools is to cram and memorise for exams and high-stakes tests, so that schools can score better in the league tables. I remember the school inspector coming round when I was still in high school a few years ago, and we were encouraged to mention certain things about eco-committees and so on in order to spin a false narrative that education in Scotland is somehow wonderful, when in actuality it is not.

Jackie Dunbar: Was it the teachers who asked you to do that?

Beinn Grant: Yes. There was an expectation at that time, and the culture in the school was that we should toe the line. There was a conflation of respect and deference, and within the school there was not much scope for students to actually be heard and listened to.

Jackie Dunbar: You mentioned education by consent. Will you explain for an auld yin how that would work, or how you would like to see it working?

Beinn Grant: Yes. With UNCRC incorporation, it is all well and good for people to be seen to be implementing human rights, but it is an entirely different matter to actually implement them. Thus far, we have seen examples of attempts to start student councils and youth voices. Across the board, there have been some really good organic attempts on the part of young people to create youth forums. We recently started the process of creating a Perth and Kinross youth forum, and I know that Glasgow City Council has had a youth council for some time. There have been attempts to integrate youth voices more into the system.

The problem is that we have a system that is geared towards examinations. For a very long time, we have had the tail wagging the dog, with the Scottish Qualifications Authority dictating what is taught in schools. Even the BGE and primary years, which are supposed to be ring fenced for the broad general education and holistic education, have seen encroachment by exam rhetoric and a formulaic way of doing education. The idea is that we pour in a little bit of science and a little bit of English and—boom!—we will have the perfect model citizen. That is not how it works.

We are failing to recognise that there is a crucial human element to education that we are missing. We are all individuals. We all have to aspire and we all need to be inspired. Currently, education is not doing that, because the focus is on examinations and league tables. We are not looking fundamentally at the real issues and we are not looking at developing skills in young people. Instead, we are focusing on timetables and how we have been doing it for the past 100 years.

Beau Johnston will have more to say on the matter.

Beau Johnston: There should be a rights-based approach to education. We should take that approach to everything, now that we have the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024. It is the basis of what we do with the Right Way model. It is not only about schools, teachers and support staff, but about decision makers understanding how to meaningfully involve young people in decision making. If teachers are not aware of that, it should come from a governmental or parliamentary level.

It is about young people having space and a voice, and ensuring that they are sufficiently supported and educated on the topic that is being discussed, and that they have time to form their opinions and speak in a space that is comfortable for them. That will not necessarily be a formal environment—it might be a break-out space in school that is a bit more chilled out, or a youth club. That is where we do a lot of consulting.

It is important that young people have an audience and influence. They need people to listen to them, including the key people in the school or whatever environment they are in—the decision-makers who have influence. They need to know what impact their voice will have, and they need that to be followed up.

It is about ensuring that we have an article 12-based approach to everything, so that young people are meaningfully involved, including through their youth councils, and it is about ensuring that teachers and decision makers are well informed on children and young people's rights before they start to implement them. Otherwise, it can become just tokenism.

Jackie Dunbar: With regard to young people having a voice and having all those things in place, that is brilliant for those who are already engaged but, as Willie Rennie asked earlier, what about the children and young people who are silent at the back of the classroom? How do we engage them? How do we get their voices heard, too?

Beau Johnston: The key is that, if you are doing meaningful participation correctly, that should take care of itself, a little bit. If you are adapting your methods of sharing ideas, there does not necessarily have to be a formal discussion. It can be people writing things down, but it can also be about the minute details of a meeting, such as, for example, people saying, "We'll be getting pizza. You'll get some free food if you come along." People should be given incentives, but should also be told that their views will have an impact.

So many times I have been involved—I know other people who have been involved feel this—in things that end up going nowhere and it feels as though we are saying the same things over and over. I am sure that you all also experience that. People just become disengaged.

Young people need to know that what they say will have some influence, and we should look at different means of remuneration, including food, gift vouchers and that kind of thing.

I will pass over to Ellie, because she will have more to say.

Ellie Craig: It is important to note that not all young people have the capacity or want to be involved or engaged at the same level as we are. That is okay: it is about creating processes that young people can feed into at different points. Some young people might just want to fill in a survey, and not stick up their hand and talk in a room full of people, but still be able to get their views across in a way that matters to them. We were talking about space and voice, but having a voice does not necessarily mean actually using your voice. A lot of young people cannot use their voice.

It is also about working outside the school environment with young people who might be supported by an organisation to make sure that their voice is as important as that of the young person who might be able to come to the Education, Children and Young People Committee and share their views.

The Convener: Three members still want to come in and we are up against the clock a little bit. It would be good if members could ask short questions and get succinct answers, if that is possible. We can go over time a little bit, but I know that the witnesses also have other things to do today.

John Mason is next.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): The convener asked you about engagement, and I think it was Ellie Craig who said that there has been a bit of improvement. I want to widen the question out. If we start with the Parliament, is it unusual that five of you have been invited along to a committee for an hour, or does that happen frequently? How is engagement with the Parliament going?

Ellie Craig: As I said, we have a partnership agreement that was signed by the Presiding Officer, and it has been really successful. MSYPs are invited a lot to give evidence and are invited to events with various stakeholders in the Parliament.

At the end of October or the start of November last year, the Scottish Youth Parliament and all of its more than 150 members took over the Scottish Parliament chamber for a couple of days.

John Mason: Did many MSPs come and engage with you at that time?

Ellie Craig: Yes. We held a parliamentary reception to celebrate our 25th anniversary on Halloween, and we got a really good turnout of MSPs, considering that it was Halloween. We do not need to capture everybody in one weekend, because some MSPs meet their MSYPs regularly. We also have engagement with cabinet secretaries in debates.

Another really good example of engagement with the Scottish Parliament was during the 16 days of activism. When we were here in October, we held a workshop in this committee room that informed a motion for the 16 days of activism debate in the Scottish Parliament. MSYPs who were involved in that, including me, were invited along.

John Mason: You are reasonably happy with MSYPs' involvement with the Parliament.

Ellie Craig: Yes.

Beinn Grant: The SYP and the Parliament are doing quite well. We have a good functioning relationship, but we would like this meeting to happen every year. I do not see why we cannot come back and have more discussions about education and other committee matters. MSYPs should come to you guys and give evidence frequently; this should not be a one-off occasion.

It is not just about us. For example, I used to work with groups of young carers and various other demographics from across Perth and Kinross, and at times it was a real challenge to make sure that you were feeding in that voice and all the rest of it. On a wider scale, we as MSYPs do a good job of engaging with our national voluntary organisations and youth work, and of getting those voices and views in from all parts.

John Mason: What about other statutory organisations, such as the police? Do the police come to you or to the SYP to ask your opinion?

Beau Johnston: Yes. Our youth ethics advisory panel project is a group of young people who are trained on ethics and are asked by Police Scotland about ethical dilemmas on various issues—for example, artificial intelligence and lots of other subjects that young people have opinions on. We have also recently worked with them on the corporate parenting plan.

10:30

John Mason: Are there any examples of organisations that never come to speak to you?

Ellie Craig: The issue is perhaps not about organisations that do not come to speak to us. We are always targeting issues that impact organisations, so we reach out to organisations. Everybody is on their own participation journey. The issue is about when we engage with organisations and that participation turns out not to be meaningful. I am aware that we have not had a chance to speak about the Education (Scotland) Bill yet, and I am sure that we will get on to that, but we could give you a few examples of tokenistic participation.

John Mason: You bring in the Government. One or two of you have mentioned budget cuts, especially in education, mental health and other areas. We are in the process of scutinising the budget here. Do you have any engagement with the Government on the budget? Do you ever discuss saying to the Government, "We don't want cuts in education. You should cut the health budget instead"? As you say, there is not a lot of education on taxes and such things. Do you discuss whether taxes should be raised, or is that political? Do you just stay away from that area?

Ellie Craig: We have an annual meeting with the Scottish Cabinet at which we raise the three top issues that young people have raised with us. On specific budgets and numbers, as young volunteers, our job is perhaps not to find the solutions or move around money but to present the issues that matter to young people and say to policymakers, "You need to act."

John Mason: The problem is that everybody comes to the Parliament and says that they want more money, and everybody says that it is not their job to say where the money should come from. From that point of view, you are very representative of society, but somebody has to get the money from somewhere.

Ellie Craig: Yes. That is why meaningful engagement is not just about young people saying, "We want this; we want that." We implement a model that is about working together and talking through solutions. It is not about young people coming to decision makers with solutions; it is about decision makers having active conversations with young people. That is not one meeting a year, but a series of meetings.

We have had some engagement around the programme for government, and we are looking to develop that further, to make sure that we are involved earlier in the process, so that we can have that engagement and talk about the solutions. We do not want to just do a showcase speech every so often to raise issues that matter to young people, because we are clear that everybody agrees that mental health and all those things are issues. We want to work on solutions, and I do not think that it is about leaving it to them or to us; it is about having productive conversations together.

John Mason: I will finish with Sophie Kerrigan. Is the question of tax and how public finances work touched on much at school?

Sophie Kerrigan: To be honest, not really. There needs to be more education on the things that will affect us later in life, such as taxes and pensions. Young people are likely to say, "I don't want to sit in a 50-minute class to learn about taxes." It sounds like such a boring topic, but doing that for 50 minutes or even 20 minutes a week for a month or something would genuinely help us so much. We would be able to have a bit more control over our lives and not just be shoved out into society. As Beinn Grant said, we are put through the exam system and then pushed out into the world and left on our own. Do you know what I am saying?

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Thank you for all the information that you have given us so far. I think that many of us around the table—and, in fact, many of us in the Parliament—could learn a lot from what you have said. I will be as succinct as I can be. My questions are about education reform, mental health and qualifications and opportunities. You said that involvement in education reform has been tokenistic. Will you say a bit more about that? What is your view on where it has all got to?

Ellie Craig: I will kick us off and then pass to Beinn. We are very clear that the Education (Scotland) Bill is not education reform. That is not to say that it will not do important work or that we do not need to reform education institutions, but it is a really small piece in a much wider puzzle.

On having meaningful engagement, we think that the requirements in the bill to engage with young people should be strengthened significantly. I have a few examples from reading the bill. We need to make sure that young people are specified on the learner charter and in engagement because, right now, it refers to interested people but does not specify that they need to be young people or learners.

Another issue is that of power balances and remuneration. Young people giving up their time to be involved at such a high level of decision making in a volunteer capacity while they are in full-time education represents a big commitment, and we need to make sure that we are properly rewarding them not only by taking into account their views at the same level as any other stakeholder's, but perhaps by exploring ways to help them to get a qualification, a reward or remuneration in some other form.

