OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 26 February 2025

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 26 February 2025

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
7th 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:

James Dunphy (Advance HE)
Professor John McKendrick (Commissioner for Fair Access)
Claire McPherson (Universities Scotland)
Lydia Rohmer (Colleges Scotland)
Rebecca Scarlett (Lead Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 26 February 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:15]

Subordinate Legislation

Level 1 and Level 2 Disclosure Review Application (Scotland) Regulations 2025 (SSI 2025/26)

The Convener (Douglas Ross): Good morning, and welcome to the seventh meeting in 2025 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. The first item on our agenda is consideration of a Scottish statutory instrument. This instrument is being considered under the negative procedure. Do members have any comments on the instrument?

Members *indicated disagreement.*

The Convener: As members have no comments, does the committee agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the instrument?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Widening Access to Higher Education

09:15

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is an evidence session on our widening access inquiry. We have two panels of witnesses. On our first panel, we have Professor John McKendrick, the commissioner for fair access, who is joining us remotely.

For full transparency, Professor McKendrick, I note that I have informed committee members that we know each other from your time in your former guise as a professional football referee in the Scottish Professional Football League, where we operated together. I am delighted to welcome you to the committee, and I give you the opportunity to make some opening remarks.

Professor John McKendrick (Commissioner for Fair Access): Thank you, Douglas. I welcome the opportunity to make some opening remarks. First, I thank the committee for conducting the inquiry, which is timely and shows a commitment to the issue. I also thank the committee for allowing me the opportunity to provide evidence.

It is fair to say that there are three broad agendas in Scotland that are interlinked: tackling child poverty; narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap; and trying to achieve fair access in higher education. In my opinion, all three are worth pursuing. However, the first two agendas that I mentioned—tackling child poverty and narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap—are necessary but insufficient if we want to achieve fair access in higher education.

Yesterday was an interesting day in terms of those issues, as it saw the release of the latest data on attainment in schools, and there was an article in *The Times* that made some comments on fair access. I want to start my opening remarks by referring to both those things.

It is certainly the case that the most recent data that was released on attainment in schools is unhelpful in terms of narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap to achieve the broader aim of achieving fair access in higher education. The evidence suggests that the poverty-related attainment gap is not narrowing in Scotland and that, if it was, it would make fair access easier to achieve.

However, it is important to acknowledge that that data also contains relevant evidence that shows the progress that has been made. For example, hidden in the data is the evidence that the number of people from the 20 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland who have progressed

to higher education has increased in each of the past six years. Higher education includes not only the university level but the higher national diploma and higher national certificate levels. In itself, that progress is an important point that we should not overlook. About 10 to 12 years ago, there were three times as many entrants to higher education from the most affluent areas compared with the most deprived areas. There are now twice as many. We might argue that that is a sign that there is more work to do, but it is also a sign that significant progress has been made. So, although yesterday's data cannot be celebrated, there are, nevertheless, signs of welcome progress that has been made in recent years.

The article in *The Times* is relevant to the committee's work, and committee members might wish to refer to it in their deliberations. It largely articulated Universities Scotland's position, which is that the failure to narrow the poverty-related attainment gap is a problem in terms of meeting the fair access target—I have made reference to that point already. However, the article contained a point of view that was attributed to me. I want to read that passage, because it is important that I clarify this point at the outset. The article mistakenly asserts that I

"admitted widening access to deprived pupils on lower grades would mean more middle and upper-class pupils locked out of university, including some with stellar grades at high school."

I have had a constructive exchange with the Scottish editor on that point, and I have to emphasise to the committee that I do not recognise those words and I do not concur with the message.

The Convener: Thank you for that clarification. I expect that we will come on to that issue during our session with you.

First, I want to go back to your appointment. When you were appointed as commissioner for fair access, what did you want to achieve? Now, more than a year into the post, you have issued one report and are finalising your second report. What do you feel has been achieved in that time by yourself and others working collaboratively? What areas could have been actioned in the time that you have been in post that are still waiting to be progressed?

Professor McKendrick: There are certainly some things that are on-going work. I have noticed a change of pace as recently as in the past six months. There almost seems to be a renewed energy in relation to the issue, and some interesting developments in terms of trying to make progress on some long-standing ambitions in this agenda. I would like to discuss that in more detail later.

I was highly motivated when I took on the post. I saw it as a coming together of some of my interests: I have an interest in school education, I provide support for the Scottish attainment challenge and my core work is on child poverty, and, as I say, I see those three agendas as being linked. Working on those issues is good for Scotland, and it says something about us that we want to allow individuals to achieve their potential. It was an agenda that I stepped into with a lot of motivation and an acknowledgement of the good work that had been done. However, to be perfectly honest, it was an agenda that I did not understand as much as I thought that I did when I took it on. I did not understand the range of work that is undertaken towards achieving that end not just in higher education but in colleges, by third sector partners and in schools. Much of my early time as commissioner was taken up by gaining an understanding of the landscape, of why progress had been made and of what the barriers to that progress were. Now, we can turn to action and take concrete steps to make the progress that has to be made.

I sensed some frustration on the part of the previous commissioner when I saw the comments that he had made, almost annually, about things that no progress was being made on. However, again, I can see that we are perhaps beginning to address those issues more directly than we were in the past.

There have been disappointments—it is important that I give a balanced view. In the past two rounds of formal reports on widening access data, there has been no increase in the proportion of people from the most deprived areas progressing to higher education. Again, I am sure that we will address that in more detail later. It has certainly been a disappointment that, during my time in post, there has been no evidence of an increase towards the next target. However, I do not necessarily think that that is a significant problem, given more recent indications and the work that has been undertaken to underpin further progress towards fair access.

The Convener: Your first report was published in January last year, but it was September before the Government issued its response to your report. Is that the timescale that you were expecting, or would you benefit from greater urgency in the Government response?

Professor McKendrick: It is fair to say that a quicker response would be helpful. There are perhaps good reasons for why the response was delayed in that particular year, but we would absolutely be looking for a quicker response.

I should say that I am in regular contact with the policy team and the analytical team, whose work underpins what the Scottish Government does.

The Convener: Were you given any reasons for the delayed response?

Professor McKendrick: I think that there were data issues last year that meant that it was difficult to reply more timeously.

The Convener: You say in your written submission to the committee that you are finalising this year's report. When can we expect it? Can you put a timeframe on your homework for this year?

Professor McKendrick: My homework should be able to be marked by the end of March.

The Convener: The 20 recommendations that you made in last year's report were all either agreed to or partially agreed to by the Scottish Government, barring one, which concerned strengthening your remit to include colleges. I have discussed that with some of the representatives who are interested in this subject. Given that the Government is not keen on that and dismissed it completely, will that be a recommendation that you keep coming back to, or do you accept that the current Scottish Government will not agree to strengthening your remit?

Professor McKendrick: I think that it is the right thing for Scotland that the fair access work has a tertiary education perspective rather than just a higher education perspective. I understand the reasons why the proposal was rejected. It was perhaps felt that we must throw our energies into meeting the targets that have already been set, and that, given that the next interim target will be soon upon us, it would have been unwise to broaden the agenda at that point. I can understand why it was rejected, but I completely and whole-heartedly believe that, with regard to fair access and the appropriate outcomes for young people and adults returning to education, the right thing for Scotland is that we consider further education as well as higher education.

The Convener: These will be the final couple of questions from me for now. You say in your written evidence that you

"would not be supportive of crude interventions, which were deployed simply in order to achieve the next interim target."

Would you outline some of those "crude interventions" that you think would be counterproductive?

Professor McKendrick: Sure. First, however, nobody is proposing "crude interventions" of that sort, so I think that we can relax and not worry about that.

It is within universities' gift to decide who enters university. They could decide, for example, that they will only enter those from deprived-area backgrounds in order to meet the target. That is an incredibly crude measure that could be undertaken, which would meet the target. If we were only interested in meeting the target, we could do that. Nobody is arguing for that, however. It would not be right for individuals and it would be socially unjust. The point is that, if we wanted to meet the target for meeting the target's sake, we could do so. It is more important that we meet the target by doing the right things at the right time in the right way than that we just meet the target for meeting the target's sake.

The Convener: One of your other recommendations is

"the adoption of a universal student identifier and the establishment of a national tracking system",

which

"should be a priority action."

That sounds like a fairly reasonable proposal. Why has that not happened before now, and why is it still an "action", rather than actually being delivered?

Professor McKendrick: That is one of the issues on which we seem to be making a little bit more progress, and we are paying it a little bit more attention than previously. It is absolutely central: if we want to ensure that money from the public purse is being spent wisely, to track progress, to understand the journeys of young people—perhaps through further education into higher education, or perhaps into the world of work and then returning to education—to understand what works and to understand transition in the longer term, we need such a system. I am not the only one who has been arguing for it; such a system was argued for by the first commissioner, by Universities Scotland and by others in the sector.

That system requires resource being committed. I would very much welcome the committee's support in arguing that the resource would be well spent. I think that there is commitment to the proposal in the sector; I do not think that anybody thinks that it is a bad idea. However, it requires resource, commitment and leadership if we are to introduce a universal student number.

The Convener: Does it just come down to a lack of available funds to implement that? Like you, I cannot understand a reason why the idea would not be progressed.

Professor McKendrick: Yes, I think that that is what it comes down to. We have the technical ability to deliver such a system. I would not say that it would be easy, but we have something similar in the health system in Scotland, where we have the one number that works, and there is no

reason why we should not have the same in education.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Good morning, Professor McKendrick, and thank you for taking the time to come along today. You have said that work to progress the introduction of additional data measures is a priority. Will you give the committee an update on the progress of that work? What needs to happen next?

Professor McKendrick: There are probably two dimensions to it. What we have is a sensible indicator in the early stages of fair access work. The indicator that I am referring to is that of the 20 per cent most deprived areas. As has already been mentioned, in 2010, there were three times as many people progressing to higher education from the most affluent backgrounds compared with from the most deprived backgrounds. We understand that there was a gap that was worth narrowing, and that indicator allowed us to measure the gap.

However, there are inconsistencies with that measure. We know from wider work in poverty that there are disadvantaged people who live outside our most deprived areas, and there are people in our most deprived areas who are not disadvantaged. I live in one of Scotland's 10 per cent most deprived areas. My youngest daughter should not be benefiting from any fair access work, given our family background, but she perhaps would, simply because of where we live. Although it is a helpful indicator to a degree, it is not the right indicator. The right indicator would measure individual circumstance.

I understand why the indicator was introduced in the first place, but we are now at a more mature stage in our fair access work, and it is time to rethink, in that we can have an optimal indicator rather than a convenient indicator.

An optimal indicator would be one that measures individual circumstance. Free school meals are currently being explored; a trial is being undertaken in the north-east of Scotland to understand whether we could use free school meals data more effectively as an indicator of fair access. I understand that there are challenges to overcome in terms of data agreements and permissions to be sought, but those are surmountable, and the public would be very surprised if they found out that we were not using such data to optimal effect.

09:30

Although the system is different down south, free school meal data can be used to measure fair access work south of the border. As I say, the different system in Scotland does not allow that to take place here, but there is on-going work on that, and I would be very disappointed if concrete progress is not made in that area in the short term. Getting a better single indicator of fair access and shifting away from an area-based measure towards an individual-based measure is one aspect.

The second dimension is that having a sharp focus on any single indicator undersells the fair access work that we do in Scotland. I understand that the committee is also interested in the broader range of circumstances that pose challenges for people in accessing higher education. We must acknowledge that a lot of work goes on in universities both to get students in and, once they are in, to support students with a broad range of backgrounds and challenges to succeed in their studies. However, we only measure fair access in terms of the 20 per cent most deprived areas.

Therefore, the two dimensions in which we have to make progress are that, ultimately, we need a better single, headline indicator, and we need a basket of indicators that tells the broader story of the range of work that we are doing to facilitate access for all with talent, to get the most from their talent in higher education.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, and thank you for your opening statement, Professor McKendrick. I want to ask about measures, and I will come to the basket of measures in a moment. In your report, you talk about the importance of measuring student experience and outcomes as well as entry. Will you tell us why that is important?

Professor McKendrick: There is absolutely no point in getting people into higher education if they do not succeed in and thrive beyond it. It is a waste of public money and of their time if they are not succeeding in their higher education. We measure the staying-on rates, or the retention rates, after one year. That is a very crude measure of success in higher education and much more can be done to measure success. We also measure destinations at the departure point from university—again, more can be done to make more of those data.

We also have data that we do not work hard enough: the data that we hold as institutions could be worked a bit harder, or the story could at least be shared more widely, in order to demonstrate the extent to which and the ways in which those who come from a fair access background are progressing in their studies. That is vital, in terms of public interest in our money being well spent in pursuing this agenda, and in terms of social justice, so that we are not just putting a lot of energy into getting students in and then forgetting about them once they are in. We have to support them to enable them to succeed in their studies when they are there and set them up for a future

that allows them, when they leave university, to realise the potential of the skills that they have acquired and pursued through their studies.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Does anything in the data that you have seen in your work tell us a story about those students, particularly in terms of student experience and the longer-term outcomes?

Professor McKendrick: We do not have enough data on that. There is certainly a gap in the retention data; it is not an extensive gap, but there is a gap for those from more deprived backgrounds and other students in terms of whether they are retained at university. That tells us something, very crudely, about whether they actually maintain their studies. It tells us that something is not quite right, because more of the students from more deprived backgrounds are not progressing in their studies, but it does not tell us about their study experience and why that might be the case, so we need better data to understand that.

Looking at the data on entry and that on graduation, a gap has emerged between those two points. The retention rate is there for the four years of university study but by the time students get to that exit point, it is not 16.4 per cent of graduating students who are from the 20 per cent most deprived areas, it is less than that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: A colleague will probably ask more questions on that in a moment and I do not want to steal them, but thank you for that.

The universal student identifier that you spoke about sounds useful. Would anything that you have learned from the pilots in Aberdeen benefit from that number? Does it need legislation or could we do it without legislating?

