OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 5 February 2025

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 5 February 2025

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
5th 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)
*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
*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:

Joanna Campbell (Colleges Scotland and Dumfries and Galloway College)
Neil Cowie (North East Scotland College)
Audrey Cumberford MBE (Edinburgh College)
Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con) (Committee Substitute)
Andy Witty (Colleges Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 5 February 2025

[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Interests

The Deputy Convener (Jackie Dunbar): Good morning, and welcome to the fifth meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee in 2025. We have received apologies from the convener, Douglas Ross, and we welcome Roz McCall, who is attending for the first time as a substitute member. Therefore, our first item of business is to invite Roz to declare any relevant interests.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Thank you. I have no relevant interests to declare.

Colleges Regionalisation Inquiry: Post-Inquiry Scrutiny

09:30

The Deputy Convener: Our main item of business today is to hear from Colleges Scotland and from college principals. We are interested in exploring what progress, if any, has been made regarding the committee's report and recommendations following its inquiry into colleges regionalisation. The report was published in March 2023. We hope that the meeting will also provide useful background to help the committee to prepare for its scrutiny of legislation on post-school education and skills funding.

I welcome Andy Witty, who is director of strategic policy and corporate governance at Colleges Scotland; Joanna Campbell, who is chair of Colleges Scotland's college principals group and principal of Dumfries and Galloway College; Audrey Cumberford, who is principal of Edinburgh College; and Neil Cowie, who is principal of North East Scotland College. I thank you all for taking the time to join us today. The microphones will be operated remotely, so there is no need for anyone to press any buttons before or after speaking.

Before we move to questions from members, Andy Witty will make a brief opening statement on behalf of the witnesses. Andy—the floor is yours.

Andy Witty (Colleges Scotland): Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to meet today. Your committee's inquiry report, which was published in 2023, was a milestone in reflecting on the years that had passed since regionalisation.

We are now two years on from the committee's report, and it is safe to say that there has been progress. The Hayward and Withers reviews have taken place and, flowing from those, legislation has been proposed. However, many of the concerns that the committee noted in 2023 are still concerns for us today. You will hear our concerns regarding pace and about the need for the ambition in the college sector to be matched by that of the Scottish Government and its agencies.

I suspect that you will also pick up on a mix of concerns, frustration, gratitude for what has been provided and hope. It is often difficult to balance those different emotions when there are so many moving parts in the college sector.

It is clear that Scotland's economy needs skilled workers. To give some idea of the scale, I note that the Inverness and Cromarty green freeport area alone is expected to generate 11,000 jobs. In his recent speech on the economy, the First Minister spoke about the need to build in Scotland and to skill up the workforce for stable

employment here, thereby maximising the opportunities for Scotland and its economy.

Skills are also needed to deal with poverty. The income from social security has provided a safety net for those who are in that position, but another part of the Scottish Government's strategy involves increasing the income from employment, recognising the need for the provision of skills and qualifications.

What we see coming to fruition at the moment is something that we warned the committee about in evidence in May 2024, when we said that there would be an impact if funding was further reduced and was inadequate. Unfortunately, we are seeing that now. Audit Scotland has evidenced cuts amounting to a real-terms reduction of 17 per cent. Almost £1 in every £5 has gone, and that level of disinvestment is devastating.

Last week, there was a notable announcement of £3.5 million of additional funding for the offshore wind sector and for a partnership on health and social care. It is great that the critical role of colleges has been recognised, and we will work with the Scottish Government and others to maximise that. The data shows a predicted gap of about 35,000 skilled workers for the offshore wind industry. Of course, that is against the backdrop of the £29 million of Barnett consequentials coming into the Scottish block grant from the recent increase in funding for further education south of the border. Those are examples of the mixed elements and feelings in relation to those moving parts. There is an expectation that colleges will respond to this once-in-a-generation opportunity—for example, around offshore wind—but they must do so with shrinking resources.

Let me finish on hope, which I mentioned earlier. The college sector is ambitious. Before Christmas, the sector leaders agreed a document that sets out the sector's strategic priorities. It is a foundational document to set the stage for a vision for the sector by the sector, and we are looking to publish it in spring this year.

Colleges exist in a social contract with people in Scotland to provide that place of hope and a path out of poverty. It is also a social contract with employers that we will provide the skilled workers and graduates that they need to keep their doors open.

Colleges could do much more to boost Scotland's economic productivity and lift people out of poverty, and college leaders are keenly and enthusiastically working with industry to understand its needs and provide a wide range of initiatives that will help with that. However, colleges need support to maintain and then build on the valuable work that takes place across the country day in and day out, and the sustainability of colleges is still not assured.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. We will move to questions from the committee, and I will start things off. What further support is needed to help the sector to set priorities for the years ahead? You have just caught my eye, Audrey Cumberford, so I will come to you first.

Audrey Cumberford MBE (Edinburgh College): For me, it is clear that colleges have not only potential—which Andy Witty has just articulated—but untapped potential to meet the particular regional needs that we know are fast coming our way in relation to people, skills and talent.

We are operating within two horizons, if you like: the first is about trying to respond to the immediate skills needs and demands of our regions; the second is about having a keen eye on the future and on what is coming at us quickly in relation to skills gaps and the new jobs that are required—and, importantly, the people who are currently in work but who will have to be quickly upskilled and reskilled over the next few years to be in the right place to respond to those new and changing jobs.

I believe that colleges and the sector as a whole have a clear sense of where we must get to. Part of the frustration is that it is incumbent on the Scottish Government not simply to say that reform is needed—I agree that it is needed—but to be clear about setting and creating the appropriate environment in which we, as sector leaders, can deliver on that reform and get to where we need to be.

In the context of priorities, it is not simply about reform but about reaching a clear consensus about where that reform must get us to—it is about why we are reforming and how we do so. As systems do not reform naturally, there must be an environment that supports a transition towards the destination that we all want to reach. My biggest frustration is that we know what we have to do, sooner rather than later, but the environment just does not feel like it will support the change that is needed. Although financial sustainability is a clear driver, it is also about what Scotland, its colleges and its vocational system need to be in order to support economic productivity and social cohesion and to address other social imperatives, such as poverty.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. I should probably have said at the beginning that you just need to catch my eye if you would like to come in.

Neil Cowie (North East Scotland College): Following on from what Audrey Cumberford said, I acknowledge the funding issue, which is critical for us, and I agree with Andy Witty that there is a lot

of hope in the sector that we will do good things even better.

Every college is a broad church, and we have an array of people who rightfully demand high-quality education and training experiences from us. We are having to turn people away from NESCol. For example, we have seen our provision of master of arts courses doubling in three years and, interestingly, engineering is also a growth area for us. It is a concern when we have to turn people away.

We also have high demand from schools, and we have about 6,500 young learners on our school-college programme at the moment. There is a fundamental question to ask, because we get siloed into the idea of post-16 educational reform when there is actually a bigger thing and we are much bigger than that. We have very wide doors and deep reach. We are anchor institutions in our communities, where we serve a lot of people and try to change their life experiences and chances as a consequence of what we do.

In order to do that, we must be funded appropriately. There is something interesting if you look at the funding that is allocated to learners across Scotland. Delivering a full-time 15-credit higher national course in our college costs about £4,500. That is what we are funded to—£4,500. The equivalent cost at university level would be £7,500, and school-college full-time places are funded to £8,500. My question for the committee and for my colleagues is whether that is fair. Why should college students be funded at a lower level?

I advocate for something that I know the Scottish Funding Council is on to. We really need funding change at pace, because we are itching to do stuff and because we understand the Scottish Government's priorities and the priorities that we can very effectively play into. That is our bread and butter. However, in order to do that effectively, we need to think differently about how we are funded.

I will quote some figures that I asked my vice principal for finance and resources to give me in preparation for the meeting. If NESCol was funded at the average credit price given to all medium-sized colleges, we would have an extra £1.4 million of grant, and, if we were funded to the sector average level, we would have another £2.9 million of grant. That is rather convenient for us because, since we merged one very large urban college with a small rural one, we have lost roughly £3 million every year because of the way that the former Banff and Buchan College was funded with a rurality premium to sustain its lower learner numbers in areas that simply could not create volume. We really need the funding model to change, and that must be delivered at pace.

Joanna Campbell (Colleges Scotland and Dumfries and Galloway College): The first thing to say is that colleges feel empowered to respond to their regional needs and that we have a great track record of being able to do so.

In answer to your question, and picking up on what my colleagues have said, there is a need for sustainable funding in the future. I sit in the tripartite group, which I know the minister has told the committee about before. Through that group, we have been afforded a number of flexibilities. That has been most welcome, but, as Neil Cowie said, we need to see pace injected into that to allow the sector to continue flourishing.

Investment in our infrastructure, particularly capital investment to support Scotland's transition to net zero, is also important, as is our digital estate. Both of those will require capital investment in the sector, but although we have had a modest increase in our capital for the next financial year, we have a well-documented maintenance backlog across the entire college estate.