Finally, it is not clear in the bill as it stands whether learners are going to be reporting directly to the committee. We need to make sure that that is going to be happening and that it is not fed through a third party or senior management.

Beinn Grant: I absolutely agree with what Ellie Craig has just said. As it stands, the bill is not going to meaningfully reform, let alone fix, our broken education system. I think that we have made that quite clear. That is not to say that it is not doing important work—of course it is, as it contains some valuable aspects that follow on from the Muir report and so on.

However, I am deeply concerned about how narrow the scope of the bill is and its somewhat vague nature with regard to how the Government intends to carry through its stated aim of building in the voices of stakeholders and young people, who are, after all, the experts in their own lives. As Ellie Craig mentioned, from reading the bill, it seems that parents will be asked to give evidence to the strategic advisory groups on behalf of learners, but it should be young people themselves who are doing that.

The requirements to engage young people meaningfully need to be significantly strengthened in the bill. As it stands, we do not believe that the provisions will deliver the necessary cultural changes to significantly influence the institutions in the way that the country and young people so desperately need.

The impact of high-stakes exams on mental health in schools should be considered more in the bill. It was clearly highlighted in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's concluding observations, following the evidence from the children and young people in Geneva.

The recommendations that are set out in Professor Ken Muir's report and the outcomes of the national discussion on education and the independent review of qualifications and assessments, which was carried out by Professor Hayward, myself and others, which were fed into by literally tens of thousands of young people, point out the major shortcomings of Scotland's current educational framework. The review set out clear steps for decision makers to take in making the bold changes that are necessary to move forward with the ambitious reform that is required.

Engagement and consultation with young people should always be on-going, but it should not be used as an excuse for a delay. Over the past six years, I have asked students what they think about various aspects of the Hayward review, what the council is doing, what is going on in their high school and so on. They have whole-heartedly given me their genuine responses and have told me about their life experiences, which I have then fed back to Parliament or the council only to find out, in time, that nothing has been done with that information and that the process is

simply a one-way stream. That is one of the barriers to engaging young people and learners.

There has to be a feedback loop. We have to ensure that young people are having their voices heard and acted on. It is not enough to sit here and tell you what the issues are and to talk with you about some of the solutions—we need to see action as well.

Those are some of the major issues that are playing out nationally with regard to elections. Young people are the least likely to vote in elections, but they are the most likely to participate in protests and sign a petition and are the most politically active of any age group. We have to recognise that there is a disconnect between what is happening in Parliament and in councils and what is happening on the ground in schools and in young people's lives.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The one-way street issue that you have just described is a concern. Also, I share the views around some of the reviews that have been published and the urgent need to start implementing them.

I will move on slightly. A number of you have pointed out this morning that school is not necessarily engaging young people—I think that that is the term that Beinn Grant used. That is relevant today, because, as you know, this afternoon in the chamber, we will have a debate about the school environment and so on. I thought that the points about engaging young people were fascinating.

What options are available at school that interest young people and set them on their future career path? Do we need to change anything in that regard?

Beinn Grant: That is quite a complicated question to answer. A lot needs to change. At the moment, the whole culture of education in high schools is wrong: you sit down in rows and watch the whiteboard for 45 minutes, and then the bell rings and you disappear to another class. At no point throughout your education are you actually receiving an understanding of why you are learning what you are learning. It is all well and good to talk about the stars, but if you have not been to Our Dynamic Earth to see how that information has a practical use in reality and society, it can often seem like an arm's-length concept. We need to do a better job of engaging with young people on why what they are learning is important.

As, I think, I have mentioned before, a dab of science, English or maths is not going to produce the perfect worker or the perfect citizen at the other end. We have to really consider the relationships that are involved in education. I, myself, would not be sitting here right now if it was not for the youth workers who supported me. I had a bit of a rocky time in high school—the system did not work well for me at all. I was excluded from school and I did not get on well.

Because of its rigid nature, the school system failed to show me why school was important. It failed me in many respects, but fundamentally it was about the lecture model, in which you sit down and learn about maths and English. Yes, that is important, but we have to recognise that there is an interpersonal relationship between students and teachers that has to be encouraged, and there have to be elements of education that come outwith the classroom. That means developing skills through things such as the Duke of Edinburgh's award and through vocational qualifications and apprenticeships. We need to focus more on the parity of esteem between qualifications, because, right now, there is too much focus on the approach of, "You have to get an A in higher English or you're not going to university—end of," when that is not the be-all and end-all.

There are plenty of examples of people in my year group at school who have done fantastic things post-school. They left school at 15 or 16 with no qualifications and went on to do apprenticeships, and they have done really well in their lives outwith the education system. We need to recognise that there are aspects of how things are done in other countries, and in other areas of society, that are part of doing a really good job of raising and educating young people, but those things do not necessarily fall within the standard educational model that we currently have in the UK.

Beau Johnston: On the back of that, it is important to come back to the idea of co-designing education with young people—for example, choosing the English text that you are going to study and stuff like that.

In addition, something that came out of our SQA learner panel, and which we hope to see acted on, is the need to change the general culture in schools and education. Beinn Grant spoke about promoting alternative pathways better. In our meeting with the SQA, we spoke about how, as a student, you feel that you are forced to take particular subjects that are considered academic, such as English, maths and three sciences, in case you might want to become a doctor, whereas people are getting so much out of apprenticeships now and yet that pathway is entirely overlooked. A lot of teachers and educational practitioners in general do not have enough knowledge about it to be able to encourage young people into it. Looking at alternative pathways and increasing their prevalence for children and young people is vital.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you. I appreciate that.

The Convener: I will bring in John Mason at this point.

John Mason: Thank you, convener. I was not necessarily expecting to come in just now, but I have a question on the point that—as we have just heard from Beinn Grant—the emphasis should not be on university alone. On the whole, are schools emphasising university too much?

Linked to that, we have four women on the panel and one guy. Is enough being done to encourage women into engineering and other subjects that women have traditionally not studied?

Jordana Rae: There are many schools in Fife that look at qualifications in the context of university. My mum, who is 36, I think, talks about how, a few years ago, when she was at school—you probably experienced this, too—the kids who stayed on were the ones who went to uni. They were the "smart" ones who studied the academic subjects. That is still a thing nowadays. If someone takes art or music, or even design and manufacture or woodwork, and then applies to university, they are sort of frowned upon compared with students who have taken maths and chemistry—all those subjects—even though, if you want to study law to become an advocate, which is considered a big thing, you can take art and music and then go to university to study law. Many universities do not want only students of chemistry and those kinds of subjects, but schools do not say that. They make it seem to the students that, if they do not take those subjects, they will not go any further compared to someone else.

John Mason: Do you think that, sometimes, teachers just do not know what is happening out there?

10:45

Jordana Rae: Honestly, it depends. You sometimes get teachers who make it hard for young people. For example, maths teachers can be really good or they can be bad. I struggled with maths, as I cannot understand numbers, but I stopped going to maths classes at all because, when an art teacher came in, our maths teacher made a comment that implied that they were stupid because they were an art teacher and they could not do maths. I took art, so I was like, "I'm not even going to go." There are also teachers who let kids expand what they are into, though a lot of the teachers who do that are more on the creative side.

Obviously, there are also teachers—for example, in the science block in my school—who make people aware that, no matter what subjects they take, they can still go to uni, get an apprenticeship or go to college. You still have those opportunities; it does not actually matter whether you took the really academic subjects.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I hope that people out there are listening carefully to all of that information, because it is really important that we offer something to the about 60 per cent of people in Scotland who do not go to university.

I want to move on to a question about mental health. You have spoken about the campaign that you are running and the work that is already on-going in schools. Can you tell me about the balance between what happens in school and the role of other services, such as CAMHS, and how that is playing out?

Ellie Craig: As well as CAHMS in schools, there are community-based mental health services. A couple of years ago, the Youth Parliament was commissioned by the Scottish Government to do a youth-led review of community-based mental health services. To the surprise of some of the young people involved, the review was overwhelmingly positive: when young people can access community-based services, those are really positive for them.

However, there is an issue with the lack of consistency across the different local authorities, and there is a postcode lottery in terms of where the services are and the extent to which they are available to young people up to the age of 25 or 18 and to different demographics of young people.

Sophie can talk more widely about some of the other stuff.

Sophie Kerrigan: I mentioned earlier that I am part of the mental health campaign within SYP, and we have done amazing things over the past little while. For example, at the 82nd sitting of the SYP, which took place in the Scottish Parliament, I and the rest of the mental health campaign planning group ran a session alongside Change Mental Health. We encouraged it to create an idea for a resource to help those with mental health issues or those who just want to learn more about mental health. Through that exercise, it was clear that young people are passionate about talking about mental health. It is a subject that will never go away and, unfortunately, it is not something that you can just put a Band-Aid on. It is a massive priority for a majority of young people.

As Ellie mentioned earlier, we had the Cabinet takeover in late November, when we talked to the First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney and his Cabinet. I and Skye Morgan, who is the MSYP for LGBTQ Youth Scotland, met with the Cabinet and told them about our experiences of dealing with mental health issues in the school environment.

At the 82nd sitting of the SYP, I and my co-MSYP for Stirling, Zac Mickel, proposed a motion saying that the SYP believed that mental health education and training should be available in schools. That motion passed with 88 per cent support from all MSYPs, which was really amazing. I mentioned how hard it was to go back to school after Covid, after being alienated by society, and how many young people across Scotland lack the necessary skills to socialise. I also spoke about how hard it was to come straight back to exams. As I mentioned earlier, my year was the first not to receive any hints about the national 5 exams, whereas my brother was in S5 or S6 during Covid and he once said that he was handed exam grades like they were sweets—that was a fun conversation.

Two days later, after the Cabinet takeover, I took the stage at the mental health in schools conference and presented more about SYP's work on mental health, which was very empowering. It was amazing to sit in a room with so many professional chief executive officers and teachers who were passionate about mental health.

Over the busy few months with the groups, we managed to finalise our points as being:

"Mental health education incorporated in school curriculums.

Mental health training and education for adults working with young people.

More long-term sustainable funding for mental health services."

Mental health should not be a taboo topic any more. It needs to be not normalised but talked about, so that people feel comfortable talking about it. As you said earlier, it is important to aim for the voices at the back of the classroom, because we do not know what they are struggling with.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Are young people getting that support for mental health?

Ellie Craig: I will mention the gap between CAMHS and what happens in schools. The language around mental health is full of contradictions. We want to tell young people that their mental wellbeing matters, but they are stuck in an exam system that is to the detriment of their mental health and there are long waiting lists for mental health services. A lot of those policy areas are siloed, but young people have one lived experience of their education and their mental health, so we need to ensure that it is consistent.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I know that we are stuck for time, so I will ask two quick questions.

