



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 15 June 2022

Session 6



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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
18th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Alex Bryson (Fife College)

Micole Cochrane (West Lothian College Student Association)

Heather Innes (Highland and Islands Student Association)

Kirsten Koss (North East Scotland College Students Association)

Amy Monks (Dundee and Angus College Students Association)

John O'Hara (New College Lanarkshire Students Association)

Al Wilson (Edinburgh College Student Association)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 15 June 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:45]

Colleges Regionalisation Inquiry

The Convener (Sue Webber): Good morning, and welcome to the 18th meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee in 2022. The first item on our agenda is an evidence session being held in a round-table format as part of our college regionalisation inquiry. During today's session, we will take evidence from student representatives and student association staff.

I welcome Alex Bryson, student class representative, Fife College; Micole Cochrane, student association development officer, West Lothian College Student Association; Heather Innes, vice president higher education and president elect, Highlands and Islands Students Association; Kirsten Koss, depute president Aberdeen/Altness, North East Scotland College Students Association; John O'Hara, senior learner engagement manager, New College Lanarkshire Students Association, who is joining us online; Amy Monks, president, Dundee and Angus College Students Association, who is also joining us online; and, last but not least, Al Wilson, director, Edinburgh College Students Association. Good morning to you all, and thank you for coming.

Our session is hybrid today and, as I have mentioned, two of our witnesses and one committee member are participating virtually. As those who are attending remotely will not be able to catch my eye, when they want to come in—and we might direct questions to them as well—they should put a capital R in the chat box. That is mostly for my eyes, because I cannot read lower case. The clerks will also be monitoring the chat box and I will bring you in when I can.

Part of the regionalisation review was to make sure that colleges and learning environments were more learner centred. I will open up that issue to the witnesses so that we can find out whether that has been their experience of regionalisation. Who wants to go first?

Micole Cochrane (West Lothian College Student Association): I am happy to answer. I absolutely believe that that is the case. West Lothian College has attributed lots of values to

ensuring that the approach to learning is definitely student centred—including our own values, which are shared with the student association, which keep students in the centre. It has come up with lots of different projects and initiatives to ensure that students are being listened to. It has completed and organised a project called the trust project, which was developed for students who have trauma backgrounds and who are looking to develop into the main stream, and it has supported those students right through the project. It likes to listen to student feedback. It ensures that there are placements for students so that they are ready and eligible to progress into employment. As I said, it listens to student feedback, which is really important.

Al Wilson (Edinburgh College Student Association): Our experience is similar to Micole Cochrane's. Edinburgh College has put in place a range of initiatives to ensure that the student voice is part of the on-going process of review and reform as the college progresses. There are lots of mechanisms in place to ensure that the student voice is heard. Some of those include support around care-experienced students, which is an area that has grown quite significantly at Edinburgh College over the past couple of years. Equally, I think that, because of the scale of Edinburgh College—it is a large college compared with some others—it is working out the best practice at a more local level as well. Faculties and courses have done a good job of ensuring that they are shaping that feedback mechanism to suit their students.

Amy Monks (Dundee and Angus College Students Association): At Dundee and Angus College, not only within the students association but across the college as a whole, we have been utilising service design methodology in everything that we do to ensure that our students are at the heart and the centre of all our planning, whether that is in the classroom or in strategic planning, and that they are involved in and have a shared ownership of all the decisions that are being made and are involved in implementing them and reviewing them. That is across the board, as I said, from class level through the executive level and even up to the board of management.

The Convener: Thank you. I invite Stephanie Callaghan to put some questions to the group.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I will turn first to Amy Monks. We heard in previous evidence that students need that support to make sure they are getting involved in the key decision making and that, when they come to boards or the college student association, they are not just reporting back on what it is that they have done. I am interested in any examples of

how students have influenced some of the key decisions that have been made there.