09:45

We also need to remove duplication in the system. For example, Neil Cowie spoke about the school-college partnership, which accounts for approximately 16 per cent of college provision, and there is overlap in some of the funding that is associated with that. Similarly, at the other end of what we do as colleges, in our higher national certificate and higher national diploma offering, there is overlap with the undergraduate provision in universities.

We have previously made points at committee about the crisis in mental health and wellbeing that exists among our students, as well as about the impact of the cost of living crisis on our students. As the committee will be aware, the funding that was allocated to the sector for counselling to support mental health and wellbeing is no longer available to us. Therefore, colleges are making very difficult decisions in order to support that. It is only right that we support that, but we are divesting in other areas in order to do so.

The Deputy Convener: I think that some members have questions regarding that exact topic, so we can delve deeper into it later on.

Andy Witty, do you have anything further to say?

Andy Witty: I do not have a huge amount to add to what my colleagues have said.

There are elements around fair funding and comparability across the sector. The point has been made that, if you had twins and one went to university and one went to college to study the

same course, they would get funded at hugely different levels. It is about using the moneys that are already in the system more efficiently.

Obviously, there is also the huge impact of the steady and large reduction in funding that we have seen over the years.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning. Thank you for your opening statement, which I found incredibly helpful and really powerful. I am sure that people who are listening will understand that the sector finds itself in very difficult circumstances, but we can hear the hope that you have for it, and it is in that context that I will ask my questions.

I listened to your answer to the deputy convener's question, about changing the funding at pace. Can you give us a sense of why the pace is not what you would like it to be?

Andy Witty: I will kick off. Our frustration around the pace is because of the situation that colleges are in. There is a paradox, because there is the hope and ambition of the sector and our understanding of how vital it is for the Scottish Government's priorities—for example, reducing poverty, the economy, and the NHS—but we are having to balance that with the hugely difficult decisions that individual principals are having to make around the impact of the cuts, be they about reducing curriculum offer or about geographical location offers.

The need to see the progress made is really important. Out of the tripartite group that Joanna Campbell mentioned, two weeks ago, we got confirmation about asset disposal and a new approach that will allow colleges to know more clearly what they can keep from asset disposal, if there are colleges in that position. That was agreed in principle last May, and we have just had the confirmation in writing to understand how it is going to be.

We therefore know that things are happening. There is a mix of different emotions around it, as we know that things are happening and trying to be done, but they need to done faster in order to help the college sector where it is at the moment.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: You have all said in advance of today that flexibility is important, as it allows you to do the things that you want to do. Do either of the principals have any examples of situations in which something is getting in the way of good examples of collaboration being delivered?

Neil Cowie: Yes, I think so. We also work closely with our local authority partners, who are facing quite significant decisions with regard to their budgets, and we are in conversations with partners about what we could do around the senior phase.

A bigger and more radical conversation is needed that nobody seems to be grabbing a hold of. I have colleagues and former colleagues in schools who are working with some pretty disengaged young people, who we want to get on the path so that their life chances can improve and they do not become inactive citizens who are another drain on the economy. People from the school sector have given evidence to the committee and eloquently indicated that the qualifications model and the way in which we assess young people do not apply equally to or really work for everybody.

We know that we are quite transformational in what we offer young people who come into college, because it is a different set-up, with people with industry experience who have come to teaching as a secondary profession and where young learners do not hear a bell going off every 50 minutes telling them where to go and who call me Neil and not Mr Cowie. It is a different regime. If the regime that they are currently in ain't working for them, can we do more for them by moving them to the colleges quicker? In order to do so, there needs to be more funding.

We have very wide doors and deep reach—as colleges, that is what we do. The quality of teaching is second to none; I am privileged to work not only with a strong team of very good lecturers and conscientious and hard-working support staff. That wraparound support that we give our learners evolves every year—the support is more complex, but we deliver it. However, as my colleagues have alluded to, that is becoming harder to do with less money.

We need to press on, because there are emergencies on the horizon around mental wellbeing, disengaged young learners and poverty generally. There are the demands of employers, too, which I have not mentioned. If we are truly committed to turning the economy around and making it greater than it already is, we need to be able to meet employer needs now and not hang around. We have demand.

Audrey Cumberford: I would not describe the system as it stands as agile, responsive and flexible, but two or three strong examples have signalled to and shown what can be achieved when agility is built into a system. One example, which has been spoken about many times at the committee, is the flexible workforce development fund. It was specifically established to strengthen the links between colleges and industry, to help upskill and reskill people in work, to support those businesses to innovate and be better and, at the same time, to influence and shape what is happening back at the ranch, in the college. In

Edinburgh, working with the flexible workforce development fund, we upskilled and reskilled the equivalent of one out of every 50 people who are employed in Edinburgh and the wider region. We were able to do so because the flexible workforce development fund system was agile, flexible and responsive.

Another really strong example is the skills boost fund, which sat outside our current system—that is where pots of money can be helpful but also unhelpful, because they are not mainstreamed—and was extremely flexible and agile. I will translate that to what it means on the ground. We currently have around 700 vacancies in health and social care in Edinburgh alone, but health boards do not have time to wait for somebody to go through an HNC or HND course or a four-year degree course—they need people with basic skills that they can articulate clearly, which, if they are met, will guarantee jobs for those individuals. The skills boost fund allowed the national health service in Edinburgh and the Lothians to co-design a programme with us, which was only six or seven weeks long, because we co-determined that we needed that amount of time to work with somebody to get them to the very basic skill levels. The person finished the course on Friday and walked into a job with the health board on Monday, already on payroll. That is flexible and responsive. A pot of money for the skills boost fund appeared, which was great, and we demonstrated that it was wonderful, but then it stopped. Hundreds of cohorts of people were going through that process.

The third example is specific to Edinburgh and the south-east, which is that our city regional deal has a skills programme built into it. It provides £25 million for the four colleges and four universities to focus on data, digital innovation and analytics, and women and construction. That skills funding has more than delivered the outcomes that we set out to achieve in upskilling, training and getting people who are unemployed—women in particular—into digital jobs in the sector.

Those are three good examples that clearly show that, if we can design a system that has in-built flexibilities but also trusts and allows the colleges, universities and other providers in our region to work together, we can deliver outcomes in a responsive and flexible manner, and we will be able to respond much better to what is needed further down the road.

We already know what skills planning we need in Edinburgh, with the various sectors and investments that are coming into the city and beyond in the Lothians. The challenge is how we can work collectively to provide solutions to deliver that.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): One of the messages that came through clearly from the sector in the lead-up to our inquiry was a desire for clear strategic direction from Government and an understanding of what Government expected of the sector. In response, the Government committed to develop the purpose and principles document, not just for the college sector but for the wider landscape. Now, around 18 months, I think, after that document was published, do you feel that it was the answer to the question about strategic direction? Has it been clear enough in setting a direction for the sector?

Andy Witty: I can start off, and I am sure that colleagues will want to come in as well.

You are right—the purpose and principles document was published in June 2023. There is very little in that document that is difficult to disagree with, as far as the principles in it are concerned, but it is quite high level. The minister has accepted that there is a raft of asks of the college sector that could probably be clearer. That is why the sector published its document before Christmas. Sector leaders have now taken the view that the sector needs to lead the sector, and have set out the strategic direction and vision, so that the sector can play its part in that economic development, respond to the economic needs and opportunities of the inward investment that there is, and look to produce a system that is truly agile, which, as Audrey Cumberford referred to in her opening statement, is needed in order to deal with poverty.

People gaining stable and long-term jobs is, as is recognised in the Scottish Government's own strategy, fundamental to helping to move people out of poverty. Colleges need to be positioned so that they can play that key role in regional economics, but what is needed differs across the different regions. Flexibility is needed in the provision of the funding, so that regional colleges can deliver what is needed and look at a more outcomes-focused ask of the sector, rather than just measuring activity.

Ross Greer: Before I bring others in, it sounds as though you are saying that the purpose and principles document was so agreeable that it did not really provide direction. Is that a fair summary? The sector has therefore needed to make a series of decisions about strategic direction itself, because that document did not provide a clear direction of travel.

10:00

Andy Witty: I think that it was maybe even at this committee that the minister said that he accepted that there was a raft of asks and that further clarity would be beneficial. So, yes, we are

looking to take that forward ourselves as sector leaders.

Ross Greer: Thank you. When you are doing corporate planning for your institutions, have you sat down with the purpose and principles document and thought, "Right, we will work back from here"? Does it provide that kind of value and, if not, what value has it provided?

Neil Cowie: I would reflect what Andy Witty said. It played back what we had said, which showed that we had been listened to. However, the key is in actions rather than words, and you need to have something that follows through on the statements in it. That is the problem that I had with the document.