There has been a lot of discussion about engagement. The vast bulk of education is delivered through local authorities. I am aware of one local authority that appointed a pupil from each of its secondary schools to its statutory education committee. It tried to give them full voting rights, but it was not allowed to do so by law. Have you heard of any other councils doing that? Would it be a good idea?

Beinn Grant: Recently, I worked alongside the CEO of Perth and Kinross Council and members of its education committee regarding the creation of a new bespoke youth forum within the council that would work alongside councillors and within the communities. A much wider conversation needs to happen. Youth forums should be everywhere; there should be youth voice everywhere.

Keith Brown: What I referred to was not a youth forum; it was young people being members of the council's education committee.

Beinn Grant: Yes. That comes back to the point that we are volunteers. Outside of being an MSYP, I am a student nurse. I work 40 hours a week in accident and emergency at the moment. It is stressful, to say the least. I am realistic not to expect cohorts of young people to read through hours and hours of council papers on often minute matters about budgeting or whatever. It is important to engage young people where they are. If that means, when the time is appropriate, that young people get voting rights on a council, so be it. Obviously, we need to recognise that sifting through papers is not always the best use of young people's time.

Keith Brown: We all feel like that from time to time.

Beinn Grant: I am sure that you do.

Keith Brown: My other question relates to the social media situation. I have not, unlike Willie Rennie, had lots of complaints about violence in schools in my constituency. I have had a lot to do with additional support needs and individual parents. However, I had two secondary 3 classes from Dunblane in Parliament recently, on the same day that the convener was asking questions about behaviour in schools.

I asked the two teachers about their experience, and they said that one of the most alarming things was the increase in misogyny. I was interested to hear somebody talk about misogyny becoming a hate crime, which I think is the Government's intention. In particular, those teachers mentioned young men seeing Andrew Tate and repeating the stuff that he says.

Is that your experience, Beinn? I ask you first of all because you are a young man. Have the others had the same experience? Those teachers were just stunned by some of the stuff that was being

said. It is like we are going backwards rather than forwards.

Beinn Grant: That speaks to the importance of critical thinking being taught in schools. It has become all too easy to scroll through Instagram and TikTok reels. I can show you right now how easy it is to flick through on my phone and sit for hours looking at those reels. The information that pops up around Andrew Tate and his soundbites about what it is to be a man is extremely toxic.

Schools and society as a whole need to do better at recognising and calling out misogyny where it exists, and better educating young men in particular about what is good and what is right. That is part of a much larger conversation that needs to be had around social media and education on how we approach that.

In my school, because we were quite a small school and there were a fair few of us who were quite politically minded, we made quite a conscious effort to do the Equally Safe at School programme. We did a lot of things with RASAC—Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre Perth and Kinross. That work was all pupil led and done because I and a number of other students in the class were unhappy with the way in which personal and social education was being run. We were unhappy with the way in which the school was dealing with issues relating to misogyny and critical thinking. To be honest, it was ignoring those issues, as though they did not exist, and it was not recognising that there is a toxic spewing of misogyny from people such as Andrew Tate and Donald Trump, who push that rhetoric. The issue is part of a wider conversation about how we teach critical thinking and what we encourage our young people to do.

Beau Johnston: On the previous point about young people being involved, it is entirely possible for them to be involved in voting and other such decisions, but that needs to be done in a meaningful way. That means ensuring that children and young people are fully informed in an accessible way. They should not have to read pages and pages of briefings; there should be easy-read versions or short summarised versions of things. Children and young people can absolutely be involved in those spaces, but it needs to be done in the correct way. Children and young people should not be expected to just adapt their lives around that, no matter how important it might be to them.

On the point about the toll of social media and its impact on gender-based violence, that issue was a big part of the debate in the sitting that Ellie Craig and I took part in, which formed the motion that was presented as part of the 16 days of activism. We take an intersectional approach to gender-based violence, and we advocate that everyone else does, too. Everyone experiences that issue in a different way. Although women might be more affected, no matter what the conceptions are around the subject, it involves issues such as toxic masculinity and the things that are said by Andrew Tate and other such people online. Therefore, there needs to be an intersectional approach, because the issue affects different communities differently.

Ross Greer: I will continue Keith Brown's initial line of questioning. I think that I was the first MSYP to be on a local council education committee, but I did not have voting rights, despite having roughly the same mandate in terms of votes as the councillors did.

I am interested in what you said about education reform. I share a lot of your frustrations about the process, particularly the fact that the Government is, in essence, not taking forward Professor Hayward's recommendations, which is a massive missed opportunity. Much of the reform cannot be put into law—a lot of it cannot be put in primary legislation, although some of it can be done by regulation—because a lot of it is a matter of policy choice.

However, one issue that has some relation to the Education (Scotland) Bill is, as has been touched on, how to engage with young people who are not already involved or are not naturally interested. I am talking about young people who do not become MSYPs—I think that I can say that as somebody who was one. I am interested in your thoughts on that kind of engagement. The bill sets out proposals to have a learner interest committee and to have someone representing the interests of young people on the board—I agree with Ellie Craig that that must be a young person, not an adult speaking on their behalf. However, that is a very small and, ultimately, self-selecting group.

We can take the example of higher history, on which we are about to take evidence. The SQA has no mechanism by which to contact every young person who sat the higher history exam last year. Particularly through the reform process, how can we create a system in which we get mass engagement with all young people who are affected by such decisions, not just a self-selecting group? We need that group, but those people are not necessarily always representative.

Ellie Craig: I totally agree. As an organisation, we have gone through a really good process of engagement with young people more widely. From 2020 to 2022, we delivered the SQA learner panel model, which was then developed into an SQA advisory project. That group of MSYPs had the sort of active role that you are talking about, as they might have sat on a committee or engaged with SQA senior management. A big part of that

involved the MSYPs going to different schools and communities across Scotland and, as young people themselves, holding focus groups in order to reach young people who might not want to be involved in the Youth Parliament or something like that. That project ended in August 2024.

There is a bit of a gap just now, but, when we introduce the new body and the new structures, we would be really keen to see a model like that, because, as you said, not all young people will yet have the skills and experience that they need to be involved at a higher level.

11:00

Beinn Grant: I mentioned the independent review group with Louise Hayward. One of the things that we did really well was engaging with different demographics in society. I do not know how aware you all are of the final report and everything to do with the review, but, to provide a bit of context, we ran community collaborative groups. The independent review itself was made up of a group of individuals who each represented different sectors of society, whether that was universities, employers, big business, or students like me and young people. Those individuals would go out alongside the Scottish Government secretariat and run workshops and community collaborative groups in different areas across Scotland. For example, with the help of the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Scottish Government, I chaired three of those meetings.

The review itself was not a forever process, in the way that we are thinking about for qualifications Scotland. We met students from all over the country. The Scottish Government came into my school and number of other schools around the country, and we spoke with students, teachers and people on the ground. We set up lunch-time and after-school workshops, where we would sit down with folk and have really honest conversations about what is happening with education. Obviously, if the students were talking, the teachers were out of the room. It is about creating a safe space for young people to have their voices heard, giving them a platform and meeting them where they are. The IRG did that really successfully—meeting people where they were and travelling to different schools.

No one method works for everyone. As we said earlier, surveys are great for some people, but, for example, I hate filling in surveys and I would rather sit here and talk to you about something. It is about incorporating a number of ways to engage with young people, through running workshops and going into communities, doing surveys and having a system for engaging in various ways. I cannot give you one perfect magic bullet, but I can suggest things that we have done in the past that have been really successful, such as the community collaborative groups.

Beau Johnston: On what Ellie Grant said, the SQA advisory panel project was very successful, but, if we are doing engagement work on that in the future, which we hope to do—we hope to be able to form something like that again—the topics for discussion should be selected by young people. That was an issue this time, because young people would tell us about specific things—for example, we heard about exam reform a lot—but we had other topics that we needed to discuss that did not feel as pertinent to the young people.

Ross Greer: Were the other topics things that the SQA senior management had asked you to discuss with young people?

Beau Johnston: Yes.

Ross Greer: That is good to know. Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That concludes our evidence session. We have significantly gone over our allocated time, so thank you for your patience. However, that shows the level of interest from members and the fact that you have given comprehensive answers on a number of issues. Beinn Grant, I cannot give you a guarantee, but the impression that the committee had was that we could come back to this subject, perhaps annually. This is the first time that the committee has decided to do have such an evidence session, but the evidence that you have given us today has been very helpful not just in relation to what the Parliament is looking at at the moment, but on some of the issues that we should consider in the future.

I thank you all for your time as MSYPs and for the extra roles that you have taken on in the organisation, and for coming here today.

I will suspend the meeting for about 10 minutes.

11:03

Meeting suspended.

11:15

On resuming—

“Higher History Review 2024”

The Convener: Welcome back. We move on to our next agenda item, which is an evidence session with the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History on the Scottish Qualifications Authority’s “Higher History Review 2024”.

I welcome the witnesses. Joining us remotely is Kirsty MacDonald, the faculty head of social subjects at Paisley grammar school and president of the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History. Joining us in the room are Rebecca Hanna, who is a teacher of history and politics at Linlithgow academy, and Andy Johnston, who is a history teacher at Ross high school. Both are committee members of SATH.

Your microphones are operated remotely, so you do not need to worry about them. I understand that Kirsty MacDonald wants to make an opening statement, so we will go straight to you.

Kirsty MacDonald (Scottish Association of the Teachers of History): Thank you for having us. I really appreciate the opportunity to come here to share the point of view of history teachers and to have a voice as part of this process.

As you mentioned, Rebecca, Andy and I are members of the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History, which is a voluntary association. Ours are not paid roles and no additional time is given to us to fulfil them. They are not elected roles—we are volunteers.

We are practising history teachers, and the evidence that we give today comes from our experiences as practising teachers, although it really comes from the conversations, opinions and experiences that have been shared with us through our authority networks and staff networks, and through a variety of other means. We will do our very best to represent the different points of view and to share what we can as honestly as we can.

I just wanted to share a little bit of context surrounding the survey that was shared with the committee. The survey was carried out following the conclusion of the SQA’s investigation and the continued questions and the continuing discontent surrounding the higher history exam. On one hand, it was a response to the continued questions that were being asked, and on the other hand, it was a response to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills asking for a response from SATH.