Professor McKendrick: I genuinely do not know whether it needs legislation for that to happen. I would be surprised if it did. If it does, I impress upon the committee the importance of that. It is legislation worth making because it is about efficient public spend.

If we want to understand what works, we need a much better data system than we currently have. Many of the initiatives that are undertaken are plausible. Many of those that are undertaken in schools are well regarded by schools. They seem to do the right things, but we genuinely know whether they are doing the right things only if we have the data to track that through time, so there are very good reasons to introduce the identifier. If we want to make the right decisions about public investment of the limited resource that we have, we undoubtedly need a much better data system to support that.

The Aberdeen initiative, which is about using free school meals as an indicator, is not so much about a universal student identifier. The universal student identifier goes beyond that. It raises the question whether there are other schemes going on in the schools in the north-east that also lead to success or non-success in who gets to progress to university.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have a final question about the student experience. Some of the evidence that the committee has heard as part of the inquiry talks about the funding and support that are available to students while they are at university. I recall the National Union of Students Scotland report that spoke about how education is free but studying is not. One comment that we have heard is that the current system of bursaries, grants and student support is not as progressive as it might be. Do you have a view on that?

Professor McKendrick: It almost seems implausible that, if you have a free education system, it cannot be progressive. If it is free education, surely everybody will benefit from it, but the reality is that students must exist while they are in their studies. The fee for learning is not the only cost of study that they incur. They must exist. They must feed themselves. They must travel to university. Many costs are involved simply in living and the bursaries are not currently sufficient.

There has been an increase in the entitlement of students to have a loan portion up to the equivalent of the national living wage. That is welcome and NUS Scotland welcomed it, but the reality—which, I find, we do not always face up to—is that many students do their best to minimise the amount of loan that they have to incur. Doing that leads them to undertake paid work that complements their studies.

There is nothing wrong with paid work. Many years ago, the Cubie report stated that there were benefits from students undertaking paid work in combination with their studies and recommended that they should undertake a maximum of 10 hours a week. The contemporary reality is that many of our students are undertaking much more than what we think is a reasonable amount of paid work in combination with their studies. In effect, we have full-time students who combine their studies with part-time-plus work.

We have to face up to that issue. I am not saying that we should completely do away with loans and replace them all with bursaries—I understand the cost to the public purse of doing that—but we must have a realistic and honest conversation about the realities of student life, student financing and how students spend their time. Are they able to get the most out of their studies when they have to work—not choose to work—to continue with those studies? I am not

convinced that a significant proportion of our students are able to get the most out of their studies because they have to work more than it is reasonable to do while pursuing a higher education.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Thanks very much for everything that you have given us so far, Professor McKendrick.

Do we lack an active framework for fair access? How much impact has that lack had on the progress towards bringing everyone up to the same level?

Professor McKendrick: I am sorry—I am not quite sure what you mean by a framework.

Bill Kidd: I beg your pardon. I mean how different sectors work together to share evidence of successful access initiatives.

Professor McKendrick: We have a system in which each part understands the roles that are played by the others within it. However, even when one part is critical of others, it still understands their importance. An example of that happened yesterday, when Universities Scotland expressed concern that schools were not delivering what it needed to achieve fair access. That tells us that universities still understand that schools have to work if such access is to be achieved. Universities also acknowledge the vital role of colleges in facilitating access to higher education.

My sense is that such information is shared. An organisation called Scotland's community of access and participation practitioners, or SCAPP, which was introduced at the outset of the fair access work, provides a space for people from different institutions who work in the field to come together to share practice. The importance of such an approach is much underestimated. My involvement with that organisation is that I attend events and provide support where I can. I see it as a true collective, which promotes the sharing of experience and understanding. It has a desire not to be protective, or to think that the information that we hold is commercially sensitive and only for the benefit of our own institutions, but to share practice among the wider higher and further education community.

A collective sense of purpose exists across the sector, together with an understanding that all parts of the system have to work together if we are to achieve our ultimate goal of fair access to higher education.

Bill Kidd: That is very positive. Thanks very much.

The Convener: We move to questions from John Mason.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I want to pursue a little further Jackie Dunbar's point about Scottish index of multiple deprivation areas. I have just been looking at a map of my own constituency in that context. I get the argument that the index is perhaps a bit rough and ready—there might be better-off people in lower deciles and poorer people in other areas—but is it not a good clear-cut measure that people understand? Once we start bringing in this, that or the next thing, does it not all just become vague, so that it is then hard to pin down whether we are making progress?

Professor McKendrick: I agree that there would be no point in replacing a widely understood indicator with one that becomes more complicated, so that the agenda becomes more obtuse. That is not what I am proposing. I suggest that we find a better indicator that people can understand as an individual measure of deprivation.

Nor am I saying that there is no merit in using SIMD—there absolutely is. For example, constituencies such as yours, which are part of a broader area with challenges, brings impacts for everybody in those areas. There would be additional merit in using an area-based measure, but the complications of such measures mean that the closer that we get to 20 per cent, the more problematic it becomes to pursue using a single indicator as the only measure of our progress.

The most dramatic example of that concerns rural areas. For example, Orkney and Shetland have no areas in the 20 per cent most deprived category. If we take away the remote and rural aspect, we know that there are families there who will be economically disadvantaged, but they will not be caught by what we are measuring in our fair access work. Work is going on to promote fair access wherever there is disadvantage, but we could be sharper about what we measure.

To cut to the chase on your point, there has been merit in using SIMD, there continues to be merit in doing so, and there would not be a crisis if we continued to use it, but it is not the best measure. There is a risk that the public's commitment to the fair access agenda would be increasingly undermined, because the inconsistencies will become more apparent as we get closer to the target. Ultimately, the right thing to do is to take a target that is direct and sharp about who is within its focus, so an individual measure would be better.

As far as the basket of indicators is concerned, that is a delicate balance that I think is worth striking. Yes, if we have a single indicator, it is very clear what we are measuring progress on—and I will continue to advocate for a single headline measure—but there is also a danger that

if we have only that measure, which is very easy to understand, we do ourselves a disservice by not being able to tell the broader story of the access work that we are undertaking.

Therefore, I think that there is a balance to be struck. We need the right indicator—that is, the headline indicator—but we also need, if you like, a subsidiary tier of broader indicators that tell that broader fair access story. I think that it is well within our gift as communicators, and the gift of the broader general public as consumers, to understand what that data is telling us.

09:45

John Mason: If you are arguing that there should be one headline indicator, but that it could be better, would free school meals be the one that you would be inclined to go for?

Professor McKendrick: I think that the free school meals indicator looks the most promising just now. You could also argue that the Scottish child payment might be promising, too, further down the line.

Free school meals is not perfect as an indicator, though, if we do not have a full data system. Many of the fair access population entering higher education are adult returners, for whom we will not have that ready free school meal data. After all, school is not their entry point back into education. Therefore, it is not a perfect indicator, and we must ensure that we do not replace one imperfect indicator with another.

As I said, there is work to be done. I think that that looks like the best indicator just now, or the most promising of all that are there.

John Mason: I take your point that it is not perfect. There is the whole issue of stigma, too, with some families who are probably entitled to free school meals not actually claiming them.

You might also have two families, both of whom are on relatively low incomes. In the first household—and this, in my experience, is often the case with people from, say, an African background—the parents are very committed to education, are really supporting their kids and really want them to do well. Even if the parents have not done so well and are struggling a bit financially, those kids will have the huge advantage of getting all that support from their parents. The second household might not have two parents, say, and there might be no commitment to education at all. Those are the kids whom I feel that we need to be targeting, and I just wonder how we bring them into the system.

Professor McKendrick: That is where your education professionals are important. Schoolteachers and those involved in widening access work know pupils; they understand family life, community life and the need to support kids who perhaps do not get that support in the family home.

That is why this work is so important. It is perhaps no fault of their background that some parents do not value education—they might not have had the benefits of life that come from it—but they might have children with talent who could benefit. The fair access work is important, because there is talent that is not being realised. I commend the work that has been done, and which has been supported by the Parliament, to invest in this area, because it allows that talent to flourish.

I do not think that this is necessarily an issue that we have to think about in our design, because our teachers already know which children have talent and need a little bit of a push and some support in order to realise it. Increasingly, there are interventions coming in during the senior phase at school to get them over the edge, if you like—to give them that little bit of a push and that little bit of extra support so that they have an understanding of what is required, which perhaps is not there in the wider family.

I also want to stress that I am not in any way, shape or form demeaning or decrying families who do not provide that support. It might simply be that it is not part of the family's background, but it very much could be part of the child's future.

John Mason: Fair enough.

Let me see if I am understanding this correctly: in a better off area, there might be fewer kids from a deprived background, but the school can focus on them and give them extra support. There are parts of my constituency, though, where everyone in the whole area—or at least part of it—is struggling, which makes things very difficult for the school. Is that a picture that you recognise? It pulls me back to the idea that physical SIMD areas provide a good measure, because that will be reflected in the schools. Am I being unfair?

Professor McKendrick: No—that is a fair point. If you are going to be efficient, you will target your work in the areas where you are likely to get the greatest return. Therefore, you are right: in the east end of Glasgow, there is more opportunity to make more of a difference than there might be in more affluent parts of Scotland or in those parts of Scotland where a higher proportion of kids benefit from school.

Still, when it comes to measuring fair access, it is important that we do it at an individual rather than an area-based level. We might be talking about two issues there, John. There is the work of targeting in order to provide opportunity, and then there is the work of measuring, which is about whether or not we are achieving fair access. I think

that in the future we will continue to target schools and communities that have a low throughput to higher education and further education in order to allow talent to flourish when that otherwise might not happen. There are excellent examples of that work going on. The young Strathclyder programme, which will cover some of the schools in your area, John, specifically targets schools in Glasgow that do not have a tradition of large numbers of pupils progressing to higher education. It tries to realise those talents, if you like, and provide those pupils with the extra support that they require to set them on a different path.

John Mason: Thanks very much.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning, Professor McKendrick. On the back of what my colleague John Mason has said about SIMD, I want to say that he and I have known each other for a very long time, and he is an accountant at heart who wants that one data set that he can work on.

I think that a basket of measures are needed. You have mentioned some of them. Having just one data set on its own would not be the way forward. SIMD might be a good measure in some areas, but not in others. Everybody talks about rural areas, but in some urban areas, it might work for one street but not for the street next to it. Is it not better to have a basket of measures, or am I just overcomplicating things?

Professor McKendrick: I do not think you are overcomplicating it, but having a single headline measure is important. It gives focus to the agenda. If we get the right single measure of focus, it all becomes credible. I think that we can achieve that—we can find the right individual measure.

I am not contradicting myself, but there is also merit in having a basket of indicators that sit alongside that one, because a broader range of fair access work is being undertaken and it is important that we are able to tell that story at the same time.

There is a broader range of data that describes the profile of the student population anyway. It sits there as part of that broader picture, but we do not talk about that as much because we are focused only on the headline measure. It is like so many things that we measure in public life—we focus on the headline, but there is a broader story to tell beneath that. I think that we have to get both right.

The Convener: In answering the point that was raised by John Mason, you mentioned adult returners. Is there a metric that you can use to capture them? As you said, they will not be captured by measures such as free school meals and the Scottish child payment. Is it possible to capture them?

Professor McKendrick: If you had a single universal identifier and you were tracking through time, the historical free school meal data would be there to enable us to do that. That would be the best way to go about that. If you are talking about the medium term and the longer term, it is not as big an issue, because you have the right data in place from the outset.

Just now, a mixed economy might be required, with free school meals data used for school leavers, but SIMD data continuing to be used for adult returners, perhaps. Until we get to a time when we have a comprehensive data system that tracks our young people over time as they move into the world of work and adulthood and throughout their education journeys, I think that we need to consider that as an option.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): My question goes back to your introductory remarks about school education. The figures that we heard yesterday were truly depressing. The numbers have flatlined since 2016, and Universities Scotland was clear that they have remained broadly static since the campaign was launched by Nicola Sturgeon. Do you have a message for the Government about how that failure to narrow the gap is having an impact on your work?

Professor McKendrick: I think that Universities Scotland has a clear position on that. It sees that as being the main barrier to achieving fair access. I am sorry, but I am going to appear like a dog with a bone here: I come back to the idea of having a comprehensive data system. It is not the case that every fair access student goes from school into higher education. Many enter the world of work, then go to college and then return to work. Many enter college and decide that they want to continue with their studies. Although the results that were released yesterday certainly are not positive—nobody could suggest that they are—nevertheless it is undoubtedly the case that many of those young people will move into further education, begin to realise their talent in further education and then decide that higher education is an option for them that they would like to pursue, and then they will articulate into university at a later stage.

I am not as negative as Universities Scotland about the data. I do not think that this is a barrier to the achievement of fair access, but it is certainly difficult in terms of direct entry from school. If talent is not being realised in school, universities understandably cannot accept as many from school. However, that is not the end of the story. That is a point that we miss, and we are not able to talk it through because we do not have the data that allows us to track journeys beyond school into higher education.

Willie Rennie: I am completely with you on all that. The variety of different routes—the almost unique way that we do it in Scotland—is a beneficial way of doing it, and I accept that. However, you must be frustrated about the failure to narrow the gap. From your work in the higher education sector, do you have any advice for ministers about the measures that they should be implementing and the lessons that we can spread across to the school sector to narrow that gap? Have you any advice about how that should be done?

Professor McKendrick: As somebody who works in higher education, it would be wrong for me to speak down to schools and tell them what has to be done in schools in order to narrow the gap. You are right that more has to be done. We cannot accept a widening gap, never mind a gap that is not narrowing.

The reality is that attitudes towards schooling have changed slightly since Covid. The Covid consequences are still being felt—and that is not an excuse; it is a reality. Some of the data that was produced yesterday tells us that more than one in 10 young people miss one day of school every week, and that one third of our school pupils miss one day of school every two weeks. That tells us something about what has to change in schools. For whatever reason, schools are not able to deliver for young people. That might be for health reasons, but it might also be about disengagement from school.