In the conversations that we had during the consultation on purpose and principles, I made the point that, if you are looking at post-16 educational reform, you also need to look at what comes before that. However, I do not think that that really got an airing as a consequence of all this.

I was looking for more direction but, in the absence of direction, our college, under my leadership, simply cracked on and did stuff for our region. We are all responsive and adaptive leaders here, and that is where our obligations lie.

We need to coalesce around common themes, particularly around Government priorities, and make sure that what we are doing is delivering to that regional agenda while being mindful of the Government priorities.

Audrey Cumberford and I are involved in the College Alliance and, in a recent set of conversations that we had with colleagues in Belfast, something interesting came up around Jobs and Skills Australia. I was quite intrigued by that discussion, and I think that there is something in there that we need to flush out a little bit more. I am looking to fill a void in relation to the data insights that we need in order to inform what we do, and Australia seems to have cracked that. They have a 10-year plan that is rolled over and reviewed every year, and which tells tertiary educators exactly where the job gaps are and what is going to be needed year on year for those 10 years. Something as concrete as that would be very helpful to us in the jobs that we do.

Ross Greer: I would love to go further into that point around data with Neil Cowie, but I know that colleagues will come back to that later on.

Does anyone else have anything to add? Do not feel that you have to, if you feel that the points have already been covered. If there are no further comments on that, I will leave it there.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, and thank you for joining us today.

I will carry on some of the conversation that Neil Cowie started in relation to post-16 learning and the pre-16 opportunity. How can schools and colleges further develop their relationships in order to improve effectiveness and those partnerships? I recently visited Barnardo's Works here in the capital, which I know has been working with Edinburgh College, especially around 14 and 15-year-old pupils who are not going to school and are disengaged from the school system, like the pupils Neil Cowie mentioned. How can those relationships be improved in terms of both pre-16 and post-16 education?

I will bring in Audrey Cumberford, as I mentioned Edinburgh College.

Audrey Cumberford: Like Neil Cowie, we have the equivalent of something like four very large high schools studying in the college every week. That shows that there is demand; there is no question about that. Pupils at all ages and at all levels within schools are experiencing that vocational, technical and professional offer to help to guide them in relation to their futures and to give them a sense of what is possible, where their talents are and possible pathways.

In relation to school-college partnerships, what helps significantly on the ground is actually at the local authority level. My college's patch or footprint, if you like, crosses three local authorities. When I first came to Edinburgh, it was clear that we were dealing with three quite distinct local authorities, and that there were benefits to be gained from the collective power of the three local authorities working together much more closely and looking at the benefits and added value that a school-college partnership can bring. That partnership exists within this region and is very strong. School-college partnership is part of our distinctiveness in terms of what we do very well and it should be supported going forward.

Neil Cowie: I will add to that. We work with around 28 secondary schools, 15 primary schools and four private schools. As I said earlier, around 6,500 young people are on school-college programmes with us in a given year.

The region that we operate in has a large geographical footprint, and it is interesting that around 35 per cent of all Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire school leavers come to us. That number increases to 60 per cent for pupils from an area that is one of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation 10 or 20 areas. We have an obligation to ensure that what we offer them continues to provide effective progression pathways.

I will go back to the primary school situation briefly. The approach there, particularly in primaries 6 and 7, involves thinking more about what the Scottish economy will need in the long

term. We need to get into the heads of young people, and more so the heads of those who influence them at home and in school, ideas about what their careers are likely to be and what skills we will need to plug the skills gap in later life.

We also deliver 250 foundation apprenticeships. That is a really interesting area for us, because that figure is growing. We do that pretty well across both the city and the shire. Those give people an idea of what work is all about. We are the biggest modern apprenticeship provider in the north-east, so it is critical for us to get that feeling in there.

There is also a great deal of focus on the technical levels that we will need. Given that careers in areas such as energy transition are currently very much focused in the north-east, we need to ensure that young people, and those who influence them within school and beyond it are aware of the careers that are coming up. Getting out and about to do all that stuff takes time and resource, but we want to do it because it is important.

Joanna Campbell: The school-college partnership is a real strength of the college sector. Audrey Cumberford and Neil Cowie have given a couple of examples, but there are many in every college. In my own, we have co-created various programmes with our local authority colleagues. As a result, we have seen our numbers increase by about 30 per cent and our attainment levels in our school-college partnership have increased, too, which is really positive.

The downside is that, although we create excitement around the school-college partnership and young people's choices in the next stages of their education journey, when the funding position is as challenging as it currently is, we do not have the capacity to do more of it. For example, in my college, our applications are up 40 per cent. We are a rural college, and there is not another one close by that those young people can go to. As I said, that is a strength. However, the difficulty that we face going forward is that we are curtailed in being able to do more of that work because of the current situation in which we find ourselves.

Miles Briggs: What struck me when I met some of the young people involved in the school-college partnership was the fact that they still hated going to school and were ready for college. Given your expertise, what is your view on that? One of them told me that they would go to school only because they were forced to, and that they were still completely disconnected from the school setting. They felt as though they were being told, "Until you're 16, we can't do anything with you, except that you can go to college and do some of the things that you want to do now." What reforms should be made in that regard?

Neil Cowie: I am grateful to be able to have conversations with headteachers and senior executives in local authority areas. I know that the budgetary constraints under which they find themselves present challenges. Their ability to discharge their statutory responsibilities is key. We understand that the people who need more of our input and resource are the ones who are at the sharper end of our communities. Consequently, I know that college is not for everybody, but—this goes back to a point that I made earlier—if the system that they have been educated in thus far is not engaging them, is it not worth a punt to try something different?

We have plenty of evidence. I have had the privilege of being at my college for 25 years, and I have been in public service for a lot longer. As someone who has been an educator for 25 years, I have seen the transformational effect that colleges have on those kinds of learners. I can even think of one who eventually got a PhD, and he was an absolute handful once upon a time.

However, people will not realise their potential if we do not try something different. We should bear in mind the fact that the kit in colleges is industry standard—it is of a higher standard than our colleagues in schools can probably afford—and, to go back to an earlier point, the people who teach and provide support in colleges have industry experience. They have come into the teaching profession as a secondary career option, and the value added that they give those young people is incredible. It is also credible, which helps us to get young people into a mindset of thinking about what they could do for work.

Joanna Campbell: As part of our curriculum offer, as well as offering accredited qualifications, we can provide college-certificated qualifications. To build on Neil Cowie's point about the lecturers and teaching staff who are involved in teaching for those qualifications, there is a degree of vocational expertise in being able to offer a curriculum that is perhaps not available in the school system. That creates a level of excitement, and it gives the young people the opportunity to develop skills that they might not have been able to develop in other sectors.

Andy Witty: To give some idea of the scale of this activity, the most recent figures that I have seen show that, every week, about 70,000 pupils go in and out of colleges. Colleges make a significant input and, as my colleagues have said, that increases pupils' potential and allows them to contribute, and it helps certain individuals who are at risk of disengaging from education. That is critical and helpful. Foundation apprenticeships have been mentioned.

Some of the challenges relate not only to the local authority level, but to the conversations that

have to take place with individual schools and headteachers in order for such arrangements to be set up. We also need to ensure that the funding levers do not work against what is in the best interests of an individual learner. For example, is the tightness of funding in schools driving certain behaviours?

We also need to avoid duplication of input and of structures, whereby schools try to replicate what colleges are doing. I will give an example of a very practical challenge. I live in a small local authority area where there are three high schools. To save on transport costs, the three schools have different finishing times on different days of the week. That enables them to maximise the use of transport to save money, which makes sense. However, it also hugely limits the timetabling opportunities for those school pupils to attend even a local college. That, too, is driven by tight finances.

Miles Briggs: My final question is about college student associations. In its inquiry report, the committee called for minimum standards for funding and the independence of college student associations. To date, what progress, if any, has been made in relation to that call?

Audrey Cumberford: At Edinburgh College, ECSA—Edinburgh College Students Association—is a force to be reckoned with and, as far as the college is concerned, is a very healthy and positive one. ECSA is embedded in everything that we do. That extends from its sitting on the board of management all the way through to its being part of college committees and informing how we shape and deliver what we do. ECSA is a fundamental part of the college. It is independent and has its own budget, which is substantial. It approaches us with its budget annually, as I would expect. We have quite robust conversations about budget, what ECSA's priorities are and where it needs to focus.

Our success has come from having full-time student association officials in the college. It is very hard for students to carry out that role while they are studying, and we have found that it is effective to pay them for doing what is, in effect, a full-time job. Being a student association official is a great way to develop their skills and talents for what they go on to do next.

10:15

Miles Briggs: Do you have the same model?

Joanna Campbell: Yes.

Miles Briggs: Thank you, convener.

Roz McCall: Hello, everyone. Thank you for being here.