Amy Monks: In 2020, we held a board of management committees session. It was still in the midst of the pandemic, so it was online, and it involved all our board of management members along with all our lead representatives coming together in a service design workshop style to inform our strategic plan for 2025. We looked at the theme, which was the college of the future. The students, the senior association team and the senior executive were all part of that and they worked together. They were split into small groups in breakout rooms, utilising all the fun things that we had learned in having to go digital and in using the online platform Miro. They worked together in small groups to break down assumptions and to get to know each other on a more one-to-one, human level, which I think helps immensely with everything. It was not a case of, “Oh, my goodness! I am speaking to the chair of the board”; it was, “I’m speaking to Angela. She is into this. She has shared interests with me.” It really broke down those barriers, so that our students felt like they truly had a voice.

The event ran over two sessions and used different tools and methods to see what the shared vision was for our college of the future. At the end of it, we came up with six main points together, and Simon Hewitt, our principal, used them to directly influence his strategic plan for the whole college for 2025, which we then shared with our students. We said to them, “You might have had to give up a couple of afternoons for us, but here is where you were involved. You had your say from the very first minute of that. You were involved through that whole process, and here is how it has come out at the end, having used that.” They could see directly that that feedback loop had effectively been closed, although it is always moving. They were able to see it on that full scale.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is great. Does anyone else have anything to add?

The Convener: I wonder whether Kirsten Koss, Heather Innes and Alex Bryson had a similar experience at their colleges.

Alex Bryson (Fife College): Yes, we had a pretty similar experience. As a student representative, I have been involved in quite a lot of the conversations about groups, teams and help that is available for other students.

Heather Innes (Highland and Islands Student Association): At the University of the Highlands and Islands, it varies. On an executive level or regional level, we are definitely very involved and our voice is seen as being very important. When it gets down to the individual boards of management, it depends on differing attitudes.

Everyone says that the voice of HISA is very important, but how that affects what they do differs. Some people see us as really important; some make it a little bit more difficult to get things across, putting board of management meetings at times when the student officer has said they can never make it. So, the experience differs, but we deal with 12 different principals rather than one, for example, so it is a complicated and unique system.

Kirsten Koss (North East Scotland College Students Association): At North East Scotland College, we are supported to be members of the board, to have our voice heard and to influence key decisions. Before we sat on the board, we had the opportunity to meet the chair and the relevant committee chairs whom we deal with, and that helped to break down any potential barriers that might have been there. It can be quite intimidating when you have maybe only been at college for one year and then you go to the board. However, to meet with them and to speak about silly things at the same time as discussing the priorities for the college really helps to break down those barriers.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Do you have any other questions, Stephanie?

Stephanie Callaghan: Yes, convener. As a follow-up question, perhaps for Al Wilson, how important are the officer roles in supporting students and making sure that they are part of making these key decisions?

Al Wilson: Certainly my experience over the past six or seven years at Edinburgh College is that full-time officers in college student associations are incredible and have an incredible impact.

However, it is important to put their role into context with regard to their life cycle as students, compared with, say, university student association officers. They might have been students for only a number of months before they become full-time officers, and the support, training and on-going personal development that they require are key to ensuring that their contribution is as effective as possible. As a full-time member of staff in a student association, I think that a key part is ensuring that officers are trained and developed and, indeed, receive on-going support throughout their term so that they can be as effective as possible and contribute in a meaningful way at board of management or other committee meetings—or even at evidence sessions such as this. The college student association sector is quite impressive in that way, even if I say so myself.

The Convener: I wonder whether John O’Hara, who is online, wants to respond.

John O'Hara (New College Lanarkshire Students Association): Yes. Can you hear me?

The Convener: Yes, we can.

John O'Hara: Good.