The problem is perhaps not so much with education issues or the learning as it is with those broader social challenges and social contexts that we have to look at if we are serious about narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap. It should not be taken as a failure of school teachers or as meaning that pupils do not have ability. Something broader is happening in the lives of school pupils, in their families and in their attitudes towards school, and we have to look at that if we want to make further progress in narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap.

George Adam: Professor McKendrick, I apologise for anything that I might have said when you were refereeing at St Mirren park in the past. It was entirely of the moment and not personal.

In my area, Paisley, we have the University of the West of Scotland, which is similar to your own Glasgow Caledonian University and does well in recruiting young people to university. Unlike a lot of other universities, where access is straight from school, access to those universities is normally through college—perhaps people returning to education or going to college slightly later in life. Can more be done in the sector to work with colleges and schools to see whether they can help you with the work that you are trying to do?

Professor McKendrick: UWS has some stellar examples of work that it is doing with colleges. It now has something like a franchise arrangement with New College Lanarkshire, whereby there are four subjects in which someone can do their University of West of Scotland degree in the colleges in Lanarkshire. Without leaving the college, they can get a university education. That is bringing higher education closer to where people are and making it more convenient for them. There has been some innovation. UWS is not the only example—there are partnerships elsewhere in Scotland, too.

We have to make sure that we have a system in place that means that people are in the right place at the right time. Colleges have expressed some concerns that universities have been so focused on meeting their targets that they are keen to get pupils in earlier than perhaps they should be brought in, and that the right place for some who leave school is college. That can be a full stop—college education has value in and of its own right, and it is very often the right thing for many young people. Alternatively, the right pathway to higher education might be through college.

Valuing each of the sectors and the role that it plays is important. The sectors should not be seen as competitors, but as doing the right thing at the right time for our young people. When we have strong partnerships—and there are many examples of those—it is more likely that we will do the right thing for the young person rather than the right thing for the institution.

10:00

George Adam: When we talk about people from poorer backgrounds going to university, the other thing that we often talk about is that those students tend to have a higher drop-out rate in year 2. Again, UWS used to mention that to me regularly, saying that the fact that it has to retain those students should be taken into account when the Scottish Funding Council is providing funding. Can more be done to make sure that we do not have that high drop-out rate? I know that things have improved slightly, but if someone's family has a chaotic background, they are still going to have that chaos in their life in year 2. How do we make sure that we keep them for the full course?

Professor McKendrick: Going forward, retention has to be one of the priority areas. I have already mentioned that there is absolutely no use in our throwing all our energy into getting people in if we are not prepared to allow them to thrive once they are there. More work has to be done when young people or adults return to university after year 1. Again, there are some good examples of work on that.

I am not here to sing the praises of UWS, but you are forcing me to do it once again. In the past few years, UWS has employed student success officers. It is about early intervention and working in a different way. We know the signs that, early on in their studies, a student has maybe not bedded in well and is not succeeding as well as they might. UWS employs people not to go in there with a stick, but to find support for those students. They find out what the issues are and whether they can be solved. They take a person-centred approach to make sure that the students are able to settle into their studies. That practice is promising—it is not evidenced, so we cannot say that it is the solution that will solve retention issues, but it is a good example of universities thinking differently.

Our job is not just to get people in and teach them, but to get them in and think about whether—given the challenges that those students face—the education that we deliver will enable them to realise their potential. If it will not enable them to do that, we need to think about what has to be done.

That is just one example, but there is a sense that universities can work slightly differently in order to retain that resource and make sure that students are not wasting money from the public purse by getting in but not realising their potential.

Should a higher premium be paid for widening access students? I do not know whether you were hinting at that as well, George, but it is interesting that it was in the Australian universities accord as part of Australia's proposal for working towards fair access over the course of this century. There is an acknowledgement that it is more expensive to teach a student from a fair access background, so the state would pay a higher levy to the institution for teaching students from such a background. That has not been proposed in Scotland and I have not yet established a position on it, but it is worth having a public debate on the issue. If there are higher costs to educating those with more challenging backgrounds, is it reasonable to expect universities to bear that cost without some acknowledgement of that in how we finance our students?

George Adam: Rather than anything else, I was probably coming at this from the aspect that Glasgow Caley and UWS get a better funding package, because they seem to be the ones that continually hit the figures.

I know that you cannot answer this, but my argument has always been that some of the ancient universities can carry on without Government funding. The University of St Andrews survived the reformation, for example. I am not saying that that is a Government position—it is just a thought that I have had. For some of the other universities, 70 per cent of their funding comes from the Government. There might be a way to have more flexibility, and that could be a way forward for us. We could at least have the debate.

Professor McKendrick: The debate is always worth having. The universities would argue that, currently, they are not in a strong financial position. We know the challenges that are faced at the University of Dundee, but there are other institutions that are considering reducing their staff numbers just now. They are not necessarily in a strong position, but you make a valid point.

The mix of funding that universities get is different from institution to institution, and understanding what is required to allow universities to function and thrive is a conversation that is worth having.

You made a point about UWS and Caledonian bearing the brunt of this. Our metric is the 20 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland, and the bulk of the most deprived areas are in west-central Scotland. That is why UWS and Caledonian are doing a lot of the heavy lifting. The University of Glasgow and the University of Strathclyde also take significant numbers of students from those areas. I stress that each of Scotland's 19 higher education institutions is making a contribution to the agenda, with that contribution often being a proportionate one, based on their catchment areas. If we use only the SIMD measure, universities such as Robert Gordon University and the University of Aberdeen will never be able to achieve the proportion of fair access students that you would find in Glasgow. That simply cannot happen because their core population largely does not come from deprived areas. It is important that we value all institutions for their commitment to the agenda.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Good morning, Professor McKendrick. I do not think we have met, but I offer no apologies for anything that I might have said at Easter Road, should you ever have had the privilege of going there.

Your comment has kind of cut the legs off the question that I was going to ask. I know you have said that you do not support crude measures, but if we look at what Glasgow Caledonian University has achieved, it might be simplistic to suggest that that model could be applied to other universities.

Glasgow Caledonian was challenged to achieve an aim. I might be being a simplistic politician, but the idea of having a target and achieving it is important in its own right for public confidence. I assume that there must be some compelling reason why this is the case, but your comment seemed to suggest that some institutions would

never be able to achieve that target because of their core population. I do not want to put words in your mouth, and you will get a chance to come back to me, but is that right? If that is the case, how realistic are the targets in the first place?

Professor McKendrick: You make an important point. It is a national target, which means that different parts of the nation are able to, and will, contribute to achieving that overall national target.

I have recommended one thing for which I think that there is support. At the moment, we have a single target that says that every institution should work towards having 10 per cent of its students coming from the 20 per cent most-deprived areas. From the get-go—from the very outset—institutions in the north-east and, to some extent, Scotland's Rural College will never be able to meet that target, while institutions in central Scotland always meet it, simply by virtue of where they are.

I have recommended a more stretching target. I have suggested that, instead of having the same figure for every institution, regardless of catchment, every institution should be asked to do at least as well as it has done before, or to do better by increasing the number of students from the most deprived areas. That would mean that universities such as Caledonian or UWS, which have a high proportion of students from those areas, would be looking to do even better. It would also mean that those universities that seemed to be failing would be acknowledged not to have failed if they continued to make progress. The cumulative effect of that would be that the national target could be met by those in west central Scotland achieving more than 20 per cent, with those in the more northern and rural parts of Scotland reaching not 20 per cent but a reasonable percentage for them to achieve, based on where they are in the country.

You made two points. Your point about Caledonian is a fair one. The principal there would argue that his institution should be given more places because it has evidence of success in attracting students from the 20 per cent most deprived areas and that, if we want to make further progress on achieving the target, giving more places to institutions such as Caledonian would be one way of doing that.

That is an argument and there is a debate to be had. It is for the Scottish Funding Council to decide where to put university places in the nation, but I want to value all institutions for the contributions that they continue to make to the agenda.

Keith Brown: I have to ask the question whether the target is a worthwhile one to have, aside from the fact that you can do a lot of good in trying to achieve it. Given what you have said, do we have the right target?

I would be interested to hear about your own experience, and not only from the year that you have spent in this job. I am new to the committee and it would help me to understand the historical context and where we are in closing the attainment gap. I remember that when I went to university, very few people from my background were at university. I would like to get an idea of the historical context but also of whether it is the right target to have.

Professor McKendrick: It is the right target for the reason that you gave—it does a lot of good. We are trying to work towards something that is well worth achieving. At the end of the day, it is about young people and adult returners achieving their potential, and working towards that is worthwhile.

It is interesting that Australia is almost following Scotland's lead in terms of trying to follow a similar agenda. However, in its target, which is over a longer time frame, it has not estimated proportionate participation. I cannot remember the exact figures, but it is not going for 20 per cent of students from the 20 per cent most deprived areas, which it does not see as realistic. It still wants to increase the proportion, but it is not asking for as stretching a target as we have set ourselves in Scotland.

One of the challenges of setting ourselves such an ambitious target is that, if we do not meet it, does that constitute failure? It would be a great risk to draw the conclusion that if we do not meet the target by 2030, we have somehow failed. When we sit back and look at it, we can see that you are right, in that the number of participating students who are entering university from the 20 per cent most deprived areas has almost doubled in the past 10 years. That is an incredible transformation. Our universities are much more diverse than they were beforehand. That is about people realising their potential. It is a success story for Scotland.

Yes, we can do more and we absolutely cannot be complacent, and there are things that we have to do if we want to continue to make progress. However, I would be very disappointed if we were to lose heart just because it seems as if the target that we have set ourselves is a little beyond us. We should continue to work towards it because it is the right thing to do for the country.

Keith Brown: I have one last question on that point. This is probably well known to other members of the committee, but not to me. You mentioned Australia, but how does Scotland

perform in Europe and United Kingdom comparisons, in terms of widening access?

Professor McKendrick: We do not have measures that allow a like-for-like comparison. Other parts of the UK certainly welcome and look to—with a bit of jealousy, if you like—the strategy that we have to pursue fair access in Scotland: the commitment to fair access is stronger in Scotland than it is in other parts of the UK.

That is not to say that there are not things going on elsewhere in the UK that would be welcome in Scotland—in England, there are access and participation plans that have a stronger evaluation component to them—but I certainly think that we have a stronger commitment to fair access here than there is elsewhere. In terms of data, it is very difficult to do a like-for-like comparison.

The Convener: To follow up on your answer to the first point that Keith Brown raised with you, why have we set that target for individual institutions when everyone knows that the north-east and, maybe, the south of Scotland and other more rural areas cannot achieve it? Why was it set in the first place? Why was the point that you are making now on having a more accurate measure—that is, incremental increases year on year—not established at the very beginning?

Professor McKendrick: I am not sure. That was before my time, Douglas, but the most important thing is that we do the right thing now. We realise that the right thing is to ask all institutions to do better, and that we are fair in our assessment of the institutions in the north-east of Scotland. I do not think that we have been fair, because there is a power of good work being done in the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University to promote fair access, but every year, when the data are released, a media story comes out about how they are failing because they are not meeting the target. That is so unfair. That is not to say that better work cannot be done, but I think that we are at a mature stage of the agenda.

Perhaps the target was attractive at the start to get a bit of focus and to get everybody to want to make progress in a certain way—in other words, for the same reason why SIMD was an appropriate indicator at the very start, which was that it gave us something to work towards—but we are now at a mature stage of the agenda and it is the right time to do better. There is a feeling of support in the sector for what I am proposing, and it is a challenge that I am setting. There is no hiding place: I am asking everybody to do better than they have in the past.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, Professor McKendrick, and thanks for joining us today.

I want to carry on the line of questioning that George Adam and Keith Brown have pursued, because I am interested in hearing, from your experience and from what you have had the chance to look at, what unintended consequences and admissions behaviours the targets have delivered.

You outlined well how, in some cases, we have set universities up to fail because they have not been able to achieve the targets. However, are we creating a situation in which, because we have the targets, we are also setting young people up to fail? We can tick a box to say that we got them into university for year 1, but we are not sustaining them all to graduation.

I have seen some of the great work that is going on with care-experienced young people in Edinburgh. That is a great model, but we are talking about a different model for the wider student population. What is your view on that—specifically, on the point that the approach has driven admissions behaviours to change, but not necessarily to deliver the outcomes for which we hope?

10:15

Professor McKendrick: It is in universities' interests for students to succeed and for any student who enters a university to progress and graduate. There is a financial incentive for universities for their students to do that, because the fees then continue in subsequent years. That has led to changes in support structures in universities.

It is perhaps less of a headline that there is better support in universities to enable students to thrive. It is worth exploring whether there is enough, but we are certainly more attuned to students' needs and better able to attend to them to allow students to progress.

On admissions behaviour, universities are independent institutions. To be viable, every one of them has an imperative to have enough students progressing into its institution every year. We need a system for entry that does not allow hypercompetition to make the system become regressive, although I do not think that we have that in Scotland. Although there are critics of the allocations and the cap numbers, the system leads to a greater sense of what we are trying to do as a collective and dampens some of the ubercompetitive behaviour in admissions that has perhaps been more characteristic of south of the border.

I would not say that the system is perfect. It would be wrong of me to suggest that it is, but much more work goes on to support students to

succeed in their university studies than is perhaps understood and widely acknowledged.

Miles Briggs: From your experience, is it fair to say that, in some cases, students who are not ready for and cannot be sustained in university are funnelled into going there in order to meet the target? Politicians often put in place targets and think that that is a good thing. We are hearing that the target might not be realistic for many parts of the country, but—needless to say—we have created the system, so institutions will try to hit the target.

That relates to my point about care-experienced young people. There is a really good model for them that we can progress, but is that happening?

Professor McKendrick: No, is my quick answer to that—but that is not to be flippant or to say that the issue that you raise is not important.

My eldest daughter went to the University of Strathclyde and withdrew after having successfully completed a year because she was miserable and was not enjoying it. There are many reasons why students do not succeed at university. Sometimes, it is just a case of having picked the wrong course, so they have to step out and reorient. My daughter did okay: she went back to university later, in the right place and on the right course, and did well for herself.