Colleges have some great links with schools and some fantastic links with small and medium-sized enterprises. I know that there are challenges and positives when it comes to establishing links, but I am interested in how that is going. When I was at Fife College recently, I heard that it could not obtain a single placement for its social care course for a whole year—it simply could not offer that side of the course.

Given that you are building links with SMEs, what has the process been like since the flexible workforce development fund came to an end? Can you give us an idea of how that is going?

Neil Cowie: We had an interesting journey with the flexible workforce development fund. We were originally involved in some of the working groups that brought it to fruition, but we felt that it was never something that really settled. There was a bit of a surprise launch, Covid impacted on it, there were delayed starts in the first year and levels of funding fluctuated. However, it was an interesting initiative in that it gave us reach to SMEs that we had perhaps not had before.

At the height of the flexible workforce development fund, we were allocated about £1.9 million. The last allocation that we got was about £1.1 million. It gave us access to a lot more smaller employers, which were very grateful to receive that funding. In the last year of the fund, I think that we supported an additional 113 SMEs.

Interestingly, that has been a challenge since the fund stopped, because the SMEs valued the fund and were not necessarily prepared to go elsewhere. That has meant that our business and community development team, which oversaw the fund in the past, has had to be more active in supporting SMEs to access funds through alternative funding streams.

When it comes to resource, we are talking about a drop in the ocean, given the number of employers that we have in the north-east. For us to be able to knock on doors and say, "What is it that you might need in order to train your workforce?", we need a lot more resource than we can afford, so it was a loss for us to lose the fund.

It has been an interesting challenge to chase up such opportunities for SMEs in the north-east and to make sure that the offer of professional development comes with some sort of fee waiver, whereby SMEs do not have to worry about the risk that will come to their organisation if they have to fund it themselves.

Roz McCall: That was very interesting—thank you.

Audrey Cumberford: In Edinburgh, we supported hundreds—in fact, thousands—of businesses through the flexible workforce

development fund. It is fair to say that the vast majority of SMEs struggle with capacity. They want to innovate, they want to bring in new people and they want to train their current staff and continue to upskill, but giving them the capacity to help them on that journey is often a challenge. The flexible workforce development fund helped with our capacity, as a college, to approach those businesses and work with them in the way that Neil Cowie described to establish where they were going, what they needed, what their priorities were and how we could help.

About 80 per cent of what we provided through that fund was bespoke provision rather than off-the-shelf qualifications. The companies involved wanted specifically designed interventions. Whether that provision was for skills, support with applied innovation or support for their business processes or product design, they wanted quick interventions that were bespoke to their needs. That is interesting.

We recently did a survey of all the businesses that we support in Edinburgh. The results of that survey have been hugely informative with regard to where we go next. Forty per cent of the companies that we have supported for several years say that they will no longer be in a position to upskill and reskill their staff or to look at how they can innovate as businesses to make sure that they are fit for purpose in the future. That is a scary number. It is a very concerning situation. We have strong evidence straight from the SMEs in the Edinburgh region on what they need and what they want.

We all want to get business and industry to invest more in our colleges. In many ways, they are already doing that. For example, for many businesses, the work that we did with them through the flexible workforce development fund opened the door to a strong relationship. When the fund stopped, some of those businesses continued with that relationship, and they are now paying for the specific training and business support that they need. For us as a college, that leveraged about 30 per cent additional income—I would call it commercial income—over and above the £1.6 million that we received for the flexible workforce development fund. Those businesses took a decision to pay for the support that we could give them. There is an opportunity to see how we can leverage our relationships with industry to get industry itself to invest more in staff training and in what colleges can provide.

Roz McCall: That is very interesting.

Joanna Campbell: To follow on from what Audrey Cumberford has said, given that our business base in the Dumfries and Galloway region is made up predominantly of SMEs—they account for 97 per cent of it—the removal of the flexible workforce development fund was a huge loss, as you can imagine. However, we have been successful in tapping into other pots of money. The shared prosperity funding is an example of funding that we have been able to use to help businesses on their journey to becoming carbon neutral. For example, we run several courses in carbon accountancy and carbon literacy, which have been very successful.

In addition, through the support of the Scottish Funding Council, we ran one of the pilots for the digital pathfinder programme. We worked with a number of partners in the region to look at digital skills and to help those businesses to upskill and retrain in areas such as cyberresilience.

In a wider sense, the college sector has been very successful in tapping into other funding pots. I mentioned the shared prosperity fund. Work is being done in the greater Glasgow region to help businesses to innovate and increase their productivity. The six colleges in the greater Glasgow area have been very successful in securing money from UK Research and Innovation to run a series of innovation programmes that are targeted at SMEs.

The discontinuation of the flexible workforce development fund has been a huge loss to us, as, through it, we built relationships with SMEs. Equally, however, we are tapping into other streams of money to continue that good work.

Roz McCall: That is interesting.

Andy Witty: You have heard about the benefit of the additional funds that were leveraged as a result of the flexible workforce development fund, and that has gone. That showed the benefit that is brought to the economy when colleges can make use of flexible funding. Some elements of the current funding could be provided to colleges as a single pot, so that they could utilise it in the best way for their region, taking into account the skills needs there. That is really important.

That links in with the role of colleges in regional economic partnerships and regional economies. Those structures need to be up and running as national skills planning comes back to the Scottish Government, followed by regional skills planning. Fundamentally, colleges must be an integral part of that, to ensure that the planning of the skills capacity that is needed supports inward investment and helps industry to fill the gaps in the workforce. That is really important.

Across the country, it is a mixed picture at the moment. On paper, the colleges are there. The system is working well in some areas, but not in all, and that needs to be looked at.

Roz McCall: Thank you very much indeed.

The Deputy Convener: Willie Rennie has a quick supplementary question.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am a big fan of colleges, but one of the criticisms that we get from employers is that they sometimes find the relationship with colleges really difficult. They say that you are not flexible enough and do not meet their needs.

What is it about the mainstream element of the funding that forces you to go down the route of workforce development and shared prosperity funds to supply the flexibility that directly meets employers' needs? What is it about the mainstream funding that is not flexible and does not help them?

Audrey Cumberford: I am happy to kick off on that. Our mainstream funding is predominantly designed around qualifications but, as I have just said, the flexible workforce development fund proved that qualifications are not what many businesses need—they need other interventions.

Our mainstream funding is designed around qualifications, and predominantly full-time qualifications. However, year on year, the demand for long and fat full-time qualifications is clearly reducing. Student demand is reducing, and the qualifications are not what employers want. To put it crudely, our whole funding system is based on full-time qualifications, activity, teaching hours and bums on seats, and that does not lend itself well to the responsive, agile and bespoke provision that is often needed.

Willie Rennie: When you put that point to the Funding Council, which I presume you do—

Audrey Cumberford: Yes.

Willie Rennie: What does it say?

Andy Witty: Through the tripartite group, we now have a commitment to review the funding model. That may sound like groundhog day—it does for the people who have been in the college sector or looking at it for a little while—but we need that fundamental review to deliver and set up the conditions for colleges to flourish rather than wither. Part of setting up those conditions is about deciding what the funding model will look like and what will, as Audrey Cumberford said, allow colleges to deliver what industry needs.

Willie Rennie: Is the Funding Council going through the motions, or does it really want to change the model so that it is flexible?

Neil Cowie: I think that it wants to change it. My colleagues might have a different view but, based on the conversations that we have had with the Funding Council, it understands the inequity that exists across the piece, particularly in relation to other providers.

I mentioned how college students are not funded to the same level as school pupils and university undergraduates. The Funding Council understandss that, generally speaking, the college sector has been pretty adaptive to employer need and a variety of different needs over many years. We are pretty good at doing that.

Although I would not dare to contradict you, Willie, my experience has been quite different from yours. Ordinarily, if people are critical of the college, they write me a complaint letter, but I do not tend to get complaint letters from employers.

Willie Rennie: I get them.

Neil Cowie: If they are about NESCol, you can by all means direct them to me, but I do not get them.

That is partly because we already have some really good and long-established relationships in the north-east regional economy. At the college, we have a very adaptive and responsive team of people who understand that it is not rocket science and that, if you want to create really good outcomes for other people, you build and sustain good relationships, which is what we have sought to do.

Willie Rennie: That is despite the funding system's rigidity. It could be better.

10:30

Neil Cowie: I agree, and we have tried to make that work as best we can. I think that James Withers's report has been really effective in picking up the voice of the college sector, which asks that colleges be given, at regional level, the autonomy that allows them, with their partners, to deliver what the regions need—although there might need to be some sort of coalescing around strategic obligations or imperatives at national level.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): On the Funding Council point that Willie Rennie has just raised, I say that nearly every comment that you have made—and, in fact, all the comments in the committee's previous report—relate to funding. Most of us in this committee are on other committees, where we get a pretty constant parade of organisations that say that they want more funding and that are convinced that they are the ones that are treated the worst, but very few acknowledge the constraints that the Scottish Government is under—we have had 14 years of constraint on public sector budgets. However, that is just a thing of mine.