Just to add to what Al Wilson said, I think that it is important that student officers are supported through specialist sabbaticals. At New College Lanarkshire, we have three main sabbaticals, and that has come about as a result of experience and looking at what our culture of students needs across the sector. It is a regionally based approach. The campuses in our region are quite far apart, and the culture of our students at, say, Cumbernauld is different from that in Motherwell, because the demographic itself is different. As a result, the support that students at Cumbernauld need can sometimes be different from the support that is needed at Motherwell. By having these three sabbatical officers, we, as staff members, can ensure that we support students on their campuses and at different levels.

When students come in the door, they have different levels of need. Whether we like it or not, every student demographic is different, but I definitely think that the more support that we give students going through the system, the better. I was the student president 10 years ago, and I can see a huge difference between what student officers did then and what they are required to do now. We and the college as a whole have to recognise that officers need support going forward—it is a huge issue. I definitely think that the support that students, especially officers, need has changed, but we are lucky to have three full-time sabbatical officers. It has been a real plus.

The Convener: Do you have any further questions, Stephanie?

Stephanie Callaghan: I have a small question on Amy Monks's comment about local variation. Is there anything that we could put in place or roll out to make sure that these things happen across the board?

10:00

Amy Monks: As the only full-time sabbatical officer at Dundee and Angus College, I cover our three campuses—Kingsway and Gardyne in Dundee, and Arbroath. In other words, we have what are very much city-based campuses and then a more rural campus for outlying towns. We have three vice-presidents who are also students but who work 10 hours a week. We are very lucky in having a staff member, too, but, as John O'Hara has said, the needs of our campuses are completely different and having more of a full-time presence at each campus would really help us.

Stephanie Callaghan: I apologise, convener. When I said Amy Monks, I actually meant Heather Innes, who made the comment.

The Convener: Luckily, Amy Monks had an answer, too. Heather, do you want to come in on Stephanie Callaghan's question?

Heather Innes: I am sorry—can you repeat it?

Stephanie Callaghan: You talked about local variation and said that, in some areas, things are working really well and, in others, not so well. What might help to ensure that students right across the board get the impact of that support and the encouragement that they need?

Heather Innes: Actually, work has been done on that this year. One of our staff members has been leading a board of management project in which they have been going to local officers who sit on these boards and finding out what support they need and how it can be improved. That report should be coming out very soon, and we should be seeing some very positive changes being made for next year. We are feeling very hopeful and excited about that.

The Convener: Micole Cochrane would like to come in on that question, too.

Micole Cochrane: We have introduced a two-year sabbatical for our officers, which has been really helpful in building their confidence, empowering them to be able to contribute effectively and supporting them in their journey over the two-year term.

The Convener: Thanks, Micole.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): It has been good to hear about the positive working between the students and the colleges and about their getting to know the board and being able to go to them. I am particularly interested in Amy Monks's remarks about the work that they did on a shared vision. However, I just want to flip that slightly and ask whether that work helped. After all, the student voice will not always share the board's vision, and there might be conflict when the board wants to change things or do something that students do not agree with. Did the work on the positive side of things help to deal with that kind of conflict? Have you ever had to disagree with the direction that the management wanted to go in or with a specific thing that they wanted to do?

Amy Monks: I think that, because we have that shared view and involvement—ownership is perhaps not the right word—and because the management has built up this good mutual respect and culture, when more difficult decisions have to be taken or things have to be changed, they will still involve the students or they will come back to us and say, "We have tried this, but it's not

working. Can we go back to the students and develop something new?" Because we have that open channel of communication, we feel comfortable with that approach—we know that the student voice is still at the heart of things.

Ruth Maguire: Do you feel that you can challenge decisions that you do not agree with?

Amy Monks: Yes.

Ruth Maguire: I am interested to hear what the other students have to say about that, convener.

The Convener: I know that Kirsten Koss wanted to respond to the previous question—I missed her, even though she is right there. Ruth, can you repeat your question to see if Kirsten wants to respond?

Ruth Maguire: Perhaps she can say what she wanted to say first. I do not want to cause any confusion.