There is an issue that comes back to my tertiary-education perspective on fair access. We have sent the message that higher education is the desired outcome for our young people. That in itself has, perhaps, created a system that focuses overly on higher education and does not truly appreciate the value of a college education for some young people, either as a throughway to higher education or as an end in itself.

We need to create better balance in the system, but I do not want to overstate the suggestion that we have created a system that is putting lots of young people into university who are not capable or are not ready. There will always, for a variety of reasons, be people, such as my elder daughter, for whom it is just not right. We have to create balance in the system. That will come, I think, when we have a tertiary-education perspective on fair access.

Miles Briggs: This is the million-dollar question: what is the likelihood of the 2026 interim target and the 2030 target being delivered? To put that a different way, what needs to change to deliver on the targets? You outlined concerns around geographic spread, but are there others that you would like to put on the record?

Professor McKendrick: I think that the 2030 target is realistic, although I would much prefer that it was an individual target. It would represent a recalibration of the fair access agenda, and it would be more stretching than an area-based target. So, I think that the 2030 target is possible.

As for the interim target, if you had asked me the question a few months ago, I would have said that the indications were not good, because the proportion of fair access entrants had flatlined for a few years. However, more recent indications from early-access returns suggest that we are, perhaps, beginning to see an uptick, and that further progress is being made. Therefore, it is possible that we could meet the next target. I would not say that it was a certainty, though.

This will seem to be a very odd thing for me to say, as commissioner for fair access, but I would not see it as being a problem if we do not meet the next interim target, as long as we are making progress towards it and are doing the right things in terms of allowing students to access higher education and allowing them to thrive while they are in it. For me, it is more important that we are doing the right things and getting the system right. If we do the right things and get the system right, the stats will change, because that will be what they will reflect, at the end of the day. Nevertheless, I think that it is a possibility that we will meet the interim target—and that it is a much stronger possibility than it was a few months ago.

Miles Briggs: Thank you.

The Convener: I call Ross Greer.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Good morning, John.

Earlier, you mentioned that students have to exist while they are at university, and you mentioned all the other factors that have a significant impact on their ability to get there in the first place and then to complete their studies. I am interested in the housing situation, in particular, and in hearing about any work that you have done on that and evidence that you have gathered on it, particularly in the light of the point that was made by Miles Briggs about care-experienced young people, who often have difficulties in accessing housing and accommodation when they are at university.

The Scottish Government's programme for government in the previous years of this session contained a commitment to a guarantor scheme for estranged young people and students, in particular. That is not present in the most recent programme for government, so I presume that the Government no longer intends to progress it. What impact are you aware of on the ability of students, particularly those who are estranged from their families, who are care-experienced and so on, to complete their studies as a result of their inability to access housing and the lack of a guarantor who can help them with that?

Professor McKendrick: I have to say that you have raised an issue that I am ignorant of, but I assure you now that I will look into it. It is not something that has been brought to my attention, but it is a significant issue. What you have explained to me is something that is worth my while to look at, so I will do so.

We have to acknowledge that many fair access students remain in the family home, so you are right that a smaller proportion of estranged students or care-experienced students pursue studies away from the family home. I am perhaps being critical of myself, because my focus has been on the bulk of the fair access population, but it has been my understanding that they tend to be home-based students: therefore, housing has not been as much of a focus as it perhaps should have been, in my work.

I give you an assurance that I will look into the issue after the meeting, Ross. If you want to contact me to follow up on that, I would welcome that.

Ross Greer: That would be great, and it is much appreciated. Thank you very much. That is all from me, convener.

The Convener: I have just a few final questions, Professor McKendrick. First, what is your view on including other characteristics within a basket of measures to analyse the progress that is being made? I am thinking of things that are perhaps not considered currently, such as disability status and such like. Would you widen the range of issues that you would look at in that way in order to consider progress?

Professor McKendrick: We collect a broader range of data now—we just do not headline it. The report on widening access—or ROWA—data will include a broader range of characteristics for who enters university.

One of my recommendations is that we should have a broader basket of indicators. I understand that Universities Scotland has welcomed that, so a conversation will be taking place to explore what that might be. Contextualised admissions are really interesting in terms of giving us a sense of what universities want. The 20 per cent indicator is what we measure for fair access, but if we look at the range of factors that individual institutions take into account in determining what has to be done to provide a little bit of extra support in order to facilitate access, we see a much broader range with regard to the 20 per cent most-deprived people, including factors such as having a forces background, having a disability and coming from remote and rural areas. A broader range of factors is currently being considered, and that story has to be told.

Inevitably, the story will be slightly different in different institutions. What is considered to be an issue in Scotland's Rural College might be very different to what is considered to be an issue by Edinburgh or Glasgow university, but I think that being able to tell that broader story is important. I am strongly supportive of having a broader range of indicators to give a more rounded picture of our fair access work, but—and it is a big "but"—I would combine that with the continuing need for a central measure to provide a focus for the agenda.

The Convener: I want to go back to something that you said in March 2024, just after you had been appointed as commissioner. In talking about cuts to the Government's budget to colleges, you said that you feared that college funding cuts could deny students the "springboard" that they need to get to university. Since you made those comments, we have had another budget, which was passed yesterday in Parliament. On colleges funding, Colleges Scotland has said that it is a disappointment that there has been a real-terms cut in its budget and that that posed "significant challenges". Almost a year on from your concerns about last year's cuts taking away from or limiting the springboard that students need to get into university, what is your view of the further real-terms cuts to the college sector's funding?

Professor McKendrick: I can only reaffirm my point that colleges are vital to the fair access work in Scotland. If we were measuring fair access only on the basis of a direct journey from school to higher education, we would be underselling what we do, and there would be far smaller numbers coming from our most disadvantaged backgrounds.

A significant proportion of our fair access students are adult returners who come through the college route, which is absolutely vital in allowing people to achieve their potential. Colleges have to be funded to a level that allows that work to take place. Again, though, I emphasise that we should value our colleges not just as vehicles for getting people into higher education; rather, we need to value the work that they do in its own right, as a direct entry route to the labour market for young people and for adult returners, too.

The Convener: Finally, I went back and read the article in yesterday's *The Times* that you started off the evidence session by commenting on. I notice that you are not quoted in it at all; there are no direct quotes from you, as far as I can see from the online version. However, the article does say:

"The commissioner for fair access admitted widening access to deprived pupils on lower grades would mean more middle and upper-class pupils locked out of university, including some with stellar grades at high school."

I know that those are not your words—a journalist was paraphrasing you—but what did you actually say? What comment would you like to make on the record to the Parliament's committee on that issue?

Professor McKendrick: It is a misinterpretation of the evidence that I submitted in advance to the committee. Mistakes happen—I do not think that there was any bad intention on the part of a journalist.

What I said was that, inevitably, if you increase the proportion from one group, you will reduce the proportion from another group. It is a simple point of arithmetic: if you increase the proportion of people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds going to higher education, inevitably the proportion that comes from other groups will be reduced. However, that does not mean that the numbers from the more advantaged backgrounds have to reduce. If you increase the size of the pie, there is a chance that those numbers will increase as well as the numbers of people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

That might be quite difficult for us to get our heads around, but the reality in Scotland over the time of the fair access agenda is that not only have the numbers of people from the most deprived backgrounds increased significantly, but the numbers from the least deprived backgrounds have increased, too. The proportion might have reduced, but the numbers from the least deprived backgrounds have increased. This is a really important point.

There is a sense that, by promoting fair access, we are taking places away from our traditionally more privileged parts of the country—those who have always had university on their horizon—and that they are no longer able to go, because we are giving the places to poorer pupils. That is a fallacy, and it is a dangerous fallacy that does us a great disservice. The evidence does not suggest that that is the reality, so it is really important that I clarify that point.

As for the particular words that were chosen, I think that that was just a bit of embellishment from the journalist. They are absolutely not my words and they are not my sentiment.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that important clarification at the end of our first evidence session on our inquiry into widening access.

Professor McKendrick, thank you for your submission prior to your giving evidence and for your answers to members' questions today. I know that you will be following the work of the committee as we progress the inquiry, just as we will be following your work and your upcoming report next month. I hope that you are feeling a bit better, and that today's session has not worsened your conditions any. Thank you for your time.

I suspend the meeting for 15 minutes.

10:29

Meeting suspended.

10:40

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back, members. I welcome to the meeting our second panel of witnesses: James Dunphy is director of educational excellence at Advance HE; Rebecca Scarlett is senior policy and information officer at Lead Scotland; Lydia Rohmer is principal and chief executive of UHI North, West and Hebrides, and is representing Colleges Scotland; and Claire McPherson is director of Universities Scotland.

Since most of you were in the public gallery for part, if not all, of Professor McKendrick's evidence earlier, perhaps you could give your reflections on what you heard. In particular, will you comment on his points about the year ahead, the issues about individual identifiers, the possibility of colleges being included in his remit in the future, and any other information that was of interest to you?

James Dunphy is nodding his head, so perhaps he could start.

James Dunphy (Advance HE): That sounds good to me. Thank you very much, convener and committee, for having us with you. It is a pleasure to contribute evidence.

It was really useful to hear from the commissioner about the progress that has been made on the commission on widening access—COWA—ambition and also his sense of the work that will need to be done over the next period if we are to achieve our fair access ambitions.

For me, the big takeaway message from Professor McKendrick's evidence and the written evidence that the committee received in advance of the session is that the work in this area is not yet done. Although great progress is being made on fair access, which we can see happening across our public bodies, in our institutions and in our communities, there is further work for us to do.

Access is not just about enrolment in a college or university; it is about enabling individuals to take full advantage of the opportunity to enter higher education. As Professor McKendrick pointed out, as much as anything else, it is about retention and success and about positive outcomes for individuals and graduates. If we focus on those, as well as the access challenge, we are much more likely to secure for those

individuals the positive progress that they want to see in their lives. We are also likely to be able to secure the outcomes that we want to see on health and in our labour market.

Lydia Rohmer (Colleges Scotland): Colleges play a critical role in enabling multiple routes for individuals to access post-school education. The commissioner rightly highlighted the role that colleges play in the fair access agenda.

Colleges are very much community anchors. They provide a key role for individuals to step out of poverty and into qualifications and more valued jobs, and they generally have a transformational impact on the lives of individuals and their communities and the outcomes that my colleague James Dunphy has just described.

Colleges already make a huge contribution to fair access. I was delighted that the commissioner recognised that. Colleges work with schools. They have significant involvement with the senior phase, enabling pathways in schools to facilitate post-school choices, so they have a direct role to play in young people accessing such options, whether they be for college or university.

Colleges deliver significant higher education themselves, through HNCs and HNDs but also through their partnership agreements with individual universities, including the degree provision aspect that is franchised to them.

Colleges also have a significant role to play for adult returners, and they are key providers of Scottish wider access programmes that enable direct access to higher education for thousands of learners each year.

The college sector has supported the fair access agenda by working in partnership with the university sector in response to the blueprint for fair access and the original COWA report, through the national articulation forum and subsequently the joint articulation forum, which examines how colleges interact in partnership with universities to provide a platform for college learners to enter undergraduate university education. I can say more about that later.

10:45

Rebecca Scarlett (Lead Scotland): I was pleased to hear the commissioner refer to disability in response to your question at the end of the previous evidence session. Even the written evidence that has been submitted omits an understanding of the importance of including disability in the widening access agenda.

Five years ago, we tried to campaign for including disability as a contextual indicator, but it has not happened. It is important to understand and not underestimate the level of disadvantage that disabled people face. On children with additional support needs at school, the committee is aware of the issues in schools with the provision for additional support to learn.

It is exciting and hopeful to see how supportive the commissioner is of the role of colleges in the widening access agenda. We cannot have access without including colleges and other pathways. Lead Scotland supports disabled people to learn in the community and there is no way that our learners would be able to progress to higher education, if that was something that they wanted to do, without those transitions and pathways, so we are broadly supportive of that.

I also want to reflect on the other aspects of access beyond entrance, which are retention, participation and outcomes for disabled people, which are not always positive when compared with those for non-disabled people.

Claire McPherson (Universities Scotland): We were pleased to hear the comments from the fair access commissioner. To pick up on James Dunphy's point, this is a success story, but there is more to do. When we look at the progress that has been made to date, it is a story of partnership and collective effort in the higher education sector and between the sector and schools, colleges, the Government, the Scottish Funding Council and the fair access commissioner himself. We have that collective effort and a sense of a common mission and endeavour.

Our sector sought out this inquiry. It is passionate about helping to achieve the 2030 targets, and we think that this is the right point in time to reflect on the success and the achievements that have been made, as well as taking a bit of a critical look at what more could be done to drive towards that 2030 target.

Unsurprisingly, the fair access commissioner raised a number of issues that the sector has raised with us as being key to helping us to shift towards that target. I was pleased that the commissioner highlighted the different roles that different institutions play. This is not just a numbers game. The passion for and commitment to the widening access agenda are universal across the sector and our partners.

I am happy to be taking part in the discussion today.

The Convener: I will continue with Ms McPherson. In response to Willie Rennie's questions, the commissioner spoke about how the Covid consequences will have had an impact. Have the pandemic and the financial challenges that your sector is facing had an impact on fair access to universities and colleges?

Claire McPherson: They inevitably have. Perhaps I could start in the same way as the commissioner did earlier by clarifying the slant that was put on the Universities Scotland statement about school attainment. It is important that we recognise the incredible work that is being done across all our schools to support pupils. Covid and its long legacy are not to be underestimated.

It is, however, crucial to emphasise that the original commission on widening access report made it very clear that school attainment has an important role to play in meeting the targets, which were set in anticipation of the attainment gap closing. If we are looking ahead to how we are going to meet those targets, we feel duty bound to point out that the context in which those targets were set was an expectation that we would see the attainment gap closing as we reached 2030.