I come back to what the Scottish Government is responsible for and to the Funding Council. Earlier, you mentioned the disparity between the

£4,000 that is spent on a college student and the £7,000 or so that is spent on an undergraduate student. In my experience, the year that I had at one of the Edinburgh colleges was the best with regard to educational attainment—it was better than university. Is it your view that the Funding Council has an institutional bias in favour of higher education as opposed to further education?

Neil Cowie: I am not sure that it does, but I sense that the issue has needed addressing for a long time. It has been perpetuated year on year. The senior team at the Funding Council is the best team that I have worked with in all the time that I have been in the college sector. The Funding Council is listening, but we need things to be done at more pace.

You might be right to say that we consider that we are treated the worst. I just want us and our students to be treated fairly, and I do not see the situation as fair. We could do so much—I hope that you get a sense of that from the energy of the witnesses. We are very ambitious for the college sector; there are things that we are itching to do. We are in the privileged position of representing thousands in our workforce, and the reality is that we want to crack on and do those things because people behind us want to do them, too. However, we need to be funded fairly and at an appropriate level for all the things that we do.

I am not sure whether it is some sort of organisational bias towards the universities—maybe the universities have been better at shouting about things than we have. There has been a lot of talk about the high-value jobs that the oil and gas sector perhaps once generated; high-value jobs will be needed—I think about the north-east, for example, and its ambitions around energy transition—and there will still be a requirement for university graduates, but a lot of people are beginning to talk about what the technician level looks like. It is at a lower level, which really plays into our bread and butter—our learners—and what we do. If we are to deliver a successful regional economy for all our respective institutions, we will have to be funded in a different and fairer way.

Keith Brown: Does anyone else want to go further with regard to the Funding Council? Any additional money will have to come from somewhere. Is there an institutional bias in favour of higher education at the expense of further education?

Joanna Campbell: I do not think that there is a bias. As Neil Cowie said, the Funding Council is listening to us and working with us. The difficulty is that decoupling our funding system is complex—it is hard to simplify the machinery of our funding and to consider a future funding model without that having unintended consequences in other parts of the system. On your point about bias, I do not see that.

Andy Witty: To be clear, I do not see a bias. Indeed, I mentioned working towards the new vision and the strategic intent for the college sector, and the Funding Council has offered its support for that. Ultimately, the split in funding between college and university comes from the Scottish Government.

On the point about there being no additional money, there are elements in the current funding pot that it would be helpful to address. In some cases, only 40 per cent of every public pound that is spent on apprenticeship funding by the Scottish Government comes to the colleges to deliver the training. We know that that is being looked at by the Scottish Government, but that is another one of those pace issues; it would be good to get to a point where the funding is much more streamlined. We have talked about the funding model. That does not bring in any additional money, but it frees it up and presents it to colleges in such a way that they can utilise it better.

We are trying to assess the cost of all public training that is funded across the public sector. Should colleges have first refusal when it comes to delivering the training that is paid for by other public bodies, rather than going out to private training providers in the first instance? There are various areas where the existing pot could be utilised in different ways that would be beneficial to the college sector.

Audrey Cumberford: It is important not to conflate the funding model for colleges, which, as we have spoken about, is crying out for building in agility and flexibility at a regional level to allow us to deliver what needs to be delivered, and the broader question around the wider funding system. As a principal and chief executive, I am always going to ask for more money, but I accept that there is no more money. Is the wider funding system fair and equitable? Is the money in the system getting the best possible value in the right place?

A couple of people have mentioned going to Edinburgh College, which is fantastic—it is my college—but it is factually correct to say that if you have put your trust in my college to learn and study there, you have the lowest public investment out of every college and university in Scotland to support you. That is neither fair nor equitable.

There are wider questions about the funding system. Is it progressive? Is it equitable? Is it fair? Is the funding in the right place to get the maximum value for the money? I question that.

The Deputy Convener: I am aware that a few members still want to ask questions, and we have already taken up a fair amount of time. I ask

members to keep that in mind when they are asking their questions.

With that, I go to Pam Duncan-Glancy—that is not a personal thing, Pam.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you, convener. I will bear that in mind.

We have been talking about the national approach. Andy Witty and others have said that there is a change afoot, and that the minister is looking at that. What involvement has the college sector had in shaping the Government's national approach to skills planning?

Joanna Campbell: The college sector has been heavily involved in working with officials and the minister on what skills planning will look like going forward. We are awaiting the first phase of that announcement, which will happen in the spring. Two of my colleagues have been working very closely with Colleges Scotland on how we would operationalise that in the sector. We are also mindful of the various actors that will be involved, and we have been part of the review that has happened with regional economic partners.

I will pass over to Andy.

Andy Witty: I agree with Joanna Campbell—we have been involved in that.

The College Alliance is an opportunity to meet others across the UK. Audrey Cumberford may want to add something about the visits to different parts of the UK. We have been to Northern Ireland, Wales, the West Midlands area and Manchester to look at different approaches. As ever, you cannot just lift wholesale something that works in one area and drop it into another, but you can look at benefits and what works, and whether there is commonality.

We have been able to bring some of those examples into discussions about skills planning and preparation. As Joanna says, we are waiting. We have been told that we will have first sight of the options around national skills planning in March.

Do you want to add anything about approaches in different regions, Audrey?

Audrey Cumberford: There is a consistency of response across the four nations, and even beyond the United Kingdom. It is about finding the sweet spot between being clear about the national priorities and how we deliver them, on one hand, and, on the other, exploring more regional autonomy to respond to regional demand and need. In my experience, and in the work that I have done recently, that is a common theme. That is where Scotland has been ahead of the game—it is just that we have not quite grasped the potential that regionalising colleges offered. Back in 2012, in response to the first call for evidence on this subject, I said that, in creating the 13 college regions, there was an opportunity for them to be the catalyst for the regional collaborations, partnerships, planning and delivery that would take us to that enhanced next step.

Neil Cowie: The minister's engagement in relation to our college has been appreciated. The senior officials who support him have also been interested in what we have been doing. On Audrey Cumberford's point, they are considering the colleges that play strongly into the skills space, and in particular are exploring what commerciality could look like if it was working well at regional level—I believe that we do that—and how it could be scaled among other colleges. That is certainly the current thinking of the senior officials and the minister.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I am sure that the committee would appreciate receiving further information about any good and positive examples that you found as you went round other parts of the country.

I have a final question on that aspect. I suspect that, tomorrow, the minister will make a statement about the funding landscape. Given what we have just heard, and our discussion on funding, what are your views on the minister's proposal to move the funding for skills from Skills Development Scotland to the SFC?

Andy Witty: I am happy to start. The college sector's position is that bringing those together would be helpful. To this committee, and certainly in consultations, we have responded that the bureaucracy that surrounds receiving funding through two different routes and by two different mechanisms—or often by many different ones—and the need to service that approach, take away resource from delivery of front-line college services. Streamlining that aspect would therefore be a helpful step. We will need to see how the proposal would work through.

A few minutes ago, we touched on apprenticeships. The apprenticeship side would come into the SFC, so it would need to look at that new approach. We need to ensure that the streamlining of funding for apprenticeships—which, as we have touched on, can bring benefit—happens while all the transition work happens.

Joanna Campbell: I welcome the simplification of the funding landscape. I say that as a principal, but also on behalf of the college sector. The existing apprenticeship commissioning model does not work for all of us, so having it more closely aligned with our core funding will be hugely beneficial. Obviously, the sector is keen to work with others in the transition to the new model. A

whole host of people with expertise will be ready to make that offer of help.

10:45

The Deputy Convener: I am happy to extend the evidence session, but I must ask members and witnesses to shorten their questions and answers a wee bit. I am also happy to take supplementaries, but perhaps we can leave them to the end and see whether we have time for them.

I call Bill Kidd.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Careers advice is obviously a big issue. The recent career review recommended that we ensure not just that careers services are fit for purpose, as we would all hope, but that we future proof them to meet the demands of a changing world of work. That is quite a dramatic thing to ask for. What progress has been made on careers advice and guidance in colleges since the career review recommendations were published?

Andy Witty: I am happy to make a few comments on that. Again, the direction that we are heading in is helpful and improving things for colleges. We now have Skills Development Scotland staff embedded in five colleges; that is the first time that that has happened, and it is helpful.

I think that this comes back to the comparability element. Looking back, the developing the young workforce support that is available in schools has not been available to the same extent in colleges, so it is not a level playing field to start with. As I have said, some of the recent developments have been helpful and are heading in the right direction, but it would be good to see that approach continuing as we move forward.

Bill Kidd: That is good. Does anyone else have anything to add?

Joanna Campbell: I think that Andy Witty has covered everything.