The cabinet secretary did not ask for a survey, but I felt that that was the fairest way of representing the views of everyone and measuring the extent of the concerns, as the accusation had been made that those were just the voices of a few teachers. We really wanted to have the evidence to know the extent of the issue and to give everybody the opportunity to have their opinions heard, read and seen. Obviously, social media and other media had generated a lot of commentary on the issue and we wanted to give everybody the opportunity to speak.

It was also hoped that it would be an opportunity to identify a clear path forward, and to ask history teachers what we need, how we will move forward and how we will ensure that it results in positive change. I hope that that opportunity is taken.

As you will be aware from the results of the survey, they reflected continued concerns about the 2024 higher history results. Arguably, the key issue is the drop in marks in paper 2, which was quite significant.

Concerns were also raised regarding communication and the culture at SQA. Coming through the survey and people’s responses is a lack of confidence in the exam and in the SQA. There is also a real sense that teachers are now feeling a lack of confidence in their own ability to deliver the courses. That situation cannot continue. We are not in a good place.

The survey also contains feedback from those who felt that the exam and the process was fair, and who expressed concerns about the way in which the issue has played out in the media, including on social media. Undeniably, it has been a divisive issue, but the majority of responses have come from teachers who feel that there are issues and who have concerns.

The results of the SQA’s investigation have not been accepted by a significant number of teachers. A number of questions still remain. One of the key questions seems to be why other subjects did not see a drop, if that was down to an impact of Covid and to do with literacy.

There are many issues going on in school that impact on young people and on attainment, but the questions that are being asked are really about the cohort effect and why similar drops were not seen across the subjects. Lots of people are questioning the lack of parity across subjects, especially in similar subjects to ours, and the discrepancies between paper 1 and paper 2.

Since the closing of the survey, there has been more communication with the SQA. We have met, and there have been action points. However, at this point, we are still at the stage where a lot more is needed in order to learn from the mistakes that have happened and to acknowledge that there are issues that need to be addressed.

The key point is that we do the right thing by our young people. We are not in a good situation right now in terms of how teachers are feeling. The uncertainty cannot be allowed to damage the chances that our young people will do well. We do not want our subject to be damaged by the situation.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that opening statement.

There is a lot in there that we will get into. I will first put this question to Kirsty, then we will go to Andy and Rebecca.

When did you first become aware that there was an issue? I made the point to Fiona Robertson when she appeared before our committee that it seemed to take many weeks—indeed, months—before the SQA launched its review. Did you know on exam results day that there was a major issue that would have to be thoroughly investigated, or did you think, at that time, that it was maybe just a blip?

Kirsty MacDonald: We knew on exam results day. The data is released, so we could see the comparisons, the drop and the breakdown of the components. It was, therefore, immediate. The significant drop in paper 2 is really the issue.

The committee has discussed how variation happens. There is a lot of evidence on which I can understand how the SQA has looked at it and said, "Well, we see those increases and decreases." However, we were aware from exam results day, and teachers started to express concerns from that day, that the results were an issue.

The Convener: Were you surprised that there was not an immediate reaction from the SQA and Fiona Robertson? Why did it take so long for them to be almost dragged kicking and screaming to do the review? There are still concerns that the review was not wholly independent, but what took so long?

Kirsty MacDonald: "What took so long?" is a question for the SQA to answer.

The Convener: I tried to get an answer on that one, in fairness.

Kirsty MacDonald: Yes. [*Laughter*.]

In answer to the convener's question, yes, I was surprised that there was a delay in responding, because the reaction on social media was immediate.

One of the things that perhaps needs to be remedied is that teachers should not have to take to social media to express such points and to give feedback to the SQA. Although I appreciate that people can email or get in contact in a variety of ways, there perhaps needs to be a more formal method of gathering feedback from teachers and being transparent about what teachers are saying and what the next steps will be.

I was surprised that there was not a response sooner to the concerns that were being raised, particularly in relation to the big drop in results across paper 2.

The Convener: Andy and Rebecca, did you have the same perception—did you immediately see that there was an issue?

Andy Johnston (Scottish Association of the Teachers of History): Yes. It was not necessarily on results day for me, because results days are during the holidays and I do not always look at them. However, on our first day back, we sat down as a faculty and department to analyse the results. The difference between our estimates and the results that had come through was shocking.

Immediately, you look to yourself and think, "Did I not teach this right? What have we done wrong?" but then, as I was texting other people who teach similar topics, including at schools where I have worked previously, I was finding that there was the same pattern—their results had also dropped dramatically. It was the case at more than one school, so there was clearly a pattern emerging.

The Convener: On that point, Rebecca, and also on what Kirsty said in her opening statement, did you see the cohort of pupils that you put forward for higher history suffering in the same way in other subjects? One of the defences from the SQA is that it is actually the case that there were poorer standards across the board, but did you see that being reflected across other subjects?

Rebecca Hanna (Scottish Association of the Teachers of History): I will answer the first question first, then come to the second.

I had an inkling before the results came out that things were not as they could be. Although I did not mark this year, after the paper 2 markers meeting I heard on the grapevine that markers had given feedback to colleagues in our local authority to the effect that they felt that there had been a change in the marking standard and that things had been tightened up.

However, that was just a rumbling, and nobody had any sense of the bigger picture. Markers simply mark the packs that are in front of them, so it was not until the results came out, on results day, that we saw the impact of what I had been hearing about in rumblings—that is, that things had changed and were tighter. My inkling came sooner, ahead of results day.

On the convener's question about the impact on this year's cohort, I note that different topics were affected differently. In paper two, which is the

focus and the one that we are discussing, I teach the wars of independence topic. A minority of children study that. The vast majority of pupils sit the migration and empire topic. There are five options in paper 2, and that is the topic that seems to have been most affected.

However, I can speak to some numbers in my local authority. The number of children who got As in session 2022-23 was 31 per cent in my local authority, and that fell to 18 per cent in one year. The number of pupils who got As or Bs went from 57 per cent in 2023 to 38 per cent in 2024. The number of pupils who got As to Cs went from 77 per cent to 57 per cent. The number of pupils who got no award whatsoever went from 11 per cent in 2023 to 26 per cent in one year. That means that one quarter of pupils in our local authority who teachers put forward for higher history got no award. The impact on this year's cohort seems to be quite significant, based on the data that I have seen.

The Convener: Those are stark and alarming figures. Have you ever seen anything like this? Is there any comparison that can be made?

Rebecca Hanna: I cannot think of a comparison.

The Convener: Fiona Robertson mentioned variation across other subjects and used examples of subjects where there had been a drop, but there was nothing like that.

Rebecca Hanna: We do get variations and fluctuations. Over the years, anecdotally and from what I have seen, some topics seem to be marked a little bit more harshly than others. This year that seems to have been the issue with marking of the migration and empire topic, which is done by 72 per cent of pupils. That is why the results have been affected on a national scale.

I have certainly not previously seen a change such as that in one year. Data must exist somewhere that would allow us to see whether pupils sitting higher history have performed better or worse across all of their subjects. At our school, we can see that our pupils have done worse in higher history than they have in other subjects that they have taken.

As Kirsty MacDonald said, I would like to understand why only history has been affected. I would like to know why our pupils are feeling that higher history is harder than other subjects and what to say when they wonder whether they should be taking geography instead. I would like to know why higher history seems to be affected.

The Convener: This a question for you all. Has the issue been resolved as far as you think it is going to be resolved? The SQA seems to think that, since it was peer reviewed by someone from Wales, its independent review is the end of the matter. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has suggested that it is. However, she said in the chamber a couple of weeks ago that she was going to continue communication with you and with members who are interested.

Ultimately, a cohort of students went into that exam in good faith and, based on the communication that I had have had, came out at the other side without the marks that were expected of them. Do you think that we need to look at the marks that were allocated and reassess last year's exam paper and the results?

Rebecca Hanna: That is such a big question. I do not even know where we would begin. The children who have been affected might have gone to university, so that would be a huge undertaking, but something terrible seems to have happened last year, based on the data.

We are living with the implications now. Advanced higher classes have collapsed and children are having to repeat. However, I do not think that it is a simple issue in this particular year, or that one marking decision was made one time: lots of reform is needed.

As Kirsty MacDonald said, the teaching profession does not feel confident that we understand the standards, and that has come across in the survey. I certainly do not feel that the issue is done and dusted or that we all feel great. We have had two "Understanding standards" sessions, which were offered by the SQA, and based on the feedback on those, I would not say that teachers feel enlightened by them.

The Convener: We will definitely come on to that.

Kirsty MacDonald: Rebecca covered what I initially wanted to raise, which was that at school level, we see fluctuations in results. As a faculty head, when the results come in in August, I would look for that and my headteacher would want to speak to me about it. As a teacher and as a faculty head, I would, if we had a 13 per cent drop in pass rates, have to explain those results to my headteacher. However, I would have data from insight that would tell me about the strength of my cohort. If most of my candidates got a C, I would know how they did across their other subjects. Surely, information exists at a national level to tell us how candidates who sat higher history performed across their other subjects. That might provide further evidence to resolve the matter or move forward.

On whether the SQA is involved in revisiting the grades, as Rebecca Hanna said, we are now at the end of January, and the upheaval of having a second independent review would be enormous,

but the situation has raised questions about the whole system.

In the previous meeting, Fiona Robertson said that the SQA carried out that investigation because it was its job to do so. That is correct, but should it be? Where does the body exist to regulate what goes on and to provide answers that would be accepted?

11:30

Part of the issue is that people do not accept the findings of the review. Even while it was being done, the commentary started that the SQA was investigating itself and that it was going to say that there were no problems. The regulation and the checks that exist protect the team, but it has been stressful for everyone involved. History teachers have been involved in the processes, and that has raised an issue that needs to be addressed: it needs to go further. As Rebecca Hanna said, reform is needed and the exam itself needs to be considered. There should not be such a gap between the results of the essays that our pupils write and the source paper, so we might have to revisit that.

Changes were made in 2018-19, and there has been a period of real instability since then. The exam was changed in 2018-19, when 20 additional marks were added and the exam went back to being two separate papers. Arguably, the level of demand increased in 2019, but we then went into the Covid years, with exams being cancelled.

We are now at a point at which it is important that there is some kind of a major review of what the course looks like, that we make sure that teachers are involved in it, and that teachers feel that they have agency and a voice. Moving forward, we need to make sure that teachers have confidence in the system and in the exam, and that our learners should study our subjects. I do not want people to steer young people away from history because they feel that it will not be accessible to them.

The Convener: You are right to say that our now being in January makes revisiting last year's results difficult, but it did not necessarily have to be so difficult. If the SQA had taken immediate and prompt action, there might have been an opportunity to revisit the results in late summer rather than in January 2025. I want to press the SQA on that issue.