None of us could have expected the impact of the cost of living crisis and austerity as well as the Covid years and their knock-on effects. That is why it is important to take stock at this point in time. We know from our school and college partners, as well as from universities themselves, that the needs of students and the support that they get have increased. That is where we get into issues such as retention, which continues to be an issue for us. We anticipate that it will be an issue for years to come as pupils work their way through the school system and go on to post-school destinations.

The Convener: Ms Rohmer, do you have a comment from the college side, particularly about the consequences of the Covid pandemic and the financial challenges that colleges have been facing and continue to face?

Lydia Rohmer: I will comment first on the impact of Covid on colleges. As I said, colleges have a vital role in providing for HN learners and equipping them to articulate into university as undergraduates. As my colleague Claire McPherson said, that is very much due to excellent and strategic partnership work between colleges and universities, which is one of the success stories of fair access and is unique to Scotland—it does not exist in such a formal way in other parts of the UK.

However, the contribution that colleges make to the COWA statistics for universities relies on the volume of learners studying HNC and HND courses in colleges, and there has been a definitive drop in those HN numbers since Covid. Some of that was due to the impact that Covid had on school pupils, some of whom stayed longer in school instead of accessing college education. Particularly in 2020, it was also partly due to the way in which school pupils were assessed, which meant that their results enabled them to go directly to university, and to the fact that the university sector was given additional numbers for full-time equivalent undergraduate entries. That certainly had a detrimental impact on the numbers of HN students in the college sector.

The college sector has also picked up behavioural issues and has dealt with the mental health impacts on learners coming to us post-Covid. Those have, in some cases, impacted on retention numbers and on attainment in the college sector, which, in turn, through HN attainment and retention, has impacted on articulation numbers. Although articulation is a really important feature of the college-university partnership, there have been distinct Covid impacts. Numbers are plateauing but could recover.

I will comment on recruitment behaviour in the context of fair access. Following Covid, universities very much recruited learners who would traditionally have come to college first, before progressing to their chosen outcome of either university or work. There can sometimes be unintended consequences from applying a rigid SIMD 20 target, particularly when those numbers are used as institutional targets in the way that the commissioner has talked about. I am glad to see that those institutional targets will be removed, and I hope that the competitiveness in recruitment will be alleviated.

Finally, on the financial impact, the huge volume and percentage of articulating students who come through the college sector means that any funding changes that are detrimental to the college sector will have an impact on the number of students going into higher education. That is a direct correlation. The 17 per cent deficit in college budgets is certainly making itself felt. It is affecting both the subjects that colleges can offer and the number of learners, because, as a result of that financial crisis, colleges are having to shrink what they can offer.

James Dunphy: I will go back to Claire McPherson's point about the long-term impact of Covid, and I will connect that to the commissioner's remarks about access leading not only to enrolment but to student success.

Each new intake into the system is an opportunity, but it also presents challenges. The students who enter the system each year bring with them the legacy impact of the educational environment that they have come from. In this case, we are talking about Covid.

As we think about access targets, it is important for us to remember also to think about the continuing need to work on retention and student success. That has been a key area of focus for us as an organisation that supports the HE workforce, and particularly the educator workforce, in

Scotland. There is an absolute commitment to supporting securing student outcomes in the system, but the system also needs to be able to respond to the live needs of students, which was a key theme that the committee picked up in its earlier session.

Jackie Dunbar: I will direct my question to Mr Dunphy. However, if that is directing it to the wrong person—something I normally always do—please direct it to the right person.

What are the risks and benefits of sticking with the SIMD as the main measure of progress?

James Dunphy: I will say a few words and then pass that question to colleagues on the panel, because they will also have relevant expertise.

One interesting point in the commissioner's evidence was the message around having a headline target. Policy coherence and clarity of ambition in Scotland have been helpful. Claire McPherson talked earlier about what that has done for the system. It has had a cohesive effect in pulling people together to reach towards the challenging target of equalising access. There is a real benefit in having headline measures.

It is also important to focus on socioeconomic disadvantage. We know—and we are unashamed to talk to you about—the positive impacts and benefits of higher education. We know that higher education can play a key role in breaking the cycle of poverty by opening up opportunities and helping people to get on in life, secure professional careers and improve things for themselves and their families.

I am sure that we will also hear, through today's conversation, about the benefits of not being limited to one particular measure but also looking in the round at the range of things that can reduce people's ability to access higher education. That can include things such as rural access issues and caring responsibilities. That blend is important, which is what we heard from the commissioner in the previous session.

Lydia Rohmer: My colleague Mr Dunphy spoke about rural issues with SIMD. The commissioner also touched on that in the previous session. As it is the area that I work in, the issue is close to my heart.

I absolutely concur that the SIMD methodology is important and should remain a feature of the fair access agenda. However, although it is necessary, it is not sufficient. Other indicators are required, and a lot of work is going on in relation to a basket of more individualised measures, including work on rural learners and on reflecting rural poverty in a better way.

Local authorities in rural areas, such as Highland Council, have a lot of experience of rurality proofing in relation to policy making. For example, it is about the distance to key services, the distance to educational establishments, subject choice in very small rural high schools with small school rolls, the availability of extracurricular activities, engagement with employers in small rural settings, and post-school access to further and higher education from within rural and island communities. Those are all important issues.

Rural postcodes are huge and simply do not reflect population density, which is reflected in SIMD 20 measures. That does not mean that SIMD 20 is not valid; it is simply that it does not bite in rural and island contexts. That needs to be reflected and better amended in the targets.

Claire McPherson: I will follow on from those points. I think that SIMD 20 has taken us to where we are today, which we should value. It has been a galvanising measure and has helped to drive progress.

What we are hearing from the panel, and what we heard from the fair access commissioner earlier, is that, as we take an increasingly person-centred approach to supporting students when they are at university, it is vital to have a metric and a basket of measures that help to identify those person-centred characteristics. We know that many people who live in poverty do not live in a SIMD 20 postcode. Likewise, there are people who live in a SIMD 20 postcode who do not have the same needs. If that is the only measure that we are applying our minds to, we are therefore missing out on cohorts of people who really need support to stay and thrive in a university setting.

We are therefore very much aligned with the fair access commissioner's view that that basket of measures is vital, and we are keen to work with him, the Government, colleges and other stakeholders to develop those measures and bring them to life. It feels imperative that we get into a space where we are doing something to capture the unique needs of learners, so that we can help them to succeed and get the outcomes that they all want.

11:00

Rebecca Scarlett: I support what the rest of the panel are saying. Everybody knows that the SIMD is not a perfect measure. It is important to think about individual measures and contextual flags. Disabled people experience poverty more than non-disabled people. They have fewer qualifications and are twice as likely to be unemployed. We are thinking about this as a preventative measure. They might not live in an SIMD household, but a lot of families who have disabled children face poverty because of what

they have to go through to get the right support. It is important not to focus solely on the SIMD.

John Mason: Ms McPherson spoke about a basket of measures. I have also asked the commissioner this question. Is there a danger that, if the measures become too wide and, in a sense, too individual, it will be very hard to see whether we are making progress because there are so many factors to consider? The SIMD is pretty clear cut. It gives us a clear measure and we know how we are doing.

Claire McPherson: Any system that involves people is complex. People have complex needs. As we have grown in confidence, we want to expand our ambitions and make sure that we are assuring ourselves that we are doing everything to meet those needs.

The way that the commissioner for fair access positioned it was probably right. There is still a need for a galvanising measure, but sitting alongside that, as is commonplace in many other systems, should be a series of other ways in which we can track and understand progress and think about other interventions that we need to develop in order to meet students' needs while they are in the system, whether they are at the college end of the spectrum or as they are graduating.

John Mason: Would you stick with the SIMD as the galvanising measure? Should it be free school meals or something else?

Claire McPherson: We have been interested in exploring free school meals as a measure and the commissioner's point about the national learner identification number sits at the heart of that. The sector has wanted that for many years. We would be fully behind any investment in a system that delivers that, because we are using other things as a proxy.

John Mason: Will you explain what the identification number is? I am new to this. Is it like a national insurance number?

Claire McPherson: It is a bit like a national insurance number. It is something that would allow us to understand where a person has been in their educational journey, in the same way as a patient has a patient number in the national health service. It would allow us to understand the learner's history and mean that, without having to ask people to self-identify, we could pick up on their needs in the background.

John Mason: Who would have access to that? Does that mean that, if somebody applies to university, the university can find out all about that person's history?

Claire McPherson: I do not think that that would be the case. The commissioner for fair access and the sector are keen to have a conversation with the Government about how to design something that would work for the learner and for the institutions.

When it comes to other things that we could do, free school meals would be an obvious measure. We have also had another conversation with the Government about mature learners and the fact that they do not have a national learner identifier, and whether we can use access to universal credit or other historical data that would allow us to understand where mature learners might have particular needs.

All that is a bit of a workaround for what might be a more easy-to-access national system that would help us to track the outcomes that learners achieve at all stages of their learner journey.

John Mason: Ms Rohmer, you talked about rural areas, which are such big areas that there are bits in poverty and bits that are better off. Is it not the case that a poorer family in a better-off area will tend to get more support and care, whereas a family or an individual who lives in an area where everybody is deprived, such as parts of the east end of Glasgow, for example, will find it much more difficult to access care because there is so much need?

Lydia Rohmer: In the rural context, there are probably not many communities that are like the east end of Glasgow. There are pockets of area-based concentrated deprivation, but in rural areas it is quite often individual households that are in deprivation.

The cost of living in rural areas is such that the baseline cost of living is significantly higher than it is in some urban areas. Therefore, how we define poverty is also an issue in remote and rural areas, but it hides in those very large postcodes. There are also area-based issues in rural areas, such as lack of infrastructure and services, which are probably in parallel with area-based deprivation in urban centres.

My view is that SIMD measures must remain the core indicator even in the rural context, but additional data needs to be gathered in order to reflect and identify rural poverty and to create the right responses for learners who come from rural and island contexts.

John Mason: Mr Dunphy, we are talking about trying to make the whole system more individualised to target where need is greatest. I made the point to the commissioner that, sometimes, there are two families or households that appear to be in similar financial situations, but in one, there is great cohesion and real commitment to education from the adults, and in the other, there is not. Can we get to a stage where we target the support to the individual or student who needs it?

James Dunphy: I absolutely agree with the commissioner's reflection that it goes back to the talents of the people who work in the system in ensuring the appropriateness of the support arrangements that exist. For example, in each region in Scotland, including in the region in which Lydia Rohmer works and leads her college, there are colleagues who work with individuals in the local environment to provide the necessary support, bridging and engagement to raise ambition and enable access.

To go back to the point around galvanising, the University of Aberdeen's approach to contextualised admissions does not involve looking only at SIMD. There are very few institutions, I suspect, in Scotland that look only at SIMD when they make admissions decisions. They will be looking at a range of other factors such as refugee status, whether an individual is care experienced and what else is happening in their background to help to understand the pattern of achievement and the future potential of that individual to be successful. That takes me back to the point about investing in the access workforce that is playing a key role in enabling students to proceed through the system in a way that is contextually relevant to their needs.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Good morning, panel. Thank you for your answers so far.

I will pick up on some of the points that we have been discussing about measures in relation to colleges, which are relevant to you in particular, Ms Rohmer. From the evidence that we took a few weeks ago from some of your colleagues, we know that people are attending college a wee bit differently. They are looking for different sorts of courses, such as part-time courses. What do we need to do to the measures to take account of that, and what should we be doing to ensure that people who study part time get better access to the support that they need to continue their career progression?

Lydia Rohmer: It is fair to say that the COWA measures focus on full-time higher education only, and part-time learning does not get measured in the same way. That does not mean that there are not part-time routes into higher education—colleges support those. I am delighted that the commissioner recognises that the college sector has a wide range of qualifications that are valuable in themselves and that HNC and HND in particular are not just a springboard into university but qualifications that are highly valued by employers. The end point of an HNC or HND should be seen as a success in its own right, as part of the higher education statistics.

The part-time route is especially important for adult learners, who quite often have to work and sustain complex family lives and are unable to come into full-time education in the same way as younger students are often able to do. The financial system is not equal or equitable when it comes to supporting access to higher education, particularly with regard to college students and, I think, with regard to part-time learners in general across both colleges and universities. It is definitely the case that work needs to be done. The Government's "Student Finance and Wellbeing Study (SFWS) Scotland 2023-2024", which was published in December, has a basket of recommendations on how the funding infrastructure for students of different ages and stages—full time and part time—should be improved in order to enable access to education at all levels.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I take the point about the HNC and the HND being valuable end points. I do not want to undermine or dilute that with my next question, because I agree that they are incredibly valuable, particularly for employers and others.

On the point about articulation, yesterday's data on colleges showed a significant reduction in student numbers—both part time and full time, if I remember correctly. How might that affect what colleges do in general and with regard to articulation and the widening access agenda in particular?

Lydia Rohmer: It is a concern that HN numbers in the college sector have dropped. There are several reasons for that. There is still a post-Covid set of circumstances, as I mentioned. There is the issue of recruitment into universities. There is also demand from the labour market. There has been a significant increase in school leavers going directly into work over the past couple of years as a result of that demand—including what has arisen in consequence of Brexit, I am afraid. The drop is not necessarily reflective of a systemic failure of access to higher education. It is important to understand the numbers correctly.

Some things could be improved, such as the way in which learners are supported when they come into college, then through college into university. As I have just highlighted, student support funding is critical for learners, particularly given the cost of living. Support for mental health issues and health in general is another area. Unfortunately, colleges have had funding removed from mental health support. That is a critical issue to enable students in the college sector to remain in study, succeed and then articulate.

Articulation is a successful practice, and I can say a little more about that either now or later. It provides a significant number of learners from SIMD 20 backgrounds; it also provides care-experienced learners and learners who have a disability. Those areas could be more foregrounded when telling the story of fair access

but, at the moment, that is very much focused on SIMD 20 and full-time access to undergraduate education.