Bill Kidd: That sounded quite straightforward. Thank you for that response.

I will move on to something that might not be quite so straightforward: regional strategic boards. The committee is looking for as much of an update as we can get across the board—if you will pardon the pun—with regard to the reform or dissolving of the Glasgow colleges regional board and the dissolving of the Lanarkshire strategic regional board. On top of that, there is further integration across the University of the Highlands and Islands. I do not know whether that affects any of you, but it sounds quite dramatic. How will the proposed changes to the current regional board structure impact on colleges?

Andy Witty: I can say a few words on that, but I am not sure how helpful they are going to be. Colleges Scotland, as the membership organisation representing our members, does that job for the individual colleges as well as the regional strategic bodies at this point in time. Therefore, it is probably not appropriate for me to comment, apart from saying that we work strongly with our colleges and the regional strategic boards as our members. Whatever the structure is going forward, we will continue to work with them and to represent them on behalf of the overall sector.

Bill Kidd: I wonder whether any of the principals of colleges are concerned about anything in particular. Indeed, is there anything that you are happy with? Are you allowed to say?

Audrey Cumberford: I have the luxury of my college being the only one in the Edinburgh region, so my board is my board. I do not have another regional board sitting over me, which, in my view, is a good thing.

The regional boards were established to ensure cohesiveness across a wider region with multiple colleges, and the decisions to remove them reflect the fact that that was the situation back in 2012 and that, since then, partnerships, regional approaches and cohesive delivery have been established. There is no more need for that level of governance. That is my take on it.

Joanna Campbell: Colleges work best when they create partnerships organically. As Audrey Cumberford has said, that is certainly the case in Scotland's multi-college regions.

The other point that I would make is that the sector needs resource to support our students and we would not be in favour of anything that takes that resource away from front-line teaching and delivery.

Neil Cowie: I am not well sighted on what is happening in this particular area, so I apologise for that. However, like Audrey Cumberford, I am grateful for the governance arrangements that I have. The relationship between a principal and a chair is really important. In my tenure, I have been blessed to have worked with some very good people, including Susan Elston. I very much work in that vein.

As a consequence of what is happening in Glasgow and Lanarkshire, and more broadly in UHI, you would want to make sure that the principals and chairs can still do what is fundamentally best for their staff, students and stakeholders, and it is those principals and chairs who know that. Without necessarily knowing for sure, I suspect that the degree of additional

freedom that will be allowed as a consequence of the change will be beneficial to those principals and chairs, because they will be able to make sure that they are doing the best that they possibly can for the people that they work with and for.

Bill Kidd: That all sounds pretty positive. Thank you very much indeed.

The Deputy Convener: I now pass over to the patient John Mason.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I am not always patient. I am delighted that Glasgow is going to have three stand-alone colleges—and that one of the principals is going to be Joanna Campbell, I believe. I will therefore start with you, Joanna, on the theme of student poverty, which I assume affects most colleges but would certainly affect Glasgow colleges. A study has said that more than 60 per cent of students report that they are in financial difficulty. Is that figure realistic? How severe is the problem? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Joanna Campbell: Yes. That statistic is probably lower than the reality. The situation that I am faced with in my college is that students are saying that poverty is impacting on their ability to learn.

My college is not unique in this in any way—I know that other colleges approach the issue in a similar way—but we put on free breakfasts and have done so since 2017. We also put on lunch for our students. The students association does a whole host of work to support students, whether through food banks or working with local organisations to offer discounts.

The reality is that we are seeing more homelessness among our student body, and we are seeing more students who have been impacted by poverty than we have seen in any of the years gone by. It is a very real issue. We, as colleges, have taken decisions to invest our resources in a way that will support them, which means divesting resources elsewhere.

John Mason: In other words, there is a real problem.

Joanna Campbell: There is a real problem.

John Mason: Andy Witty, you have oversight of the whole country. Is the picture consistent across the country, or is it particularly the case in some areas?

Andy Witty: From what we understand, poverty is as real in rural areas as it is in urban areas. Different drivers might be involved, but poverty in both rural and urban areas needs to be tackled. The report did not surprise me when it came out.

There is also the potential knock-on impact of digital poverty on access to some of the hybrid learning. That was recognised, but the specific fund for digital poverty has now been stopped.

There is something around some of the other changes in the sector, with the Student Awards Agency Scotland taking on further education or higher education bursaries. There are different rules for further and higher education hardship funds, so there is an opportunity to look at that. At one college, one of the hardship funds was oversubscribed and it had to turn students away, but it had to return funding from the other hardship fund because students did not meet the criteria. Being able to bring those together would be helpful.

John Mason: Mr Cowie, most of us think of the north-east as the richest part of Scotland, but we realise that there is some poverty there, too. The 2023 committee report talked about students dropping out. Is that happening?

Neil Cowie: Our retention has improved significantly, but that is down to the hard work of not only our lecturing staff but our support staff in ensuring that we address the needs of students as quickly as we possibly can.

I echo what has already been said by colleagues. The figure in that report was, I think, probably conservative. I am genuinely concerned. In preparing for today's meeting, I talked to colleagues; we have a bursary budget of roughly £9.5 million, all of which we will spend—and that is after going back to the SFC and asking for an additional £1.4 million, which it granted. Just looking around the room, I wonder whether all of us have, in some shape or form, been impacted by the cost of living situation. In that context, when you think about the most "generous" bursary that we award, which is to care-experienced learners and amounts to £8,500, you see that that is where the impact is going to be felt. It is going to be harder to make ends meet, and in the north-east we are becoming aware of food-anxiety concerns about how to budget for food. Indeed, budgeting for every other thing is proving challenging, too.

Joanna Campbell touched on the notion of homelessness. We do not have any hard-and-fast evidence on this, but a colleague from Robert Gordon University is doing a piece of work on hidden homelessness—that is, sofa surfing. Again, we are interested in finding out a little bit more about how that impacts on our own students.

Colleagues have mentioned student kitchens and student pantries. Food flies out the door quicker than we can stock it, and we are now having to put in additional support. Thankfully, that happens through the students association, but although it is doing a great job, it is having to put in facilitators to assist with the distribution of food and ensure that it is distributed fairly and evenly.

Our college, like Joanna's, has been offering free breakfasts for a considerable time. The position is very different from what it was probably five or 10 years ago.

John Mason: In the 2023 report, there was talk of a special support payment from the Government and students getting the equivalent of the living wage. Has that happened?

Audrey Cumberford: Not as far as I am aware.

John Mason: So there has been no movement on that that we are aware of—okay.

Mr Witty just mentioned digital poverty. Is that an issue? It has been pointed out that that is not just about not having a laptop; it is also about the kind of wi-fi signal that you have at home, whether you have the space at home to sit down and study and so on. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Audrey Cumberford: The pandemic put a spotlight on digital poverty. It was always there, but as we went through the pandemic, a light was shone on some of the really challenging situations that our students are in. In my college, digital poverty is as much of an issue as the cost of living, the ability feed yourself, eating and so on. It is all about the basics of eating, heating and being able to afford to travel to college in the first place.

John Mason: I was going to say that, because you are in a city, it is presumably a bit easier for your students to physically get to college. Is that the case—or is that not always the case?

Audrey Cumberford: I am not sure that it is always the case. Indeed, I have shared some frustrations that we have about the issue in the Edinburgh region. For example, there might be free bus travel for students, but you have to be 22 years old or younger, and the average age of a college student—30,000 of whom go through Edinburgh College—is closer to 32 than it is to 22. Some more careful thought could be given to certain policy interventions when it comes to the make-up of the student body in a college.

John Mason: I presume that it would suit some of the older students to be at home, if they have children or caring responsibilities, but only for some courses.

Audrey Cumberford: We have a very large English for speakers of other languages—or ESOL—provision. Many of those students are women, and many of those women are lone parents. We found during the pandemic that distance and online learning was what they really wanted, because it suited their lifestyle; it cut down on travel, and it meant that they could look after their kids. We have continued with that approach in that provision. In fact, quite a lot of our provision is still online, because that is what the students want.

John Mason: We could probably explore this for longer. Does anyone else have anything to say?

11:00

Neil Cowie: I will be brief. Digital poverty is an interesting conundrum for NESCol's approach. As has already been alluded to, the digital poverty fund for us was about £380,000. That was valuable money that allowed us to make sure that people did not experience digital poverty.

There is a certain irony here, however. Although I am a fan of the SFC's change of approach, there is one thing that I am not particularly fond of. For a long time, we had a system called bring your own device, or BYOD, and it was very successful. It ran for about 11 years and, at its height, it gave 1,200 of our students, particularly those at the FE level and some at the HN level, access to laptops. When the pandemic came, that meant that pretty much every student in the college could walk out and move to online learning without any problem—it was seamless. However, we were always considered a bit of an outlier in the study expenses budget or the allocation that is given for student support funds. Consequently, the SFC changed the guidance to prohibit the use of those funds for such a scheme, so we had to abandon it and think of other ways of doing things. That was not particularly clever. I am not sure how many other colleges were impacted, but it worked really well for us and for our students.