There were some stark comments in your review that were picked up by the press and others. Some of your members called the SQA's independent—as it would call it—review a whitewash. They said that it was brushing things under the carpet. One of them said—I quoted this in the chamber a couple of weeks ago—that it was

"the most biased and useless investigation I have ever seen a public body attempt to pass off as legitimate".

Those are not just small concerns. There is a feeling of fury among history teachers about what has happened and how it has affected them and their students, as well as about the way in which the investigation into everything was handled by the SQA. Is it fair to say that there is still a huge amount of anger, frustration and dissatisfaction among your members towards the SQA?

Andy Johnston: Yes, I think that that is true, but it stems from a bit further back. You are right that people have said that it is a whitewash, that it was biased and everything else. The comments are very blunt and to the point.

The SQA has made mistakes in the past and not just this year and, as people have said, matters have been swept under the carpet and ignored. People took to social media about it, but nothing happened. Now, because there was such a large cohort, it is the straw that has broken the camel's back.

I think that it was two years ago that the topic was the wars of independence, and a question was asked that should never have been there, because it did not meet the course specifications. This year, in migration and empire, there was a question that did not meet the course specifications. The topic was not in the curriculum and nobody would have taught it because it was not expected of them, but the question was there. It was a 10-mark question. The paper was marked out of 36 in total, divided into two 10-mark questions and two eight-mark questions. Asking a 10-mark question, which is the biggest question there is, on a topic that was not within the course spec, is handicapping the children dramatically.

The Convener: My understanding of that is that there was a question based on something that had been removed from the syllabus. It is almost as though a bank of questions had been written years ago and the question had been pulled out of that bank, but there had been no quality assurance before it went into the exam paper. Is that what you are trying to explain to us? Is that correct?

Andy Johnston: In short, yes. There was a question about the reaction of Scots to Irish immigrants. That is no longer on the course spec. It used to be and we all used to teach it—I did, in passing—but it is not there now. We did not expect it to come up in exam papers, so it has been taken from somewhere. Questions do not just appear by magic. The papers go through several checks at different times, but that question was not picked up in marker checks, item checks

or writer checks. It was put in front of our candidates.

The Convener: A lot of other members want to come in, and there are issues that I want to come back to.

Finally, what has the SQA's response been to your survey and its responses? In an update to SATH members on your meeting with the SQA, you said:

> "Reopening the investigation, admission of fault or changes to the pupil grades for 2024 were not on the table."

Therefore, the SQA has parked the issue.

Please say so, if you cannot answer this, because I know that you are here as teachers and representatives of your profession, but what was the SQA's response to the survey being published and then removed because some names had not been redacted? Was it reasonable, and did it say, "You are all volunteers and these things happen"? Were the response to your survey, and its issues with it, acceptable or reasonable?

Kirsty MacDonald: When the survey was published, it was initially shared with the SQA, Scottish Government representatives and the history teachers who had contributed to the survey. It was shared on our Teams page and Facebook.

There was a very quick turnaround: I met the SQA and Scottish Government representatives on the following Monday. That meeting had been requested, and it was now December, so there was a sense of urgency about the issue.

At that meeting, the focus was on the action points and how to move forward, so there was no suggestion that there would be any further investigation. The results of the investigation had been accepted and there was no discussion about changing the grades. There was agreement on some of the points, such as the need for greater exemplification and the need to understand standards, so some of the issues were addressed.

You are referring to what followed that meeting. On that Friday, I received a formal letter from the SQA that informed me that the name of a member of the team had been published in the survey that had been shared. Publishing the name was an oversight on my part, and I take personal responsibility for that mistake. It should not have happened.

I anonymised the survey for history teachers; the same courtesy should have been afforded to the SQA team. There had been a quick turnaround. However, what has now followed has been a period—[*Inaudible.*]

The Convener: Conspiracy theorists could suggest that that was a strange time for the feed to call it a day. [*Laughter.*] We will wait a second to see whether Kirsty can come back in.

I am sorry, Kirsty. Your sound cut out. We got to the point when you held your hands up and said that you had made a mistake, and that you had given history teachers the courtesy of being anonymised but not the SQA. You told us that you had received a letter and were about to tell us something, but the screen went totally blank. We could not hear any of the part that followed, so could you repeat that bit?

Kirsty MacDonald: I am so sorry—that is due to the school's wi-fi.

The issue has now become contentious, and what personal data will be shared has not yet been resolved with the SQA. I have redacted people's names and job titles, but the SQA has made comments about a number of things that it is unhappy about being publicly shared.

I was asked to issue an apology, which I gladly did, because I hold my hands up—it was an oversight—but the wording of the apology has gone back and forth. I am frustrated that we cannot deal with the criticism head on, move past it and actually focus on the survey's content and what it is telling us.

Staff were given a little bit of a hard time in the survey, but the responses are people's opinions, which must be accepted. We have to learn from them and consider how we will get better. My personal feeling is that the survey needs to be shared as it is. Names and job titles need to be removed, but there are comments in the survey that do not identify individuals. The SQA is a public body, so people should be able to express their feelings and refer to teams or to its leadership. There have been issues with sharing a new version of the survey, following its initial sharing.

The Convener: I find that quite shocking. I understand names having to be redacted—that is acceptable—but the SQA is a public body and it should be accountable. It has been in front of this committee and others. I am extremely concerned if it is now seeking to vet further parts of the survey that you conducted. It was not the SQA's survey. It might be unhappy with elements of it, but it should not be trying to sterilise it in any way to reduce the criticism. Where does this end up? Could it become a legal matter?

Kirsty MacDonald: It has been mentioned that unions have been involved and there is a possibility that we should seek legal advice. As a small association that is run by volunteers, we do not have lawyers, so there has been a bit of a fear that, if we share the information without removing

the comments we have been asked to remove, we could find ourselves in a position that we do not want to be in.

The Convener: Okay. As I said, I find that concerning. We will hear what other members think. We will come back to those points, but I will now bring in Ross Greer.

Ross Greer: Good morning. To summarise, the SQA's process review came to the conclusion that it had not done anything wrong and young people had underperformed. For the purposes of my line of questioning, let us accept that premise, even though we may not accept it outwith this line of questioning. To me, it felt like half a review. The SQA got halfway towards finding out what happened but, as soon as it realised that, in its view, it was not the SQA's fault, it stopped.

When I asked Fiona Robertson about that, she appeared to be of the view that it was not the chief examiner's role to find out what happened and why young people underperformed in those circumstances, or that it is not the SQA's job to find out why there is a particular drop in a particular subject at a particular time. That has to be someone's responsibility in the system, though. To be fair to the cabinet secretary, she said that it is ultimately her responsibility. In practice, though, the cabinet secretary cannot be the one who delves into individual issues with individual subjects every year to ensure that a crisis point is not reached.

I am interested in hearing your views on where in the system that responsibility should lie. Should it lie with the chief examiner or is there someone else in the system who should be responsible for investigating why there is underperformance, if we accept that that is what happened here? Personally I do not accept that but, for the purposes of this question, who should be responsible for finding out the reasons for sudden drops in performance in particular subjects at particular times?

Rebecca Hanna: The history team would be able to identify fairly quickly, ahead of results being published in the summer, if there is a sudden and dramatic drop, and questions should be asked at that level. That should possibly inform decisions about grade boundaries, so it should be identified ahead of the grade boundary meetings.

I would like to think that, if there is the level of outrage that was expressed in August when the results were published, the SQA would be able to take responsibility and investigate in a thorough way that does not just look at the results and involve talking to the higher team that is involved, but maybe involves talking to teachers and markers as well.

In an ideal world, the SQA should be able to look into these issues. However, it would need to listen to everybody's views rather than only those of a very select number of people who ultimately have responsibility for the examination in the first place and whose backs need to be covered. It needs to listen to other people's views, too.

Ross Greer: Have you had any indication since the SQA's review was published that it is genuinely interested in finding out what happened? If we accept the premise of the review, which was that the young people underperformed, have you picked up from SQA senior management that it wants to know the reason for that or are you under the same impression that—frankly—I am, which is that, as soon as it felt that it could take itself out of being responsible, its responsibility for the process also ended?

Rebecca Hanna: I will give you my personal view, but it is very hard to answer for everybody. The survey that was published and then had to be recalled raised a huge number of detailed issues in advance of the "Understanding standards" sessions. You said that you will come back to them, but the very specific issues that teachers raised were not addressed at those sessions.

If it genuinely thought, "There's a problem here—teachers aren't confident delivering this part of the course or this element of the paper," and there was a genuine desire to fix things and identify the problem, it would be listening to what teachers are saying and that would be what was addressed when it spoke to teachers. In my experience so far, I have not seen evidence of that.

11:45

Andy Johnston: I will go back to your original point, Mr Greer. Reading between the lines, if the SQA is saying that the pupils have underperformed, that means that the majority of teachers are saying, "That means that we've underperformed. How do we get better?" The SQA did not have any answers to that. It does not give us the scripts after the exams, so we do not know where students fell down or where they achieved well. We do not see any of that. Markers' meetings are held behind closed doors and not everyone is a marker. If you are a marker, you know; if you are not a marker, you do not know—unless you know a marker. The information is not readily there, and the SQA still does not seem to be forthcoming. We will talk about the "Understanding standards" meeting—I was there—but the SQA still does not seem to be forthcoming.

Rebecca Hanna: I have asked for very specific things. I asked whether qualification, briefing and practice scripts that are given to markers at the

markers' meetings could be shared, so that teachers at large can understand what the standard is. Clearly, there is a feeling that standards are shifting and we do not get it. Some 75 per cent of history teachers feel that they are not confident in delivering the standards. That was not addressed. The response was a very vague sort of, "Hmm, we'll see," but that request was not answered clearly. Why not make those materials available? I do not see why that should not be done when that material exists.

Ross Greer: I was on our predecessor committee eight years ago, when we did a review of the SQA's performance, and that specific point was brought up: that kind of information is not provided unless you are at a markers' meeting; it is not provided to the workforce overall. There were clear conclusions, and recommendations were made, but those have not been implemented, and we are now at the point of having to abolish and replace that organisation. It had umpteen opportunities to address those issues. However, I am conscious that I am beginning to stray into other members' lines of questioning, so I will finish there.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Some of what I am hearing this morning deeply worries me, not least the threat of legal action that Kirsty MacDonald spoke of and the impact that the situation has had on young people, learners and teachers. We know that the SQA has a bit of difficulty in recruiting people to mark. Are you surprised about that?