Claire McPherson: I will follow up on the issue of part time versus full time. Another item for the basket of measures that is important to consider when thinking about outcomes for students from deprived backgrounds is the fact that the measures do not take into account part-time learning in a university setting. For all sorts of obvious reasons of balancing life commitments with learning, including the need to survive—to pay bills and the mortgage or rent—people need to be adaptable in the way in which they access higher education.

We have not spoken about it this morning, but all the students at the Open University in Scotland are classified as part time—even those who are studying in what we would consider to be intense full-time provision. They do not feature in the statistics. They are geographically dispersed across rural Scotland as well as our more urban areas.

Recognising the full achievements of the sector would involve acknowledging the role of part-time learning, because it will be increasingly vital as we think about Scotland's demographic changes and the fact that we will want more adult learners, and more people to upskill and reskill within higher education. Part-time learning is an access issue, but it is also, fundamentally, an economic and growth issue when it comes to meeting economic and employer needs.

11:15

The Convener: Before I go back to Ms Duncan-Glancy, I will point out that the Open University provided the committee with a good written submission on that topic, so those points have been well made.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I, too, note that the points in the Open University's submission are really important and echo a lot of what has just been said.

I will return in a moment to the topic of student support and student experience. First, I have a question about measures and articulation. We have spoken about the idea of students having a unique identifier number and have heard a lot of evidence that that might be really important. We have also heard that the pilot that is taking place in the north-east is not necessarily scalable because of some of the problems that have been encountered. What are the issues and what could we do to resolve those?

Claire McPherson: The pilot in the north-east is about using free school meals data rather than about having a learner identifier number. There are issues with scalability. Although it is the case that many students stay local, any given institution's catchment area means that it can have one-to-one arrangements with 18, 20 or more councils. We need a national solution that works for all institutions and students, irrespective of the proximity of the learning establishment to the student's home address. We just do not think that we can roll that out at scale and hope for the best.

Our understanding, which is based on our engagement with Government about the current conditions for data gathering, is that it thinks that a legislative vehicle would be needed to make national data sharing happen. We would be keen for that to happen, and we are continuing to engage with the Government on that, because one-to-one relationships between local authorities and providers can start to become bureaucratic and administratively burdensome. It is great to see that exchanging data about free school meals could have some benefit, but we have significant issues with scalability.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: You are saying that the problem is about having 18 or 19 different data-sharing arrangements. It is really helpful to know that.

I have spoken with some of the organisations involved in the pilot, such as RGU and North East Scotland College, which are doing excellent work. They mentioned the idea of a unique student number, which is why I spoke about that as a mechanism that could make data sharing a little easier.

My next question is on student experience. Most of us round this table recognise that we must support people to get the best out of whichever institution they are at, whether that is school, college or university, or whether they are in employment. Since the widening access agenda took off, that issue has become more prevalent. Please set out some of the things that universities are doing to support their students. In doing so, I ask that you talk about that work in the context of your funding arrangement, which has not necessarily improved during the same period.

Claire McPherson: The commissioner for fair access gave a few examples earlier about support for students, including looking for early identifiers or flags that show that they might be struggling and the mental health support that is provided. Universities can use discretionary funding, via a grant distribution model, to target a student's specific needs, such as childcare or travel to and from university, to make that experience more positive.

The big challenge that is facing universities—the situation is the same for colleges—is the funding

landscape for the sector. All those things cost money. We heard from the commissioner that there is a recognition in other countries that increased needs require increased investment in support for students. That is not necessarily what happens in Scotland. For the past decade or more, we have seen a real-terms decrease in the funding for each individual Scottish student, irrespective of their widening access status, which makes the challenge of providing wraparound services and support all the more difficult. We are really conscious of that. It is the last thing that universities themselves would seek to cut but, at the same time, the backdrop is one of reduced investment, increased costs and increased need in the student population.

Those things create huge challenges for each institution, irrespective of the proportion of students who have widening access status. Beyond the widening access student population, we know that there are mental health needs and other needs—perhaps associated with Covid—that need to be met. That is a big challenge for each institution.

As we look ahead to the 2030 targets, we need to consider how we resource the support that is required to allow students not only to access higher education but to thrive while they are in the system, and to graduate with good career prospects and opportunities.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Do you support the commissioner's request that we look at entry as well as student experience and outcomes?

Claire McPherson: Absolutely.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have a final question to ask, if that is okay.

The Convener: James Dunphy would like to come in on the previous question.

James Dunphy: I echo Claire McPherson's comment on the imperative of focusing not only on access but on student success. The delivery of the outcome for the student is not simply to enrol in a college or university; it is to secure the broader set of outcomes that they believe participating in higher education will bring.

In the written evidence that Universities Scotland submitted to the committee, one thing that I found very interesting was how much work advance HE members have done on admissions, practice and policy, and the wraparound support that exists. That support is fundamental to student success, so getting the basics right matters to secure retention. The latest data shows us that we have more work to do on retention. As Claire said, the challenge is great and the commitment is there, but it is important that we keep the focus not only on recruitment but on retention.

Lydia Rohmer: I will add that a great deal of work is going on to ensure that the delivery of HNC or HNDs by colleges that are in strategic partnership and have an articulation route with a university is aligned with that progression towards entry with advanced standing into a degree programme. That is quite challenging and requires advanced partnership working.

It is about how the college delivers HN and prepares individual learners not just for success in the HN but for the progression beyond that, given that it is a different qualification and is assessed differently to the undergraduate degree that the student might progress into, particularly if they enter into an advanced year, such as year 2 or year 3.

Just as important is the culture of learning, teaching and assessment that comes with that, and preparing students for that. Quite often, that requires additional support of learners in a transition programme that is run by the college and the university together as part of those partnerships.

Finally, it is also about subject alignment, which means ensuring that universities that have autonomy in the design of their degrees align that in the right way to enable learners with national qualifications at HN level to articulate in a successful way. The SQA's HN next generation programme was extremely important in that way, but unfortunately the programme seems to have stalled because of the reform of the SQA.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: My final question is for you, Ms Scarlett. In 2019, the Government consulted on student support for disabled students. There was a recommendation for a forum to consider what needs to change and to drive forward the change that is needed. Has that forum been set up? If so, how is it doing? If not, should it be set up?

Rebecca Scarlett: I was part of the steering group for that work. I helped to instigate it because the student support element for disabled students was missed out of the wider review of student support that had taken place previously. Initially, the scope was to look at disabled students' allowance, or DSA, but we were keen for the remit to be a bit wider, so we included student support in FE as well. A lot of things were outwith the scope of the review. There were a number of recommendations.

The review started in 2019, but Covid hit, so there was a delay. The design of the survey and the questions started to become a bit out of date when Covid came along and things changed so much. We pressed for the outcomes of the report. We included a lot of disabled students and put a

huge amount of resource, energy and time into the review.

The report, which was finally released in 2023, made a ream of recommendations, almost none of which has been implemented. I know that Scottish university heads submitted a request to the Scottish Government that that be taken forward, but next to nothing has happened. Nothing has changed, even in relation to the smallest recommendations that were made, and now the work is all out of date. All that energy, resource and time were invested, but nothing has happened, which is extremely frustrating.

Willie Rennie: I have seen at first hand some of the work that the University of St Andrews has done on widening access. The university is determined that any student who comes through the door succeeds and passes their exams. It is a tough process that involves hard work, but the wraparound support that the university provides gets them through. We should recognise that some of the ancient universities have done tremendous work, which has changed the profile of those institutions. I have seen a difference in them. However, as I mentioned earlier, yesterday's school education figures were depressing.

Claire, you talked about how the plateauing of progress on closing the poverty-related attainment gap will have an impact on your institution's ability to deliver on widening access. Will you explain that in a little more detail?

Claire McPherson: Absolutely. I will start by saying what I said earlier, which is that I am in no way criticising the efforts of everyone who is involved in the school system. However, the context is that a reduction in the attainment gap was central to the assumptions that were built into the targets. Everyone—whether they are in the college sector or the university sector—wants the attainment gap to be reduced.

We are not passive in our observation that the issue is one that we need to address. In recent months, we have had a couple of round-table meetings with the minister, Mr Dey, and the cabinet secretary, in which the focus was on thinking about what the sector more broadly can do to tackle widening access. One of the themes that emerged from that is how we can support school attainment from an HE sector perspective. There are great examples in the system of tutoring programmes that involve university staff and students going out to school settings to provide school pupils with wraparound support, thereby giving them the opportunity to succeed and helping to shift the attainment gap.

In flagging the issue, we are asking what role we can play to help to make a difference in this space. Colleges need to have a pipeline of young people coming through the door, as do we. It is the right thing for those students. We are not passively observing that there is an issue with the attainment gap; we are asking what we can do to help to make a difference. We think that things are being done in the sector that, with a bit of investment, could be scalable and could make a tangible difference to school attainment.

Willie Rennie: Are you able to track any improvement as a result of those activities?

Claire McPherson: A couple of the programmes have been running for some time—for example, one of the programmes at Queen Margaret University is in its fifth year—and there is anecdotal evidence that that approach is making a difference from a school perspective and an attainment perspective.

It is a question of us opening a conversation. I started my evidence by saying that widening access is a partnership endeavour. I think that improving school attainment is a partnership endeavour as well. It is in all our interests to make a difference here, and that is part of the conversation that we want to have. We all need to push on this, because it is critical.

Lydia Rohmer: I echo what Claire McPherson has said. Colleges have a critical role to play with the school sector. About 17 per cent of further education enrolments are through school-college partnerships. There is a huge demand from schools for provision that colleges provide, particularly in the senior phase in relation to widening subject choice. In the case of small rural and island schools, that provision often includes academic subjects at national 5, higher and advanced higher level, as well as Open University provision and other level 7 university provision that, for example in the University of the Highlands and Islands, is available to schools.

That is key in addressing the attainment gap in schools. The related point is that we live in a post-school ecosystem in which colleges are positive destinations for school leavers. That needs to be plugged into the discussion on fair access, because not all school leavers will access university immediately after school.

11:30

The commissioner recognises that we need to do the right thing by individuals and ensure that they have a positive post-school destination. That includes college, provided that college also provides a pathway to university if an individual chooses that. The role that colleges play with schools is important.

It could be looked at as double funding by the Government, because local government is funded for the school pupil and colleges are funded to deliver additionality to the school pupil. There is a potential risk in that, but there is a real justification, not least because of the attainment gap, for colleges to continue to perform that role.

James Dunphy: You are absolutely right to point to the excellent practice of many of Scotland's higher education institutions in providing bridging support. That is a result of their commitment to get it right for students and, as Claire McPherson mentioned, it is a result of the galvanised commitment that exists across Scotland. It is also a result of things such as the commissioner's involvement.

In addition to the work that the University of St Andrews does, the University of Glasgow's top-up programme is absolutely worth considering. It has a long history of impact. I know that Neil Cowie, the principal of NESCol, was recently a witness at the committee. The work between NESCol and RGU is definitely worth considering, too. The University of the West of Scotland and New College Lanarkshire recently announced the establishment of the first undergraduate school between a college and university. Those are commendable examples of good practice and collaboration across the system to support fair access.

George Adam: James, you have put me straight where I want to go on UWS. I am not saying that Paisley is the centre of the universe—well, I am saying that—but UWS has a programme working with the colleges. Should we not just say that we have looked at SIMD and everything else? For people from a certain background, college is how they access further education. For universities such as Glasgow Caley and UWS, if there is any drop-off at college level, there is a drop-off for them, which has funding consequences for them. We should surely look at the issue in totality.

James Dunphy: It is ultimately for ministers rather than Advance HE to comment on how they want to define the fair access target.

George Adam: Let us just have a wee debate about it.

James Dunphy: I agree that it is important for us to look in the round at performance on access, and we would all agree that Scotland has had a long history of colleges playing a strong and productive role in its education and skills system. Close partnership arrangements have developed over the years between many colleges and many universities. There is definitely more work that can be done in that space, but I highlight the work in the north-east and UWS's work in Paisley.

It is increasingly important that, as we look to the future, there is more regional and place-based partnership. The Scottish Funding Council has been investing in regional tertiary provision pathfinders, which I am sure you will hear about at your next evidence session as an example of how the system can invest in analysis of regional need and respond in a joined-up and helpful way.

It is also important for us to think about the collective effort around things such as school attainment. Colleges and universities absolutely have things to bring to the table, and, in many cases, they are doing so in consultation with local education authorities.

George Adam: I will refer to the written information on retention that we received. Twenty-one per cent of OU students come from deprived areas. For UWS, that figure is 29 per cent, and 44 per cent of them—nearly 45 per cent—are first-generation students. Based on those figures, an argument could be made, as I talked to the commissioner about, for the SFC to look at the issue in a more flexible way, because the support for those programmes costs each of the institutions a bit of money. The commissioner said that there are certain areas in Scotland, mainly because of their demographic make-up, that will be doing such work to the extreme. Is there an argument for funding those institutions more to encourage them to hit the targets, because that is where the need is?

Claire McPherson: When we speak to institutions about their understanding of what sits behind retention issues, that often sits not with institutional finance but with student finance: the financial barriers and costs of being at university regularly come up as reasons why a student might or might not continue with their studies. Mental health is another issue.

There is a combination of funding factors here, and there is definitely something about the bottom-line funding that goes to each Scottish student, irrespective of their background. There is absolutely something about how student support could more equitably support the learner through challenging transitions. The other issue that comes through frequently—

George Adam: On the point that you have just made, I note that the institution would still need to find a way to support the student.

Claire McPherson: Indeed.

George Adam: And that would be regardless of the issue. The argument that I am trying to make is whether that should be looked at by the SFC.

Claire McPherson: In part, I agree with you. What I am trying to point out is that the needs are not always simply those of widening access

students. We are hearing from lots of our institutions that student needs are increasing in general. Of course we need to support our fair access students, but there are issues among the broader student population. There is a conversation to be had on that.

George Adam: I am coming from the aspect of 45 per cent first-generation university students. The families of a lot of the students who go to UWS, or of SIMD 20 students, will not know what going to university is like. It is not that those students get no support—their family will support them, of course—but it is not a world that they will know a lot about. It is about the family, not just the individual. The family needs to be given support to ensure that the young person gets the opportunity.