Kirsten Koss: In response to the previous question, I think that Amy Monks said something about how different the campuses are at Dundee and Angus College, and it is something that we, too, struggle with in respect of having student involvement. As well as having a couple of different learning centres, NESCol has three very different campuses: one that serves a rural area, a city-based campus and a campus that serves construction and other such professions. The students who attend those campuses are very different and are served by one regional president, while the two smaller campuses are served by part-time presidents. It is hard to build a culture in which students feel like they are at the heart of decision making if you are there for only 17 hours a week.

I represent two of the campuses, so I have to split my 17 and a half hours a week between both. It is difficult to say that you are involved when you just do not have the time to do it. The students know that they can come forward, but you just cannot build a culture over such a short amount of time. I therefore completely agree with having a full-time structure.

This is, I think, a side effect of regionalisation: we have groups of very different people spread across a large area, while things might be easier for smaller colleges such as City of Glasgow College that cover a really small area. We cover such a huge area that our students are so different and we need more time to engage with them.

Ruth Maguire: My colleague Graeme Dey will probably want to explore some of that with you, so I will go back to the question that I just asked. In some ways, you have already answered it, because it was about the challenges of being representatives. Given all the good work that is being done by the college itself to bring on

representatives who feel able to challenge, have there been times when you have been able to challenge decisions and when you have felt that the work that was done helped you in that respect?

Kirsten Koss: It can be really hard for the student association to disagree with and challenge decisions, because we are funded by the college and are one of its departments. Any disagreements with the college can lead to the relationships you have built with senior staff breaking down. When you know that the college is funding your student association and the work that you do, it is really difficult to disagree completely.

Forth Valley College, which I visited recently, has an arm's-length funding model, and Edinburgh College has a completely independent student association. There has to be a degree of independence, because it is difficult to be part of the college and say, "We do not agree with you" when you know that your funding and your relationships with staff depend on it.

The Convener: Al Wilson wants to come in on that question, too.

Al Wilson: It is important to note that college student associations across the country have been established in different ways. Edinburgh College is unique in having a student association that is a separate charity and staff who run it in an autonomous way. We are still funded by the college but in a slightly more separated fashion, which gives us an opportunity to be more autonomous, to challenge some decisions and to have our own strategic plan, which can either complement or diverge from what the college is doing. Not all colleges have that. I would not want to speak on their behalf, but I know from experience that some college student associations would struggle in that situation, given that, as Kirsten Koss has explained, they are essentially a department of the college.

Ruth Maguire: That was helpful.

The Convener: Alex, did you want to respond?

Alex Bryson: It is quite difficult for students at the moment, because there is not a lot of face-to-face contact. Emails do not convey emotion, so you have no way of showing how disappointed, angry or upset you are at things. The sheer lack of face-to-face time is difficult.

Micole Cochrane: I am a staff member of the college, but I am supported in having what are sometimes difficult discussions with the principal and the executive leadership team on areas that the student association disagrees on. They are absolutely open to listening to our views and having those discussions. What is important is that you have those partnerships and relationships and

that you respect and support each other in addressing your different priorities.

The Convener: I guess that that comes back to the point about how daunting things are for students who are just new in the door. It is a challenge for all of us.

Ruth Maguire: I am keen to hear from Heather Innes on this question. Obviously, you also have a big spread in the Highlands, and you have already talked about the number of leaders that you have had to engage with. I would be interested in hearing your perspective on this matter.

Heather Innes: I engage mostly with the principal and vice-chancellor and the senior management team, who are fantastic in the way that they listen to us. They want an open and honest conversation, and they are not afraid to be open and honest with us, too, which is nice. When I have a one-to-one with Todd Walker, I do not feel like there are any barriers—it is just an honest conversation.

I am not sure how good it would be to comment on individual principals. I would have to go back and speak to my local officers, but I think that the situation varies depending on attitude. Some principals who come to mind are fantastic, while there are others who I imagine are a bit more challenging or who will put up more barriers. The situation varies, but I have to say that the regional team above all that are absolutely fantastic. I cannot fault them.