Rebecca Hanna: I had a local authority network meeting last Friday afternoon with all the history teachers in my local authority, and the question was asked whether anyone was marking. The vast majority of experienced markers, who have done it for years, said, "Absolutely not." It is too stressful and there is a lack of goodwill towards the SQA, which is very damaging. If we are going to move forward, we need to do that together, but the ability to do that does not currently exist. One new marker, who marked for the first time last year, said that she would renew her contract. She said, "How else am I meant to know whether they've changed what's expected of us?"

Pam Duncan-Glancy: At what point did the lines of communication—if there ever were any—fail?

Rebecca Hanna: That is a difficult question to answer. As Kirsty MacDonald said, I feel that we need to be quite careful, if there is a potential threat of legal action, but I believe that this issue goes back many years. I can think of many instances, going back to 2019, of issues with parts of the exam papers and teachers raising issues and those being brushed under the carpet or, worse, people being—I do not want to say "silenced" because that sounds very dramatic, but people were discouraged from marking and told to return scripts. I can think of examples that go back years of problems being raised and those being dealt with in a way that has been very damaging for relationships between history teachers and the SQA.

Andy Johnston: It is important to say that this is not the first survey that SATH has done along these lines, but it is the first one to have been published. With regard to the previous survey, it was asked that that not be published. It was not published at the time, with an idea of goodwill, and—

The Convener: Who asked for that not to be published?

Andy Johnston: Members of the SQA.

The Convener: So you have previously done a survey, which the SQA looked at, and it then asked you not to publish it.

Andy Johnston: Yes.

The Convener: Do you think that the only reason why it was published this time is perhaps that the cabinet secretary came in front of our committee and said that she would share it with us? The SQA was kind of boxed in at that point, was it not?

Rebecca Hanna: I think that I should step in here, because that was during my tenure as SATH president. In 2020, when the Covid measures were put in place, the SATH secretary suggested that it would be a good idea to put out a survey to see how people felt about them, and one of the questions was whether there was anything that SATH could do to make things better. We felt that it was a fair survey, but as president, I got a phone call from someone at the SQA expressing their displeasure that it had not been run past the SQA first. They were very unhappy, because they felt that it had undermined what the SQA had put in place.

I was, at that time, a marker. I was part of the higher history team, but I am not any more. It put me in a very difficult position, and it was my choice to withdraw the survey. We did not publish it; I wish that I had, but I felt at that time that it was creating a tension between SATH and the SQA, and I did not want that. On a personal level, I marked for the SQA, I worked with the team and I did not want to lose my position there. Pulling the survey was on me, and I regret that.

The Convener: You should never be put in that position. We have discussed this before: you are volunteers. You represent your fellow history teachers. Surely the SQA would want that survey published and to be out there in public so that it can be held to account and so that it can improve. You should not in any way feel regret for having

done that—the ones who should be regretting it are the ones who put you in that position in the first place.

I am sorry, Kirsty—I know that you wanted to come in on Pam Duncan-Glancy's question, too.

Kirsty MacDonald: Yes, Pam asked about marking and moving forward, and that is something that I am very concerned about for my young people this year.

The rate of pay for marking, once tax has been taken off, is not great. It is a bit of a slog, it is not particularly well paid, and teachers do it for their own professional development and so that we can prepare our young people. However, I echo what Rebecca Hanna just said: I fear that the lack of confidence in and the bad feeling towards SQA is going to impact on experienced teachers and experienced markers in particular, some of whom have said that they do not want to come back and do that work. I do not really want my young people sitting the exam and then having it marked by inexperienced markers.

I also have the concern about the markers' meetings now moving online, which is not really a satisfactory way of having the kinds of discussions that markers, particularly new ones, need to have. I feel that the meetings need to be face to face, and the SQA needs to address that issue. I know that the findings of the investigation talked about gathering feedback immediately from the markers' meetings, so that it is not waiting until the end of the marking period.

I am concerned about there being enough markers, whether a number of those markers will be inexperienced, and whether an online markers' meeting is sufficient for markers to feel confident and ensure the consistency that needs to be there when the marking process happens.

Rebecca Hanna shared her previous experience with a survey. You have asked why this particular survey was shared—there was perhaps some naivety on my part. I had been on maternity leave so, until I had some discussions quite recently, I was not aware of the whole situation. In my mind, I thought that the survey should be shared, despite the fact that there were unfavourable things in it. I acknowledge its impact on the SQA team, who are obviously history teachers, too, and I understand that this has been very stressful for them, but there needs to be a platform for teachers to be able to have their say, and we need to be able to address those criticisms and not sanitise and tone things down.

Those are my feelings about that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have one further question, convener, if that is okay. Again, I repeat that I am deeply worried about what I am hearing.

The SQA said that this was just a difference of opinion between professionals. If I am being honest, I think that it sounds like a bit more than that, from what I have heard both today and previously. What is your response to its view that this is just a difference of opinion and—to bed in what it said in its review—that nothing was wrong, really, apart from learners' performance?

Rebecca Hanna: I would point them to this year's results and the associated data. Everyone has a different opinion—and Kirsty MacDonald, Andy Johnston and I have different shades of opinion—but the data speaks for itself this year. The experience of markers speaks for itself, too.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

Willie Rennie: We have not met before, but you do not strike me as dangerous revolutionaries. You come across to me as teachers who care deeply about the subject and have the interests and wellbeing of the young people and the wider ecosystem at heart, and you seem to be telling us that your relationship with the SQA has been strained for some time.

What steps were taken to try to resolve that relationship breakdown? Has the chief examiner of the SQA been involved in that effort? Clearly, it is a long-standing issue that needs to be elevated to a higher level in order for it to be resolved. It cannot carry on like this—the situation seems to be unacceptable. So, as non-dangerous revolutionaries, can you tell me, how do we solve the problem?

Rebecca Hanna: Kirsty, perhaps you can talk about the communication that you have been involved in.

Kirsty MacDonald: Absolutely. The communication with the SQA has largely been done through me, which means that it has been through a member of the team, but not the higher history team—that is, not Fiona Robertson. However, there has been regular contact, with me acting somewhat as a go-between.

Prior to the survey being released, I was in talks with members of the senior team in relation to attendance at our conference. Going back years, the SQA was always represented at our conference—we always had a good relationship whereby its representatives would come along and give us information and support. However, the investigation and the delay of the course report derailed that, so we did not have any representation from the SQA at our conference this year, and have not had for a good few years now.

The SQA has expressed a willingness to work with us on communication. Yesterday, we had a conversation about the survey and agreed that the

back-and-forth situation is not good, and that we need to move forward.

It is true to say that the relationship has broken down and needs to be fixed. However, at the moment, I am not sure what that would look like or how it would happen.

George Adam: I want to follow that up. In a professional setting, it would be down to both parties to sit down and have a conversation. You are telling us that your relationship with the SQA has broken down, that you have serious concerns about the situation and that all that you want is better communication between yourselves and the SQA. As Willie Rennie said, you are hardly being revolutionary; you just want better communication so that you can prevent some of the problems that Andy Johnston described. The SQA suddenly starting to talk about lawyers and solicitors just because you have put out a survey is hardly going to help to rebuild an open and transparent way of working.

Obviously, things will change when the Education (Scotland) Bill comes into force and there is a different organisation in place. Is that a point at which you might be able to try to rebuild the relationship and move forward? You do not seem to be asking for a lot—you just want involvement in the process and to ensure that you get the best for your pupils. I cannot see why the SQA has a problem with you. Am I looking at it the wrong way?

Kirsty MacDonald: You are not wrong. We want that relationship to be positive, we want communication between ourselves and the SQA and we want teachers to feel confident in the SQA. We are certainly open to moving forward and to sitting around the table to have conversations. There needs to be broader communication—not just with SATH and the committee, but with the wider range of history teachers.

As I said, a member of the SQA leadership with whom I have been in contact has expressed willingness to work with us, and I hope that, following today's committee meeting, that will happen, that there will be some positive communication and that some of the issues will be taken on board.

The fact that the situation has become divisive has been stressful. Some of the comments about the culture and some of the experiences that people have had are really concerning.

12:00

John Mason: I will play devil's advocate for a moment. In some of the information that we have received, there have been some suggestions about the teaching of history, including that, traditionally, it has been taught by rote, with kids memorising specific things that they are expected to include in the answers to questions, no matter what. We were told that, in 2024, a couple of sentences in an answer were exactly the same—word for word—as those in an answer in 2019. I am just wondering whether there is a problem that has arisen just this year, and all the other years were okay, or is it the case that all the other years were not really up to standard and now things have become a bit better?

Rebecca Hanna: Andy?

Andy Johnston: Thanks for chucking me under the bus with this one, Rebecca.

A lot of people have come to me and said that history is rote learning. My response to that is, unfortunately, that the exam process involves a two-term or three-term dash, depending on how the schools arrange things. We have a lot of content to cover. If we covered all the content, we would cover 12 essays—six of them in a British context and six in a European and world context. We are talking about covering hundreds of years of history, plus a whole separate paper that is a source paper that relies very heavily on knowledge, as well—the majority of the marks come from knowledge rather than source-handling skills. I accept that a lot of people say that the subject involves rote learning, but at times there is no other way to do it.

John Mason: Does that result in pupils having knowledge of a few subjects rather than wider knowledge? Earlier, you said that a question should not have been asked about Irish immigrants to Scotland. However, that is a major part of our history. I expect 17-year-olds in Scotland to know something about that, especially if they are in the west of Scotland.

Andy Johnston: I agree with you 100 per cent. The reason why I said that it should not have been asked is that it was not in the course specification.

As I said, I still teach my pupils about the reactions that Scots had to Irish immigrants. Coming from Northern Ireland myself, I can tell them a lot of stories and make it interesting for them. I still teach that but, because it was not in the course spec, newer teachers who have not been teaching as long as I have will not have covered that, so their pupils would have been blindsided.

John Mason: I am just thinking this through; I do not really have a position on it. Is it wrong that the course spec is so specific? Does it have to be specific, because of the exams?

Someone emailed us to say that they thought that they could guarantee that certain kids would get high grades because of the input that they

gave them. That worries me a bit, because we want the kids to be thinking, and not just being trained purely to get through exams.

Rebecca Hanna: The vast majority of history teachers are passionate about their subject. They do not want to say, “Here are five bullet points—go and learn them.” That is not what the history teachers whom I know would do, and that is certainly not the history teaching that I am aware of. We care deeply about our subject. We want the kids to do well and we care because we want them to be passionate about history and to enjoy it.