Claire McPherson: From the sector's perspective, there should be more financial support for widening access more generally. Thinking of the University of the West of Scotland or Glasgow Caledonian University, for instance, I note that there has not been an investment in widening access activity across the sector in the course of our trajectory towards the 2030 target. There is a fund that the SFC rolls out. We might pick up on your point in relation to whether there is more discrete funding that could go to institutions that have a greater need. That is a conversation to be had with the Funding Council.

George Adam: The argument that I am trying to make is that we could move the funding away from certain places to others.

Claire McPherson: I am not sure that many of our institutions would feel that they are flush with opportunity to redistribute funding at the moment.

James Dunphy: We are focusing on SIMD 20 students and first in family students, but there are other groups of students who are not as well served in the system as we would like them to be. This underlines Claire McPherson's point about being careful around the application of funding. Black and minority ethnic students are still receiving lower degree outcomes than their white peers, yet there has been a huge amount of work on that in the system, with individual institutions trying to take steps and working together, including through work with Advance HE around our race equality charter.

It is right and proper that we ask about the support that individual groups need, but it is really important to keep it in mind that there are other groups in the system, such as disabled students and black and minority ethnic students, who also require support. That is where some of the institutional perspective is coming from when we say that there is a need for support in the system.

Lydia Rohmer: The pipelines into higher education, including colleges, also need more funding. The funding per student FTE in the college sector is significantly smaller than the comparable student FTE funding in the university sector. Colleges are already in a financial crisis, with the real-terms value of that funding having decreased by 17 per cent.

George Adam: I am interested in that point, as it is kind of making my argument. We are saying that we must get people from poorer backgrounds into higher education and FE, with FE as the introduction. When we are considering the funding, we should perhaps be looking at it from that perspective. Where are the access points? How are we going to do it? Who are the ones who are actually delivering? That is the argument that I am making, and I would hope that others will listen to it, too.

The Convener: They are listening in silence, George, taking it all in.

Keith Brown: I appreciate Mr Dunphy's point about targets being for ministers and politicians. However, we are moving into a pre-election period when politicians will start to think about throwing around targets and commitments and they will try to make them as simple as possible, for very good reasons. We have heard a lot of evidence today about the need to review or refine the current target. My issue with that is as much to do with the fact that targets like that do not allow for extraneous influences. Government should really stop proposing targets that can easily be affected by things that are outwith their control, because it makes them meaningless.

We do not hear much about this target, but I imagine that it is unlikely that it has not been affected by 14 years of austerity bearing down on revenue and, especially latterly, capital budgets, by the Liz Truss budget and consequent double-digit inflation, wage suppression, the cost of living and rising inequality. Many of those things—not all—lie outwith the Scottish Government's control. When the Government sets a target, it should be specific about what it controls. What are the witnesses' views on that?

A meaningful target has to be as simple as possible but there might need to be caveats in it for it to be sensible. I am maybe making a plea for presenting the electorate with more sensible targets at election time. It would be interesting to hear any suggestions on that from those with an academic background.

Claire McPherson: What you have probably heard this morning is a recognition that blunt instruments and measures are not necessarily helpful in the long term. To be fair to the target setters, we would all agree that the target had that galvanising effect. It is a simple target and there is something to aim for, particularly as there are

interim targets along the way that mean that we can measure progress.

My opening remarks touched on what you have just pointed out. None of us could have predicted the wider context in which we have found ourselves in the past 10 to 12 years, particularly with the cost of living crisis and Covid. That impacts on some of the activities that would underpin progress in this space.

Without putting words in his mouth, this morning we heard the fair access commissioner helpfully talking about a drive towards an improvement mindset, where we are constantly striving to improve rather than simply meeting a binary target. We could go beyond 20 per cent if that was the mindset. The sector would be behind the sense of understanding where we are now and building on that in an incremental way to improve within the context that we are in. That feels like something that we could all get behind. It is not too dissimilar to the ultimate target. The electorate and others understand the concept of improvement and striving to widen access to university for widening access students.

Keith Brown: I am interested in anything that could be helpful in preventing the undermining of a target by the inevitable extraneous events that can affect it, for democratic accountability as much as anything else.

James Dunphy: We all agree—and I think that John McKendrick did, too—that the value of targets is that they are useful in giving that galvanising effect. Understandably, our higher and further education institutions exist in the live environment so that, in their operating environment, they are subject to many of the things that you mentioned, not least of which was Covid and its consequential impacts on learners in the system, as well as the cost of living crisis and the pressures that that has brought into their operations.

What you might be hearing is a desire that, as we understand progress, we are not closed-minded to the progress that we have made that sits outwith the target, and that, as we consider performance and progress, we are not closed-minded to the real challenges that higher education institutions, such as those that are in our membership, face right now. It is a difficult time to be a leader in a college or university, for many of the reasons that you have cited. The commitment is undoubted, but the progress that we make is relevant and linked to the environment in which we are operating.

Keith Brown: I forget the exact phrase that the commissioner used earlier, but he said words to the effect that, taken over a slightly longer period of 10 years, there has been a remarkable transformation and an almost doubling of the number of people coming into further and higher education from challenging backgrounds.

11:45

On this panel, we have heard that it is a remarkable success story, unique to Scotland—Claire McPherson mentioned that

"This is a success story";

Mr Dunphy, you said that although we are not done yet, great progress has been made. That is not the narrative that the public is hearing. It is important to me, as a politician, but for the people who are interested in thinking about widening access and in their opportunities for access—which will not be the entire population—to continually get an apocalyptic picture is detrimental. It is what they get; they will get it from the coverage that will come out today. In the same way, pretending that nothing is wrong is detrimental. Is there a danger that we will demotivate people and that they will say, "Well, actually, there's no way I'm going to get into university, look at what's happening just now"? Is that apocalyptic approach potentially damaging? If so, what can be done?

Lydia Rohmer: Although widening access to higher education is a success story, it is at risk of a narrative that there is danger to access to education at all levels because students cannot afford it for a variety of reasons, such as cost of living, needing to work or, in some cases, the lack of provision that is relevant to them.

It is really important that fair access sits in a wider definition of successful educational outcomes. From a college perspective, the downside of the very worthwhile enterprise in fair access has perhaps been that it has entirely been focused on success being driven only by access to university education, whereas more than half of learners leaving school will not access university education but have successful educational outcomes.

Success needs to be determined in terms of equity of access and what is right for not only the learner but a balanced economy and successful communities and society in Scotland. Although higher education is extremely important and access to it needs to be absolutely equitable, it is not the only form of successful educational outcome. That is the story that perhaps needs to sit alongside the long-term strategy for fair access.

Keith Brown: To be fair, I said "college and university"—I went to college before going to university, so I acknowledge your point.

I think that a parent or a child who is thinking about access should be open-eyed about the

challenges around student finance and some of the things that we have heard about. However—and this was my point—should they not also be open-eyed about the stuff that we are doing that is unique to Scotland, which other parts of the UK are looking at with envy? Should there not be some cause for a bit more optimism around those people's chances of getting into a college or university?

Claire McPherson: I hope that the sector has tried to strike that balance. Over the latter half of last year, we launched and ran the "40 Faces" campaign, which was very much in the territory of celebration. It celebrated achievements through the voices of 40 widening access students who had been through the system, who showcased their achievements and those of the institutions that they had been a part of. The campaign included an event with the cabinet secretary, where we brought together students and members of staff who were working on widening access in universities and with Colleges Scotland and colleges officials to celebrate the achievements.

You are right—there are fantastic personal stories of life-changing, transformative experiences through the college to university or the school to university routes, as return learners or adult learners. We have tried to do a huge amount to showcase the celebratory elements of that with a view to asking, at this point in time and as we look ahead to the 2030 targets, how we can replicate that and be galvanised together behind that and achieve more. We obviously cannot control media coverage or anything else but, as a sector, we have tried, and are trying to be, even-handed in the way that we are approaching the matter. We are not resting on our laurels but saying that we have achieved a huge amount and want to achieve a huge amount more.

James Dunphy: I agree entirely. I think that it is possible to be both positive about the progress that has been secured and restless for further progress. It is about how we manage that balance. In Scotland, we are deeply fortunate to have a workforce that is working at the front end, not in our universities but out in the communities in which they serve, which is bringing a message of clarity around what higher education is and is not—an honest perspective of helpful advice and guidance. It is important that we tell the story, as Universities Scotland did through its 40 faces campaign, about the positive benefits not just for individuals but for communities and, ultimately, for our society and our economy. We need people to have positive experiences of higher education if we are to secure our collective goals.

Miles Briggs: Good morning, and thanks for joining us.

I will return to a question that I asked the commissioner earlier, on the unintended consequences of some of the changes around current widening access targets, specifically in relation to admissions behaviours. From your experience of your institutions, how has that changed and what has your learning been in relation to the success or failure of students carrying on to complete their course?

I will bring in Lydia Rohmer to respond from a college perspective.

Lydia Rohmer: I think that I partially answered your question earlier. There have been some instances, particularly during the Covid years, when the recruitment behaviour of universities has had an impact, with whole college cohorts collapsing in clearing. Those are negative unintended consequences.

There is also the potential for the recruitment of students who would probably be better placed in a college context first, in order to gain confidence in their learning and by way of preparation for post-college outcomes in university. The risk with just pursuing targets is that there is a potential loss when it comes to looking at the individual and what is best for them.

Contextualised admissions and partnership working between colleges and universities is a good mitigation against that risk, in order to ensure that learners are supported in making the right choices for them.

Claire McPherson: I agree with Lydia's final point. The key is that we work as part of an overall system. Something that happens in one part of the system can have a knock-on effect on other parts and on the strength of those relationships. The joint articulation group that we have with Colleges Scotland, which Lydia co-chairs, is fundamental to saying that we should work in partnership on a regular basis and think about collaboration as we all work towards an outcome that does not have unintended consequences for any one part of the system.

James Dunphy: I will add something on contextualised admissions. That is an example of positive practice in the system, and the work that Universities Scotland did in that space to bring higher education institutions together to look at dealing with contextualised admissions in a sensible and appropriate way is worth knowing about. That work built on work that had been undertaken by a group called supporting professionalism in admissions, which had been supported by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. There was a team effort to make sure that it could be done right. Layered into that, further to Lydia's comment, is how the

system works together—not just higher education institutions but colleges.

Miles Briggs: I mentioned retention rates earlier. The SFC's report on widening access shows a decrease among all students, but that has happened more quickly in SIMD 20 and, more worryingly, among care-experienced young people, despite the good work that has gone on to sustain them in relation to not just learning, but the wraparound care at college and university. What work is being done to take that forward?

From speaking to students, I know that they want to learn and earn, but the timetables sometimes do not work for them in that way. They need to earn money, so they are not going into college courses. What work is going on in the sector to consider taking a holistic approach, such as by bringing course time together so that someone does not need to study all week long and there is more flexibility for them?

James Dunphy: Institutions have looked at a range of different aspects, including timetabling, in order to address stickiness in programmes and to support success and retention. Although we have talked a lot about bridging and information in advance of study, the retention figures point to the centrality of the learning and teaching experience and the importance of ensuring that learning and teaching student support is appropriate, whether that is on course, which every student will receive, or wraparound, which may be accessed by only some students. Advance HE members are committed to that. Seventeen of our members in Scotland run Advance HE accredited programmes to equip their staff, on appointment and beyond, to meet contemporary student needs when it comes to both the mechanics of learning and teaching—how you schedule it, and how far in advance you provide timetables, for example—and what happens on the course. Institutions are alive to those aspects and work hard on them.

Claire McPherson: There are a few examples of things that universities are doing. Our learning and teaching committee is pretty alive to the issue. According to conversations that we have had with members, things such as timetable reorganisation have been considered, and we are looking at a longer period of induction for students so that they feel that they are more supported in that first period at university. We are developing peer support networks to make people feel that they have support from among their peers to continue, and we are focusing more on skills development alongside some of the more academic learning. It is under constant review.

It is also worth highlighting what I mentioned earlier: there are other, non-academic factors in people not staying on in their studies. Largely, that involves student support, financial barriers in people's personal lives and so on.

Lydia Rohmer: In addition, there are institutional differences between college and university. The franchise agreements of delivering degrees in college settings enable learners to continue with the support environment that they have enjoyed and to have continuity in their learning experience.

There are other issues in bringing a university on to a college campus; nevertheless, the efforts that have been made in partnership are very successful. Degree hubs such as New College Lanarkshire are innovative, but many colleges have degree provision on campus. The OU and the University of the Highlands and Islands have integrated tertiary models, so that learners can move seamlessly through further and higher education.

Miles Briggs: Have you looked specifically at the fall in retention rates for care-experienced young people, given that some bespoke packages are made available? I visited Edinburgh university recently and looked at the student accommodation for the year-round offer that can be provided if young people want it. Why are we seeing that fall? All of us around the table are looking to the Government's forthcoming Promise bill, and we are now at the mid-point, so the fact that we are going backwards is really concerning. What has been problematic and can we take any learning from it?

James Dunphy: That goes back to the question whether the target tells you the whole story. Structural inequality does not end at enrolment. From the campaigns launched by Who Cares? Scotland through to the Promise and the work of individual institutions, there has been a sea change in the offer to care-experienced students. The tracking from application through to enrolment and the range and types of support—whether academic support or things such as 365-day accommodation—are positive in the landscape. They deliver a real difference for care-experienced students. However, as I said earlier, much more work is to be done, including with students, to understand their specific needs and what interventions will particularly help them.

Claire McPherson: The connection with the Promise is worth reflecting on. I had recent engagement with the chief executive of The Promise Scotland. We are keen to look at ways to do more at a sectoral level to support the agenda and understand some of the underlying issues.

Bill Kidd: I thank everyone for the huge range of helpful replies. I have a question that was asked previously of John McKendrick. What is the likelihood of the 2026 interim targets and the 2030

aims being delivered? Does anyone have an idea about that? It does not have to be positive, but it would be nice if it was.