The Convener: John O'Hara wants to come in on that question, too.

John O'Hara: When it comes to challenging senior management or principals, I think that that shows the importance of having staff in the student association. We have to build up these relationships over the years. Student presidents are in post for a maximum of only two years, but if we, as staff members, can build those relationships with the management, we can do our job of, as Micole Cochrane said, having these sometimes difficult conversations.

When we recently asked for two-year sabbaticals for student officers, we had to have difficult conversations, especially with regard to funding. However, whether they are difficult or not, we still have to have them, and there needs to be staff support to push student presidents to ask these questions. I believe that, if we build these relationships, the management will know that we are not simply being challenging or difficult in asking the questions—they are just the right questions to ask at that time. We know that it is difficult to ask these questions about support for the student association, sabbaticals and so on, but that is what we are employed to do. We have to

support the student association, especially as we move forward.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The discussion on this line of questioning is useful in understanding the dynamics that are at work. Obviously, colleges face a significant set of challenges in the current budget year and an 8 per cent real-terms cut in funding as part of the Scottish Government's spending review.

Have student officers begun to have discussions with boards of management about those challenges in recent weeks? In my home city of Dundee, discussions are taking place about the closure of courses and other issues because of what the principal of Dundee and Angus College has described as a black hole in the finances. Kirsten Koss, have you been involved in such discussions? Have those issues come across your desk?

Kirsten Koss: We have been involved in discussions about the fact that there might be staff cuts—in fact, it is not that there might be; there will be staff cuts—and restrictions on funding. For example, at the moment, we have three members of staff who work solely on mental health and wellbeing services in the college. They are funded by a Scottish Funding Council grant. Once that goes, they will not stay. Let us be honest—we are in a mental health crisis and we need those members of staff, so that is really worrying. The fact that we face a reduction in staff at a time when colleges are supposed to be at the heart of the pandemic recovery is worrying.

We are aware of the situation and we are involved. We know what is going on, but it is less of a discussion and more a case of our understanding what needs to happen.

Michael Marra: Heather Innes, have you been involved in such discussions?

Heather Innes: On a regional level, those issues have come across my table. If such issues are brought to the local boards of management, they will come to my local officers as well, because they are involved in all the discussions—they will see the papers. We have been pretty involved and have been able to ask questions and so on.

Michael Marra: Kirsten Koss talked about getting the voice of students heard here and in the college at the design level, so that you can say, "Here's provision that we think we need to keep." Are you involved at that level or is it more a case of a fait accompli, whereby you are told, "Here's a plan that we will develop," and you can make representations on the basis of that? Does your involvement start at an earlier stage?

Heather Innes: So far, in my experience, we have not quite got to the question of, "What are we going to do about it?" We are at the "If this happens" stage. That is where the process is at the moment, but once we come to the "What are we going to do about it?" stage, I and my officers will be able to input.

Micole Cochrane: Our officers have been involved in such discussions and are looking at forward planning. Like the rest of the sector, our college is impacted with regard to student mental health and wellbeing. We are looking at initiatives that we can take in-house to support students, but funding is always necessary to provide that additional layer. For example, we run "keep yourself well" workshops throughout the summer, which support students before they start college. Without that funding, that will not be possible.

As I said, we are looking at different initiatives, such as mental health support for men, which can run throughout the college, with the support of college staff, but funding is necessary.

The Convener: Al Wilson also wants to come in.

10:15

Al Wilson: There are two parts to the issue, one of which is about the involvement of student officers. From my experience, student officers have been involved in such conversations, both at an immediate level, in relation to what will happen right now, but also in relation to how the situation will pan out over the next few years. That is probably a good example of how the board of management has engaged with those officers and made sure that they feel part of the decision-making process.