Rote learning is not a feature of our classrooms, but we have to get through a certain amount of content. One of the things that comes across in the survey is the fact that lots of people feel that higher history needs to be reviewed with a view to listening to what history teachers have to say. A lot of people feel that it is harder than other social subjects, which means that there is a certain amount of pressure on us. We need to have a discussion about higher history and whether it is working, but I do not believe that rote learning is, by and large, happening in our history classrooms.

Another thing to consider, although it is not within the purview of this committee, is that not all schools have the same amount of time to teach higher history. Andy Johnston has six 50-minute periods a week but I have only five, which means that my pupils have almost an hour a week less than Andy’s. All our schools are different, and, in certain circumstances, teachers must be quite selective about what they teach and how best to cover the content quickly.

Kirsty MacDonald: We have identified issues that came through in the survey when we asked what changes teachers felt were needed in order to improve the course and assessment at higher level. When asked whether the course and assessment were fit for purpose, many teachers answered that it is not, which is concerning.

On the point that you are making about rote learning, there are concerns that the amount of content in the course is steering it towards rote learning and, as Rebecca Hanna said, that is not how we teach or want to teach. However, when teachers are dealing with an extremely content-heavy course and are under time pressure, ensuring that their pupils do well in the exams can come at the expense of the quality of the learning and teaching. That is something to be considered.

Thirty of the people who commented felt that there was too much content, and that that led to rote learning, with an impact on independent thought. As history teachers, that is not what we want. We want our pupils to be developing their higher-order skills of analysis and to be able to make judgments and think critically about information. We are not in the business of asking people to memorise screeds of information.

Eleven respondents felt that there was too much emphasis on structure in the exam, and that that was disadvantaging some learners who had the knowledge but perhaps did not structure their answers in quite the right way.

Thirteen respondents commented on the literacy demands of the course. That theme is relevant to the drop in performance that Ross Greer was asking about. Literacy was mentioned a lot in that regard and, as history teachers, it is concerning to see young people coming through who seem to be struggling with the literacy aspect. However, we want to be bringing them up to the appropriate level: we do not want to dumb things down. Getting the approach right requires careful thought, so there must be a really in-depth review in order to get it right for our learners and our teachers.

There were comments about too much detail being needed per mark, and about the fact that that does not marry up with other social subjects, in which learners need to do less to pick up a mark. There were suggestions about how that might be countered. You have identified something that history teachers are feeling frustration about—we do not want to be teaching by rote learning.

The idea that an exam must include only the things that are in the course spec might make it sound like we are teaching by rote learning, but we are in a content-heavy subject, so we need to be able to tell our learners what they could be asked about and how to approach particular questions. That is part of what we do, as teachers.

Miles Briggs: I want to touch on literacy, because there has been a claim that the outcomes that we saw in the 2024 history exam results reflected falling literacy standards. We cannot see the performance of candidates across the subjects but, anecdotally, would the English teachers in your schools say that the same pupils who did not perform well in that history exam also did not perform well in English? Have you had conversations with them about that? The fact that we cannot benchmark those pupils’ performance means that that sort of anecdotal evidence is all that we have to go on.

Rebecca Hanna: In my school, pupils performed worse in history than they did in English. We speak quite a lot about declining literacy standards, but it did not seem to be an issue with regard to higher English exam results, as it has apparently been in higher history.

Andy Johnston: The situation was exactly the same as that in my school.

Kirsty MacDonald: In my context, comparisons across subjects revealed that the learners who did not achieve passes struggled across the other subjects. We had concerns about whether the cohort would pass this year, and we had our lowest-ever pass rate, although the cohort performed better in history than in other subjects.

That is my experience, but the survey has revealed that there are anomalies across schools in Scotland that do not really make sense. I happened to have that weaker cohort in front of me. In response to the question, I say yes—the candidates who did not do well for me also did not do well across some of their other subjects, but that is not the case in every school and is not the experience of every teacher.

Miles Briggs: Publication of the survey might present more evidence on the issue, if it was part of the questioning that you took up with your fellow teachers.

What you have said today is quite depressing. This episode has been depressing. I cannot imagine what it is doing to motivation, apart from making people not want to be markers or have a positive relationship with the SQA. I hope that the Education (Scotland) Bill's direction of travel can rebuild that confidence.

Have the Scottish Government and SQA listened to your concerns? From what you have outlined, it does not feel like that; it feels more like they want to move on and want the issue to go away. I do not think that that is good enough. From the conversations that you have had and communications that you are having with SQA and Scottish Government, where do you think things now stand? I asked the cabinet secretary whether she would look at doing a wider investigation if other teachers came forward with issues, and she did not rule that out, but we have not seen any progress on that to date.

Kirsty MacDonald: Have they listened? To a degree, yes they have, but more needs top be done on all the issues that have been raised. More needs to be done in respect of where we are just now. We appreciate having the "Understanding standards" materials—albeit that we have them later than they were needed—and the course report, but more is needed.

The survey has obviously thrown up bigger issues and, as we have discussed, I feel that the exam and the course spec need to be reviewed, and that teachers need to be engaged more. The cabinet secretary talked in the previous meeting about teachers being a part of the new qualifications Scotland body, but that involvement needs to be real and meaningful, and not just a tick-box exercise.

That will take time, so to be fair to the SQA and to anybody who is involved in fixing the situation, it will not be fixed overnight. There is no magic wand. At the moment it the case that although the SQA and Scottish Government have listened, more needs to be done, and I hope that that is recognised.

Rebecca Hanna: You have hit the nail on the head in that there is a feeling of "We've covered this; let's just move on. We don't want to hear any more." An article that was published in *TES,* which was authored by the principal assessor and co-authored by a senior member of the team, referred to history teachers voicing concerns as "unedifying". That concerns me greatly, because it is like saying to history teachers, "We don't want to hear it. Stop it—you're bringing the subject into disrepute." We care about our children, we care about our subject and we should be able to voice concerns in good faith. It suggests to me that there is a desire to sweep the issue under the carpet.

Kirsty MacDonald has had to write four different versions of an apology, and we are still at an impasse over the survey. There are 13 critical comments that the SQA wishes to be removed before we publish the survey. That does not speak of an organisation that wants to work with SATH or Scottish history teachers. It is a difficult situation.

Miles Briggs: In your experience, has this happened in other representative volunteer organisations for other subjects? Are you the canary in the mine, and is it the collapse in the results that have identified the issue and created this conversation? An adversarial culture has been allowed to develop.

Rebecca Hanna: I have not heard of this happening elsewhere, and we absolutely do not want it to. Kirsty has worked very hard to be as moderate as possible. Last autumn, we were not as critical as some people feel we should have been, and the survey reveals that many people feel that we were not strong enough in pressing that. We have tried very hard to be as constructive as possible.

Jackie Dunbar: You said that the Scottish Government and the SQA have listened to a degree. The convener said that the cabinet secretary said that she would carry on communication. Is that the case? Are you still engaging with the Scottish Government? What is the situation?

12:15

Kirsty MacDonald: Thank you for your question. Yes, that is the case—after this committee meeting, I have a meeting with the cabinet secretary, so those lines of communication are open.

The Convener: I will follow up on that with few more points. A couple of weeks ago, at portfolio questions on education and skills, the cabinet secretary said in the chamber that she had had further discussions with you, and it is clear that there will be more.

Is the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills aware that you have now written four drafts of an apology to the SQA, which have not been accepted? Is she aware that the SQA is looking for 13 further redactions? Is the cabinet secretary fully apprised of that?

Kirsty MacDonald: Currently, she is perhaps not aware of that detail, but I shared with Scottish Government representatives the request for the survey prior to this committee meeting. I shared apologies for the delay with that, as well as for the fact that there was a little to-ing and fro-ing and what the context for that was.

I have not directly discussed the matter with the cabinet secretary, but I expect that that information has been passed on and I imagine that it will form the basis of part of the meeting that we will have soon after the committee meeting today.

The Convener: Rebecca, I will go back to your point about the letter that appeared in *TES* the night before Fiona Robertson and Jenny Gilruth came to the committee. It was put to us that the letter had been authored by the two individuals because they wanted almost to set the record straight, as if what we had been hearing and reading in the public domain was not correct.

What are your members' views of that letter and its contents? Did it genuinely seem to come from people who had at heart the best interests of the higher history exam and history departments, or did it seem to be more a blatant defence of the SQA?

Rebecca Hanna: That is a hard question for me to answer, because I have worked with the higher history team and the two authors of the letter for many years. I am very fond of both of them and I hold them in a great deal of respect. I felt that the article was written in good faith. I believe that they genuinely care about the subject of history and its position and reputation.

My feeling is that there is, to a certain extent, an echo chamber. If high-up members of the higher history team are discussing things with each other but not listening to ordinary history teachers, they would genuinely believe what was written in that article. I do not believe that it reflects the views of Scottish history teachers; my phone was buzzing all night with people furiously quoting parts of it at me. I feel that it lowered morale and was misjudged. That suggests to me that there was no real attempt to listen to the genuine concerns of history teachers, although I feel that the article was genuinely meant.

The Convener: Let us get into the "Understanding standards" sessions, which I mentioned in my opening questions. I have received quite a lot of correspondence about them over the weekend and earlier this week.

I want to get this right in my head. The SQA sent out information to the effect that it was using those events as one of three additional things that it would take forward to ensure that more support and resources were available into the new year for teachers and lecturers who are preparing candidates for higher history in 2025.

In today's evidence session, we have been looking back a lot, but we are now just months away from this year's cohort going through the exam process. Some parents are raising with me concerns that the problems of last year's exam have not been resolved, so they are worried about this year's cohort.

As I understand it, the "Understanding standards" sessions have not gone down particularly well. It has been raised with me that not everyone could get to the first of the two sessions, and some of the important issues that were raised at session 1 were not repeated at session 2. Therefore, there is a mixture of people who have the information and people who do not. Worryingly, information that was promised as part of the sessions has still not been made available some time later.

Is that a fair appraisal of teachers' concerns? They went along to the events in good faith. Another one is scheduled, I think—

Rebecca Hanna: Yes.

The Convener: —but the material that will be offered will not be the same. I was told that the responses from the SQA were very defensive at times: they toed the party line and, when questions were asked about something that was not on the syllabus—I asked Andy Johnston for clarification about this, then John Mason went into the matter in more detail—the response from the SQA was, "We cannot discuss operational matters." Surely, that is a crucial point that teachers should be able to discuss with the SQA. The SQA tells us and others that the events are to help teachers to prepare for this year's exams, but then the teachers get blanked with, "We can't discuss operational matters." Is that a fair reflection of where your members are with the "Understanding standards" events?