12:00

Claire McPherson: I echo John McKendrick's answer. Anecdotally and based on recent data, the sector, having plateaued, is now emerging and potentially making progress. Picking up on Keith Brown's earlier comment, I do not underestimate the societal challenges and factors that are outside of our control that we might face as we head towards 2030.

The target is not unachievable, but it will take a huge collective effort for us to get there, which is partly why we are keen for the inquiry and phase 2 of the work to focus on things that will make a big difference for us. We need investment in the sector to provide the student support and funding that is required to make reaching the target a reality. That also involves data, the basket of measures and understanding in a granular sense what is happening in the system, so that we can target our efforts in the right way.

That is not just a university sector endeavour—we have spoken about colleges and schools, and we have to get the whole system behind that effort. With a fair wind, we should be able to get there, but it will take the whole system to do it.

James Dunphy: I am not close enough to the figures to be able to give you the certainty that you are hoping for but, if the targets are not fully met, that should not be interpreted as meaning that positive progress is not being delivered.

I point to the number of black and minority ethnic students who are from SIMD 20 areas, which has increased from 490 in 2013-14 to 925 in 2021-22. That is a positive outcome for those individuals—we can be really proud of the progress, while knowing that there is more to do.

Lydia Rohmer: The commissioner for fair access highlighted a number of initiatives that are, I hope, gathering pace and momentum. Within that is the reform agenda, which focuses on enhanced career information. The Withers report recommendations are focused on developing a much better learner journey through post-school education. Through the joint articulation group, we are in direct contact with the careers collaborative with a view to improving careers information in a way that allows learners to map a better pathway to higher education.

Bill Kidd: Rebecca, I know that you have some background knowledge on people who are disabled or have issues other than poverty—although poverty might also be part of the issue. Are the targets possible?

Rebecca Scarlett: I can speak only from disabled students' perspective, because that is my expertise and the area that I work in. No particular entrant targets are in place for disabled people.

One of my concerns is that, because the proportion of first-year entrants who are disabled students is now up at 21 per cent, people will perhaps think that we can celebrate and rest on our laurels. It is important to disaggregate the granular information, because we have seen a huge rise in people who are presenting and disclosing mental health issues, which is really skewing the data and leaving behind people with different impairment types who perhaps face more persistent inequality. In the written evidence, I referenced that there has been no movement whatsoever in the data on, for example, students who are blind or visually impaired entering university, yet the numbers who are presenting with disabilities have doubled.

That is just one example—it is important not to look at disability as a homogeneous group. I know that that is really difficult and that there are challenges but, rightly or wrongly, there has been an increase in the use of mental health vernacular on social media and in the public arena. We are seeing a huge increase among young people who identify with such language, which is potentially skewing some of the figures for disabled people.

Bill Kidd: Broadly speaking, people are still being positive in their approach to aim for the targets anyway. By the sounds of it, everybody is working together, which is excellent. We have to remember that sometimes things have to be widened out, which is good.

The Convener: Ms Scarlett, do you think that targets for the number of disabled students would be helpful, or would they be counterproductive in any way?

Rebecca Scarlett: It is important to look at persistent inequality. It would be helpful to look at granular information to disaggregate the data and look at where, as per the Equality Act 2010, there is persistent inequality and groups are still experiencing those issues, and to link that with the work that is happening at school, with additional support for learning provision, to see where the particular pinch points are and where the focus needs to be. So, yes, it is important to set targets, but it is important not to solely use that one measure for disability.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: On your point about the different impairment groups in the data, I noticed from the data that you shared with the committee in advance that the figure for people with visual impairment was 0.1 per cent quite a while ago, and it is still only 0.1 per cent now. Do you know why that is?

Rebecca Scarlett: Part of it is to do with the issues around provision at school. There has been a reduction in the number of specialist teachers for visually impaired pupils. There is less investment and fewer specialist teachers, so that provision is decreasing. There is difficulty in getting the right support, and there are delays in getting access to the right technology. All that will contribute to the situation for that particular group but, more widely, the situation is the same for students with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. There is a huge backlog affecting access to child and adolescent mental health services and getting a diagnosis. All that has a compounding effect for students with additional support needs.

Ross Greer: The witnesses may have caught my last question towards the end of the session with the commissioner for fair access. It was on student access to housing, which is a significant barrier in the context of the widening access agenda. Some universities have done a lot of work on that, particularly for care-experienced and estranged young people.

Claire, are you aware of any wider work in the sector to address the housing issues that students from backgrounds that are considered to fall under the widening access agenda have experienced and of how those issues have been resolved?

Claire McPherson: One issue that came through in our "40 Faces" campaign, which I referenced earlier, is that support system. Housing—not least the cost of it—is a key issue for students. One of our 40 faces was an estranged student, and he spoke passionately about the support that he received at the University of Glasgow, so there are good examples in the system. I am more than happy to write to you with more detail on what is happening in the sector more broadly, but intersectionality—particularly for widening access students, who tend to be home-based commuter students, and the care-experienced and estranged student population—is often overlooked in that space. There are examples of very good practice in the sector that we are happy to write to you to provide more information on.

Ross Greer: That would be great—thank you.

Lydia, are there any examples from UHI of how you address the housing issue, given that the rural context makes it significantly different? Glasgow offers a great example of widening access for estranged young people, but urban and rural contexts for housing and student accommodation are very different.

Lydia Rohmer: There is a well-known rural housing crisis in general in most parts of the Highlands and Islands. UHI has student residencies and operates a priority system for learners from widening access and care-experienced backgrounds for accommodation—both in further and higher education. We attract a lot of learners from the rest of Scotland and the UK, as well as international learners, but care-experienced learners have a guaranteed student accommodation place, so they get absolute priority. The issue is that there is not enough housing supply for the demand, and when the university or colleges are financially challenged, they are often unable to invest further in student accommodation. That is a real issue and a real disadvantage, but housing, such as it is, is prioritised for those with the biggest need.

Keith Brown: I have a very brief question that will probably have a brief answer. Is there any information on former forces personnel accessing either further or higher education? I know that it will be a small number and difficult to track.

I did not expect the answer to be that short, to be honest.

Lydia Rohmer: Although I am not here to speak for my university, which is UHI, it has a covenant for veterans and ex-Army personnel, and so does my college. That is promoted through channels and direct relationships with the Army and the armed forces.

Keith Brown: Does anyone engage with the armed forces regarding resettlement programmes or such things?

James Dunphy: I do not have the data to hand, although Universities Scotland might be able to share something after the meeting, but it is my understanding that a number of institutions have signed up to the armed forces covenant and, through that, have made a series of commitments about their offer to people exiting the forces. Claire McPherson may be able to say more.

Claire McPherson: We can give you details of those institutions. The minister, Mr Dey, is also the minister for veterans and is particularly interested in that. I know that a number of institutions are involved and can give you more granular detail in writing.

The Convener: I have not forgotten to come to Willie Rennie but, before I do so, I will close this part of the discussion. Ms McPherson, in response to Keith Brown and Ross Greer, you offered to give more information. We are doing quite a short inquiry on this subject, with our final evidence session next week, so I do not want to set too strict a timeframe, but getting that information as quickly as possible would allow us to consider that as part of our report.

I thank you all for your evidence today. This session and the earlier one with the commissioner

have been a wide-ranging and in-depth look at some of the factors that affect fair access.

Ms McPherson, we would also like to take advantage of your presence here today to ask about some topical issues, following the announcement in Parliament yesterday about funding for the University of Dundee and some of the press comment that we have seen about the University of Edinburgh. If it is okay, we will continue the meeting a bit longer and widen out to look at those university issues. Willie Rennie has a question on that.

Willie Rennie: I should have known that you would not forget me, convener.

The situation at Dundee is pretty grim. Many of my constituents work in that institution and are extremely worried about its future. I would like to hear your assessment, from the Universities Scotland perspective, of the loan funding that was made available yesterday by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government. What further investment is required and can that prevent job losses, or are job losses inevitable?

Claire McPherson: Yesterday's statement by the cabinet secretary gave Dundee as an example of an institution that would receive investment. My understanding is that, technically, the decision about where that money will go sits with the Scottish Funding Council. We have not had an opportunity to engage in detail with the Funding Council about that, but there is an assumption that Dundee is an obvious recipient for that funding and that loan facility.

The leadership team at the University of Dundee is working on an overall recovery plan. Not least because I do not know the details of that plan, it is not appropriate for me to comment on the extent of any job losses, but the situation is clearly really challenging. Some unique circumstances have come into play to bring Dundee to that position. I know from the minister's previous appearance at the committee that there is a commitment to a review. I do not want to speculate on what that might reveal, but it is clearly important for everyone that a sustainable recovery is achieved, because of all the economic benefits that the university brings to Dundee as a city region. It is also really important that the broader university sector in Scotland is healthy and thriving. I cannot comment on job losses or any details.

Miles Briggs: I know that I am putting you on the spot by asking about different institutions but, following Professor Peter Mathieson's message to staff at the University of Edinburgh, which basically said that radical action will be needed to find £140 million of savings, I have received a number of communications from constituents who work there. Unions have described that as suggesting that there will be devastating cuts and a lot of people who work in the institution are worried about their jobs and futures.

I know that you cannot comment on individual universities, but is that now a sector-wide issue? We have already discussed the University of Dundee. What is your understanding of university finances across Scotland? We now seem to be seeing a drip, drip, drip effect across institutions, which is deeply worrying for staff and raises questions about the future sustainability of such an important sector of our economy.

Claire McPherson: Universities Scotland has been saying for a number of years that the trajectory of public funding in the sector is unsustainable. Towards the end of last year, ahead of the budget, the Institute for Fiscal Studies described the situation facing the sector as a "perfect storm" and we recognise that picture. There are financial challenges across the UK university sector, even where there are different funding models.

12:15

Since 2013-14, there has been a real-terms cut of 19 per cent in the level of investment in learning and teaching. As we have discussed this morning, the needs of students have also been rising, so the costs associated with supporting students are going up. Inflationary cost pressures are affecting the operating costs of institutions. Crucially, there has also been instability in the international student market, which has traditionally cross-subsidised our student population and our research base.

It is clear to us that those issues are manifesting in different ways in different institutions, but no institution is immune. The University of Edinburgh's announcement yesterday is an example of that. We are keen to have a dialogue, hopefully with cross-party support, about achieving a sustainable future funding model for the sector.

With the current budget, our plea was for sustainability, but we did not get everything that we asked for. There are rising costs, such as the national insurance contributions that universities will have to meet within a depleting financial envelope. That is a cause of concern for us as a sector.

The situation should not be a huge surprise to anyone, as it is consistent with our messaging over a number of years. We look forward to having a revised funding model and an approach to investment that helps to stabilise and sustain the sector.

John Mason: You said that no institution is immune to the issues. Earlier, we talked about

how there is quite a big difference between universities. One of the differences is that the University of Edinburgh has reserves of some £2 billion, and the University of Glasgow has about £1 billion, whereas Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of the West of Scotland have very little in comparison. The University of Edinburgh could run for 15 years with a deficit of £140 million and still be stable, so I struggle to understand why it is making anyone redundant. Obviously, you cannot speak for that university, but is it not the case that we have some very rich universities that do not need support and some poorer universities that need more support?

Claire McPherson: I do not think that that is the case. Sometimes, with high running costs, reserve positions can look healthy when, in fact, they are not that healthy, because they are not all readily available as cash that can be used to support an institution.

There is an opportunity for us to have a broader conversation about the mix of income that comes into each individual institution. One of the sector's huge strengths in Scotland is its diversity. I appreciate your recognition that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to the blend of funding that comes into an institution, but the reality is that costs are rising and income is precarious or falling. Those issues impact different institutions in different ways, but that does not mean that they are not a concern for each institution. That is part of the need for us to have a broader conversation about funding.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have two quick questions. First, you mentioned the £15 million that was announced yesterday and you said that your understanding is that it will be for the University of Dundee. Is it your expectation that the Scottish Funding Council will use it for that purpose?

Claire McPherson: Having not had advance notice of the announcement, our understanding, based on the cabinet secretary's announcement to Parliament, is that a large proportion of the funding will go to Dundee, but we have not had any clarity on that. I do not want to prejudge the SFC board's decisions, so that is an assumption rather than a clear answer.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Having seen the brilliant work that is going on across the sector and universities, I am proud of the diversity of the universities in Scotland, and I hope to see them flourish for decades to come. Can you give us any reassurance that principals and other figures in universities are watching carefully what is happening in Dundee and are prepared to take seriously any suggestions or recommendations for how they can work to ensure that we get a strong sector again?

Claire McPherson: Absolutely. One of the features of the sector in Scotland, which we touched on earlier, is the collaborative nature of the work across all 19 institutions. There is a genuinely cohesive and connected set of leaders and institutions across the piece. Therefore, if there are lessons that can be learned by the broader sector and by the SFC, the Government and others, we would hope that everyone will learn them, and we would take the opportunity in due course, when the review is published, to do so.

The Convener: Would you have expected prior notification of that funding?

Claire McPherson: No.

The Convener: It is not as if something changed in the past week. Were there opportunities for ministers to have more engagement about the funding?

Claire McPherson: I cannot speak about the engagement that the minister may have had with Dundee or with the SFC—

The Convener: But, as you point out, at the moment, the funding will not automatically go to Dundee.

Claire McPherson: I do not have the detail of the funding, so I really cannot tell you that. The wording of the statement alluded to the fact that Dundee is an obvious beneficiary, but it created some space. It talked about funding for

"the sector and universities such as the University of Dundee."—[*Official Report*, 25 February 2025; c 34.]

That wording therefore opened up a little bit of space for the funding to not necessarily all go to Dundee. I assume that Dundee will be one of the bigger beneficiaries of the funding but, until we know from the SFC, we cannot really comment or speculate.

The Convener: We will have the SFC at next week's meeting, so we may also ask it some questions on that.

I thank all the witnesses for their time today; that evidence was really helpful.

12:21

Meeting continued in private until 12:49.

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