This is a bit of a confession. In the absence of a digital poverty fund, money is drying up. We are again looking at what is best for students and trying to make sure that we can use what is allocated to us through the student support budget as best we can. Consequently, we are ploughing some of the money back into that space.

John Mason: Okay—that is helpful.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: On the basis of a lot of what you have just said, mental health is a concern. What impact has the end of the mental health funding for counsellors and the implementation of the student mental health action plan had on provision of support in colleges?

Neil Cowie: Unhappily, I can start on that. The impact of the withdrawal of that funding is pretty grim. Again, I will summarise as best I can. We have already lost one counsellor as a consequence, and the waiting times for counsellor support have now increased. We anticipate that, in the following year, we will probably go down from four counsellors to one. Bearing in mind the fact that our geographic footprint is quite big, that means that, in essence, one counsellor will be spread across Aberdeen, Fraserburgh and our

Altens campus over the week. We are not budgeting for any funding for 2026-27.

We also have student wellbeing advisers, but they have already been reduced from five to two, and we have also lost three temporary ones. The consequence of that is not only the impact on mental wellbeing and health services to students—the need for which is increasing—but the impact on our staff, because in essence our academic tutors will then get more of these issues to deal with.

With all due respect to the conversations that we have with NHS Grampian and with our university partners, there is no solution yet for making sure that whatever happens as a consequence of all this will be of fundamental benefit to all students in the north-east. I am genuinely concerned about the impact on the wellbeing and mental health of our students.

Joanna Campbell: We are also concerned. We made the decision to retain the services of our counsellor, although the work that they do is oversubscribed. However, that means that we had to make a difficult choice about where to turn down requests for resource elsewhere. For example, in our student services area, we have reduced staffing levels in other parts of college business, but we had to make that difficult decision because we knew that mental ill-health is increasingly an issue. We felt that we had to support work in that area, because it has such a negative impact on our students.

The delay in the publication of the student mental health action plan was not helpful, because there was a gap between the funding ending and the publication of the action plan. There is a real need for the action plan to be implemented, because we need to come up with a longer-term solution.

Scottish Student Sport has made funding available to the sector for student sports and wellbeing co-ordinators—I think; I have forgotten what they are called—and that has gone a long way towards alleviating some of the impact of mental health and wellbeing issues on the student body. Indeed, it has been so successful that Scottish Student Sport has extended that support, and it will be available to the sector for another three years.

Andy Witty: The stories and examples that you are hearing this morning of the really difficult decisions that are being made by individual colleges on what to do about mental health support, now that the funding has ended, are being repeated across the country. You have already heard some examples; I am also aware of a college that decided to put funds into mental health and retaining counsellors, but because of that, it has not been able to fund business development. That has had a knock-on impact with regard to links to industry and more recent asks from the Scottish Government in respect of getting more commercial income into colleges. You can spend every pound only once, and those are the sorts of really difficult decisions that are being made, because of the situation with mental health funding.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

The Deputy Convener: I call George Adam.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): My question will be on widening access in general, mainly because of my constituency. Indeed, Audrey Cumberford will be aware of the demography there, having worked in the area in the past.

Colleges do not actually get any credit for being an access point to higher education. We talk about widening access, but at the same time, we do not say much about colleges in that respect. How are colleges dealing with the sorts of challenges that we often hear from HE establishments? For example, they will say that the first and second years are difficult and that there are challenges with the individuals that they are dealing with.

As a sidebar to my question, I know that we use the SIMD figures to identify that sort of thing. Neil Cowie will have some rurality in his area—I assume that Joanna Campbell will, too—and the fact is that the SIMD does not reflect where the poverty actually is in rural areas. It is the same in some urban areas; the situation can be different almost from street to street. How are you dealing with that? Can you measure the data in other ways to identify young people or mature students in poverty? How do you deal day to day with people coming into HE in the current environment?

Joanna Campbell: I can answer that first.

I will start with a statistic. According to the most recent set of published figures, 22 per cent of university undergraduates come from college, and 50 per cent of them go into undergraduate provision with advanced standing, which means that they have to repeat part of their college education when they go into university.

In response to your question, I would like to mention the good work that we have been progressing in the south of Scotland. We, along with NESCol, were fortunate to be one of the pilots for SFC's pathfinder project; through that funding and initiative, we have been able to increase higher education provision in the Dumfries and Galloway region through the University of the West of Scotland. We now offer degrees in business and cybersecurity and, next year, we are introducing creative industries provision and health

and social care. We did that because there was no access to higher education, and it was recognised that it was something that the region needed.

On your point about the SIMD, if we were to have considered it when we were looking at that project, we probably would not have done it, because the data, as it stands, does not stack up in a rural context. Therefore, other data required to be considered to support the argument.

We are also members of the joint articulation group. One of our colleagues has been the college representative on it, and if she were here today, she would be pressing the point that we still have work to do to meet the commission on widening access targets. We could go further in that respect.

I do not think that I have anything else to say on that. I will just pass it over to my colleagues.

Neil Cowie: Perhaps I can add a comment. The articulation arrangements that we have in the north-east are pretty well established, and those between the college and, in particular, RGU have been pretty effective over the years.

We have about 72 degree-linked pathways with advanced standing that use the two-plus-two model, and 14 degree-linked pathways with advanced standing for years 1 to 3. It is interesting that, for 2022-23, we had about 670 NESCoL students articulate to university, but the figure was 870 the year before, so we are seeing a decline in the number of students who are articulating. We are trying to understand that a bit better. We do not believe that it is at all related to entry requirements at university; I think that it may be because more people are seeking to go to university directly.

Where that is a concern for me is that we tend to get a lot of younger people who are particularly, but not exclusively, less confident about making the leap into HE, and so coming through the FE vehicle of college is really helpful for them, because they are nurtured. In anecdotal and more qualitative terms, we know that, once they reach year 3 in a university degree programme, they fare really well, because they have been well prepared.

This is a watching brief; we need to keep an eye on what is happening there. There are probably always things that we need to keep an eye on, particularly in relation to the SIMD, to make sure that we are creating something that is about wide doors and deep reach and that all the forms of education and training that we provide are truly accessible.

Andy Witty: Widening access is something that colleges do almost intrinsically, but I think that that is not always recognised. In his latest report, one of the various recommendations made by the commissioner for fair access was for his remit to be extended to colleges by making the commissioner responsible for access to tertiary education. However, that was the one recommendation that was not accepted by the Scottish Government.

It could have been useful if the recommendation had been accepted, but you could not have just taken the university approach and applied it to colleges—you would have had to look at the nuances around it. However, it would have been helpful for the commissioner to have an official role to look at widening access to tertiary education.

George Adam: Thanks for that. You mentioned UWS. Last week, I visited the UWS campus in my Paisley constituency. My question follows on from Keith Brown's question about the Scottish Funding Council, as it hit on a specific cause of the problem. Because there was a drop in college students, UWS had a drop in the number of its students—that might be unusual for it but not for certain universities—which had a knock-on effect on how funding came through from the SFC. Audrey Cumberford spoke about the need for "agility and flexibility" in the funding mechanism. Do you agree with that? Does the SFC need to take account of that when organisations such as yours and universities are going through situations like that?

I will give an example. Most of the nurses in Scotland are trained at UWS. Basically, fewer people, both younger and older, are taking the two-year nursing course at college—I know that the course lasts for two years because my daughter did it. That has a knock-on effect. How do we deal with that? Do you agree that there needs to be a bit of flexibility in the funding mechanism in order to deal with the situation more strategically?

Audrey Cumberford: I can pick that up. When you consider what is happening on the ground, it is a question about the potential for unintended consequences. To take my college as an example, a fifth of our students go to university. Of that number, 60 per cent have advanced standing, meaning that they will go into either year 2 or year 3 of the degree course, which is great.

However, to go back to what I said earlier, we are noticing that what is being demanded of colleges is quickly changing. We are seeing clear evidence that the long, fat qualifications that take one, two or three years to complete is becoming less attractive to students and is in less demand. People more or less want to get into work or to get a better job as fast as they possibly can.

From my conversations with the four universities in my local area, I know that the number of

students who are progressing from the college into those universities has reduced. My worry is that the unintended consequence of that might be that the universities decide to try to pull in, in year 1, students who would ordinarily have gone to college because they needed an environment in which there was perhaps more intense wraparound support. All that we are doing is displacing people on the ground, because they are not necessarily going to the right place.

11:15

George Adam: From the universities' perspective, given the way in which the funding works, they are trying to deal with the shortfall, so you can understand why that might be the case.

Audrey Cumberford: However, the unintended consequence is that that is driving what is not necessarily the right behaviour.