Rebecca Hanna: Yes. I attended both the events that have happened so far. Other members of my department were not able get spaces, which was frustrating. The SQA was prepared for some

questions but, as I mentioned earlier, it was not prepared for queries on matters that had come up in the survey as issues that history teachers have—things like, "We are not sure of the standard on X, Y or Z."

One particular issue that came up in our survey was the standard that is required for a three-marks-out-of-three conclusion in a particular type of essay. I know that that was asked about directly at the markers' meeting last year. Questions were also asked about it in the chat during the "Understanding standards" event, but they were roundly ignored. An example was given at the event of a two-marks-out-of-three conclusion, and many people asked what else would be needed to give it three marks. There was no clear answer to that.

That is just one example of what the experience was like: questions were posed but were not necessarily followed up on.

Andy Johnston: I attended only one of the two events that have happened so far. At times, it felt very chaotic, which, for our—

The Convener: People speaking over each other?

Andy Johnston: Exactly. The team leaders were speaking over each other and cutting each other off mid-sentence when they were trying to give an answer. It was pandemonium. The chat was going off—it was mental. At times questions were largely ignored—or, worse, one team leader would answer a question then, five minutes later, another team leader would answer exactly the same question. They were not even paying attention to what was happening.

The examples that they gave were taken from the wars of independence and migration and empire topics, which were the two biggest topics that people might have had issues with. However, again, they were not able to give us examples for every component of the syllabus, which makes people wonder whether such examples exist, as some people said to me afterwards. As I said, it was pandemonium.

I left the event thinking that I agreed with the examples that they had given but, knowing that my pupils had reached that standard in their prelims the previous year, I did not know how they had not picked up those marks. When I went to the event, I had hoped for help to prepare my pupils who had sat their prelims in January—I was hoping that I would come out thinking, "Right. I know exactly what's happening." I am no further towards knowing that. I think that I have taught them what they need, but the SQA could turn around and say, that I have inflated the standards and am making them do more. I genuinely do not know exactly what my pupils need to do.

Rebecca Hanna: I reiterate how important the events are: the great solution to this year's problem was to run extra "Understanding standards" events. We have had two of three events and the message that I got was as clear as mud. That might not be everybody's impression, but it is certainly the impression of the vast majority of people to whom I have spoken. If those events are the solution to teachers not understanding the standards, the solution is not working.

The Convener: I got an email this morning from someone who was passing on comments. They said:

"Our members in schools are still raging that the webinars and materials from December and last week"

that are held by the SQA

"have still not been put online".

Those who could not make it to the sessions are in the dark. As I mentioned before, they said that the SQA seems to be in "a defensive position" rather than trying to get the materials that teachers need to prepare their students.

As you said, the events were designed in response to significant concerns, but if that is the best that the SQA can come up with, it is clearly not delivering.

Was the SQA's qualification manager present at the meeting for higher history?

Rebecca Hanna: She was present at both events.

The Convener: Did she engage?

Rebecca Hanna: She did not speak. She did not address the group, but you could see that she was there. The meetings were held online, so you could see who was present.

Andy Johnston: Her camera was off, and she did not engage.

The Convener: The qualifications manager who, for many months, has been heavily involved in that issue and the exam issues was simply listening rather than trying to put across what she and members of her team would seek to give you to help you with your students.

Rebecca Hanna: She was just a name at the side of the screen—she did not address us.

The Convener: We have spoken a bit about culture. Kirsty MacDonald mentioned it in her opening statement, and Rebecca Hanna bravely told us of her experience—I am very grateful to you for sharing that. Culture comes up time and again, including in emails that I have received, and you mentioned it just now. Is there a culture problem in the SQA? If you do not want to answer,

do you feel that you cannot answer? We could draw our own assumptions from that.

Rebecca Hanna: I will answer that. I do not believe that everybody would say so, but I personally believe that there is a problem. I am not speaking from my experience, although I could. I know of a number of people whose headteacher was, after the person had voiced concerns, contacted by someone from the SQA asking that the teacher be disciplined for voicing concerns about higher history. In both cases, which were in two different parts of the country, I believe that the headteacher said, "Absolutely not—this person is expressing their views."

I have heard stories of people who have been asked to return their marking or have been fired as markers because they have expressed dissatisfaction with standards or said that they believe standards are changing or unclear. That is a very difficult culture to speak out in. It is not a culture that I think is positive.

Andy Johnston: In my experience of marking, I did not encounter that negative culture, but I have heard other people talking about it, and people have mentioned it to me in passing. I have a young family, so I stopped marking a wee while ago because it took up far too much of my time, but I am still in contact with many friends who mark. They have mentioned that they do not want to say anything because they do not want to lose their positions, because they find it extremely valuable to help to ensure that their pupils are well prepared for the exam. They are scared to say anything.

Kirsty MacDonald: Rebecca and Andy have answered the question well, but as you say, such comments and concerns have come through in the survey. The thing that I find most stressful about the situation is that we, as professionals, are not able to deal with it. The comments from the survey that I have been asked to redact are typically the comments that say that there is a culture problem, and they use words such as "toxic".

I am concerned by our being asked to remove those comments, because if there is a problem with the culture, that seems to reinforce it rather than to challenge it. There is a need to allow those comments to be made, then they need to be proved wrong, and not simply removed from the record. The nature of the comments that I have been asked to redact typically refer to the information that has been shared by Rebecca and Andy.

I have marked for the SQA. As Rebecca does, I know some members of the team—not well, but I know them through the events—and I have always had positive experiences. I respect many members of the team, and it is quite upsetting and distressing to give this evidence, knowing the impact that it will have on them, but we have to be honest in what we say. The culture question is coming up again and again, so it needs to be addressed.

The Convener: Thank you for sharing that. As I said, we have looked back a lot on last year's exam and the impact that it had on students. What impact is the situation having on your current cohort of students, who will face the exam very soon? Have the "Understanding standards" events delivered what they should have delivered? I understand that many questions were put into the chat because people were not able to get involved, but they have gone unanswered. Is that correct? Are you and your fellow history teachers still seeking answers to many outstanding issues just months away from your students taking the exam?

12:30

Rebecca Hanna: At the most recent event, the principal assessor said that he would look at any questions that came up in the group chat and that he would provide answers. That is a positive move, and I look forward to it.

The Convener: Do you have a timescale for that?

Rebecca Hanna: No, I have no idea.

As for your question about this year's cohort, it is very difficult. As you have seen from the evidence, teachers do not feel that they understand the standards. I have been teaching since 2006 and I have been marking higher history since—I want to say 2011, but it has certainly been a long time. I have questions outstanding; I am not confident.

As teachers, we are very concerned. We are working our socks off. However, our local authority has put history into what are, essentially, special measures. We have to set targets, show that we are doing things differently and measure how much impact we are having. All the stress from all the new materials that are being developed and so on must going on to our pupils. They must be feeling it, too, because we are constantly assessing whether we are getting this right. If we are not quite clear about the standard ourselves, that makes things very challenging.

Andy Johnston: Put yourselves in our pupils' places. I have lost count of how many times I have said, "I'm not sure if this is the exact standard. As soon as I find out, I'll come back and tell you." They have sat their prelims, but I have pupils who have not got their prelim results back yet and are telling me, "Nah—I'm just dropping higher history, because I can't do this." No one is even willing to

say to them that they are only two points away from getting a pass. The pupils do not want to do it any more—they cannot do it. How demoralising is it for pupils to sit there and hear that their teacher does not have a full idea of what they are expected to do? We look incompetent at times, as a result.

The Convener: That is because you are not getting the information that you need.

My follow-up question was to be to ask how this is impacting on people who are presenting for higher history this year. A lot of your faculties and so on have probably brought history and modern studies together. Are teachers advising pupils to study modern studies rather than history? Is the concern so big that some pupils are being put off studying history at higher level, because of what has happened?

Andy Johnston: I am sure that that is the case—thankfully, though, not in my school or in my faculty. We are all quite tight-knit and quite honest. If a pupil's strengths lend themselves more to one subject than to another, we will tell them so, but we are not actively putting anybody off and saying, "This one's too hard."

However, it comes down to the pupils, too. When those who are doing national 5 talk to the ones who are doing highers, those pupils will say, "It's too hard", then the nat 5 pupils say, "Right—we're not doing it." The impact is felt there, too. It is not just that members of staff—including senior management, pupil support staff and so on—are putting pupils off during the curriculum review: other pupils and their peers are saying, "I don't have a chance at this, so what chance do you have?"

Rebecca Hanna: I should say that a number of schools in my local authority reported that their senior managers had been stepping in and saying, "At course choice time, maybe don't take higher history—go for something easier, instead." Not one, but a number of schools in my local authority reported that those discussions are happening, so you can see why we are concerned about our subject.

The Convener: Kirsty, do you have anything to add?

Kirsty MacDonald: I asked at the end of the survey whether people had anything to add, and what they added made for really depressing reading. The comments were coming in as the survey was on-going, and I was reading them as they came in.

As has been mentioned, it is a depressing situation. It was really hard to read how anxious some teachers were feeling, and how angry others were feeling. They referred to low morale, and to feeling that they were not able to do their job or that they were not competent as a result of the situation. Some even mentioned that they were thinking of leaving teaching, which sounds really extreme. When you get comment after comment from people who are feeling worried and anxious, or are feeling that they cannot do the right thing by their learners, that is really hard to read, and it really needs to be remedied.

We do a tough job. Teachers work very hard in challenging circumstances, and we have to feel that we have the support that we need to deliver the qualifications and get our young people the qualifications that they need to take their next steps. The feelings that came through in the survey—the anger, the frustration and the anxiety—were hard to read, and they are there to see. I am not talking about just a couple of people: this is coming through again and again, and it is really concerning for me.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I know that this might not have been the easiest session, given what you have had to present to us, and I understand the relationships that you have with your fellow history teachers and people working within the SQA.

However, your evidence was extremely fair and balanced—I also think that it is damning for the SQA. Some of what we have heard today should make for extremely uncomfortable listening for those who are at the very top of the SQA, and I have to say—as other members have—that I am deeply alarmed and concerned if elements of your survey that are critical of the culture within the SQA continue to be hidden from wider public view. We have to know why those at the top of the SQA are seeking to do that.

Again, I thank all of you for your time. I know that we have overrun, so I want to thank Kirsty MacDonald's colleagues at school, who stepped in to allow her to stay with us a bit longer. I thank Andy Johnston and Rebecca Hanna for coming to Parliament, too.

This is an issue that the committee has taken a keen interest in. I know that the cabinet secretary will be following it up, as Kirsty MacDonald has said, but on behalf of the committee members, I genuinely thank you for your time and your evidence.

12:35

Meeting continued in private until 13:01.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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