George Adam: I agree, so is there a need for the SFC to have more flexibility?

Audrey Cumberford: The short answer is yes.

The Deputy Convener: We will be asking about that later, too.

Keith Brown: Audrey Cumberford talked about the nature of the courses that people are interested in having an impact. Has the sector made an assessment of the effectiveness of the SFC's new outcomes framework and assurance model since its introduction? I was not on the committee when the report was put together, but I know that having data is very important. If people do not have a grip on the matter and the SFC is reluctant to provide particular matrices for people going through the system, that is an issue. Has the sector as a whole looked at the model? If so, what does it make of it?

Andy Witty: It is a recent change—the new outcomes framework applies this academic year, so it is very new. One of its stated intentions was to simplify interactions and make the process more streamlined. Some thematic approaches are being introduced, and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education will be involved in that. The jury is still out on how simplified that will make the process for colleges. The same amount of work—or, potentially, more—might be required, so we need to look at how things develop. Clarity is needed on the individual roles of organisations in the system. We are in the early days of the new outcomes framework.

Joanna Campbell: I agree. We are working through the first year of the framework's introduction. QAA is responsible for working with us on the enhancement of our provision and assurance in that regard, and that work interweaves into the model. A number of working groups across the sector are working closely with the Funding Council as the framework is rolled out. If we are sitting here in 12 months, we will be able to answer the question more fully.

Keith Brown: I presume that the idea is to move at pace. It seems to me that, for your self-interest, it is extremely important that the Funding Council, the Government, this committee and others have a clear idea of what is happening and what benefits are being produced. In my area, one college is steadily withdrawing from a council area that has one of the highest levels of deprivation—Andy Witty mentioned it earlier—so the benefit to that area is reducing over time.

When I had responsibility for colleges 15 years ago, the need for parity of esteem for the college sector was the big rallying cry, and that had some effect. However, parity of esteem is served when the benefits can be demonstrated, so there must be clear and accurate figures. The SFC says that it is not its business to talk about outcomes for individuals—I do not know why that is the case—but surely it is in your interest to make sure that clear information is gathered at pace.

Neil Cowie: That is an interesting observation. I would be asking about the impact that Education Scotland has had through the quality arrangements for the college sector over previous years. Are we in a better position across the piece in education as a consequence? We might not have fully understood that impact.

If we are adopting a new quality model, it is imperative that we are clear about the impact of college delivery on the people whom we seek to serve. I agree with what has been said so far: it is too early for us to tell if the approach will fly, but we need to be smarter than we have been with regard to ensuring that we demonstrate our impact.

Fundamentally, we all know that we make a difference in our respective colleges and beyond. Colleges are trying to get parity of esteem right so that young people, not so young people and those who influence them within and beyond school understand exactly what the benefits are and how colleges can help them to progress towards employment. We need to be systematically clear about the impact that we are having on the people whom we serve, in an accountable way.

Willie Rennie: You said that there is a £775 million backlog in building maintenance. Will you give me a bit of colour about the kind of buildings that you are working in and what impact that has on students and staff?

Andy Witty: I will kick off with some general comments and others might want to come in. The committee has discussed the college estate previously. It varies hugely. There are some new

campuses and investment in the estate. However, there are far too many old campuses that are leaking and are not even windtight and watertight—in some cases, there are literally red buckets to catch water in the teaching environment. What does that experience mean for the learner? Is that preparing them for the modern workforce and places of work? There are some real challenges with the estate.

In 2017, a college estate survey noted that £360 million was needed to make the current buildings windtight and watertight. We all know the impact of inflation on construction costs since then. Audit Scotland last reported on the issue a couple of years ago, saying that there had been a shortfall of £321 million. Urgent health and safety issues had been tackled, but the maintenance backlog has built up and the situation will get worse.

The Scottish Funding Council is preparing an infrastructure investment plan and has done a baseline survey of the data. It has collected a good data set and has said that it is due to publish something in February. With regard to where we are with things, pace is again an issue The validation of some of the data has been extended, so we have those challenges.

Colleges Scotland surveyed our members in May 2023, and it reported that there were £775 million of costs at that point. That is the best figure that we have until we see the SFC's work. Effectively, the work will be to make buildings windtight and watertight or to replace things that are about to fall down. It does not start to address net zero at all—colleges need to meet net zero targets by 2045—and it does not deal with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. We still do not have a route to a solution for the seven colleges and 11 buildings that have RAAC.

Willie Rennie: We are quite a bit over time. Will you give me some quick examples of buildings that are not up to scratch?

Joanna Campbell: There is at least one college that I know of that has had to close its campus because it is deemed to be unsafe for students and staff to work and learn there, such is the state of disrepair. As we have heard from Andy Witty, some windows across the estate are not watertight. The Dumfries campus where I work was built in 2008 and the roof leaks. That is the reality: we cannot maintain some of our college estate.

Willie Rennie: This question is for Audrey Cumberford, who has been quite outspoken—

Audrey Cumberford: That is not like me.

Willie Rennie: I know. You have been outspoken about the need to have a regional approach and to give greater freedoms. Paul Little has spoken about having more of a polytechnic model on a regional basis, and tying that in with the local economy and other institutions. What is different about what you are proposing from what is already there, and what could that approach bring?

Audrey Cumberford: The city region deal and how it operates in Edinburgh and the Lothians helped to create a structure and a culture of collaboration between colleges, universities and other partners, whether it was industry, local authorities and so on. It was a real driving force to bring people together in a way that had not been happening before, to look at the regional needs and how those need to be met. It was also about having an eye to the future and what we need to start to line up between us. For me, there is a huge potential, not simply with the estate, but in what is provided and how it is provided to individuals and industry by a collective consortium of partners. That has tremendous value.

At the moment, those partnerships and collaborations are happening because of the leadership in the institutions and because we know what needs to be done. We are doing it despite the constraints that we are under. For me, it is about that untapped potential and how much more we could do if there was a much stronger focus on place and region, with a bit of trust given to regional partners, but with accountability and clear outcomes about what is expected to be delivered in that region. It is over to you guys.

Willie Rennie: Various governance bodies cover all those institutions. Is part of your plea to have greater flexibility and an Office for National Statistics reclassification? How far are you going with this? What essential flexibilities would have to change to make that possible?

Audrey Cumberford: When the ONS announced its reclassification of colleges, I happened to be sitting beside Anton Muscatelli at the University of Glasgow, and I asked him if he fancied a merger. I fancied that the university world of no ONS was much more appealing.

I know that the Government is looking at that by working in various ways with the sector to see whether there can be any loosening up of the current system to allow us to make the best decisions that we need to take for our regions. Again, however, I am not sure that it is happening quickly enough. The pace of change is really fast and the changes that are required in the system just do not seem to be happening fast enough to keep up.

Willie Rennie: I will leave it at that.

George Adam: There is so much to say about the ONS situation, but I will leave that and ask a nice simple question about industrial relations.

During my time on the Education, Children and Young People Committee, there has been a tension in industrial relations in the college sector that possibly does not exist in other parts of the education sector, particularly between lecturers, the Educational Institute of Scotland Further Education Lecturers Association and management.

We now have a four-year deal pay for lecturers and three years for other staff, but how do we improve industrial relations? There was a lack of trust on both sides from the start. How did we get to that place? People are people, and if you get them in a room, nine times out of 10 they will disagree but come out with some form of plan to go forward. How have we not been in that position over the years?

Joanna Campbell: I am happy to take that one, initially. You are correct, George. The multiyear pay deals have been helpful. I hope that they mean that our students will not be impacted this year when they need to complete their qualifications.

We have seen a resetting of the relationship with Unison since it changed governance of its FE branch, so we are working collaboratively and collegially with it. The lessons learned group that the minister convened has now met on three occasions. Employers and staff representatives are round that table. There have been productive discussions and a willingness to work together, and we are looking to improve the national bargaining machinery by working together. To do that, we need to look at a longer-term solution for how it operates.

11:30

We have agreed, through that group, to look at the national recognition practices agreement—NRPA—but that has been stalled by the trade unions, although employers are keen to move it on. The recommendations of the Strathesk report—the review of the national bargaining machinery—are discussed through that group. The other thing that the employers have looked for, through the work of that group, is an independent chair to the national joint negotiating committee. The staff side has rejected that, but we are trying to progress it through the lessons learned group.

To summarise, the lessons learned group is welcome and the tone of our conversations is collegial and supportive. However, there is still work to do and the employers are keen to look at moving forward with the NRPA.

George Adam: I am happy with that, deputy convener.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. Ross Greer has a final question.

Ross Greer: It was on the Strathesk report and whether the lessons learned have been followed up. Joanna Campbell has just covered that. Given how far over time we are, I am content with that.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you all for your time today and for the evidence that you have given. That concludes the public part of our proceedings.

11:31

Meeting continued in private until 11:55.

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