It is always challenging to understand what will happen as regards front-line services for students, because a lot of the initial funding is ending rather than being taken away completely. It is difficult for current officers to get their heads around exactly what that will look like in the future. In the next couple of years, it will be vital that student officers are supported to be involved in those conversations, to ensure that the services are correct for students.

Michael Marra: Could we hear from Amy Monks and Alex Bryson on the issue of involvement in those discussions?

Alex Bryson: I have not had any involvement in the process at all. Nothing has come through our student association.

Amy Monks: We have had discussions on that. The issue has come across our team and we have discussed the implications for us as the SA. We have also been able to open a channel whereby,

when news of cuts reaches the student level, they are able to take part in consultation and have a say on what might happen in their specific department.

I wanted to pick up on a point that was made about the staff member being a key tool in being able to challenge decisions. We still have the one-year term at Dundee and Angus College, so there is a very quick turnaround of sabbatical officers. Having that staff member, whom we have had for four and a half years now, I think, has been influential in enabling us to grow and become more sustainable.

The Convener: I will bring in Graeme Dey, who joins us online, to ask some questions.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I apologise to the panel for not being present in person.

I want to go back a little and look at the challenges that are faced by student officers and staff in colleges post-regionalisation. With regionalisation, college mergers took place and multiple campuses came under the same umbrella. I want to explore the challenges that that can pose, less from the point of view of the time that the relevant people have to dedicate to each campus and more from the point of view of the different cultures that exist in different colleges or on different campuses, which John O'Hara talked about.

For example, travel issues arise when courses are concentrated in one location, which presents difficulties. I am thinking, in particular, of situations in which there is a mix of urban and rural campuses. I am being parochial in that I represent Angus. I want to tease that out a bit more, if I can. Maybe we should start with Amy Monks.

The Convener: We will start with Amy Monks, but Kirsten Koss is happy to contribute, too.

Amy Monks: As someone who lives in a very rural location, I experienced that in getting to campus. Although our courses are spread across most of the sites, there are a couple of courses that are available only in Arbroath or Dundee. We need to make sure that we support the students who might have to travel 50, 60 or 70 miles from Stonehaven on the bus right through to Dundee. We must ensure that there are plans in place so that, if they have to be five minutes late every day because of the bus times, they have had that conversation with their lecturers and they are not penalised, because that is the first bus that they can catch.

There are also issues in relation to digital or online learning. Thankfully, my wi-fi signal has held up today, but a lack of devices or a lack of sufficient wi-fi to enable them to engage in their learning properly was a real barrier for a lot of our

students. That has taken a bit of time to unpick, but we are thankful that we have been able to get our hands on external funding to get devices and to have conversations to ensure that students do not feel as though they are limited in any way.

Kirsten Koss: I have a couple of points to make. In response to the question about culture, because NESCol has three very different full campuses and very different learning centres, we do not really have a NESCol culture. We have a culture at each campus, but we do not really have a culture across the region. I do not think that that will ever be the case, because our students are so different. We try—staff members and student association staff travel between campuses, and we try to have cross-campus events, but I do not think that it will ever work, because our students are so different. I am sure that the situation is very similar at HISA, for example.

As far as the availability of courses is concerned, before the pandemic, at least—online, the situation is now a little bit different—some of our courses would be taught at the city campus in Aberdeen. Students from Fraserburgh, for example, would attend virtually, which meant that they were not getting the same quality of experience as the students in Aberdeen. There were also problems with wi-fi and so on. These days, a lot of the classes are still being held online but it is hoped that we will go back to the previous model, at least to a degree. Now, the students are getting the same experience, but some of the students are being taught by lecturers who live more than an hour's drive away, so the only way that they can talk to them is by email. I can go and speak to my lecturers on campus, because I am at the city campus, but those students are not getting the same provision.

I also wanted to touch on availability. Someone who lives in Glasgow, for example, who wants to take a course will have three different colleges to choose from. Someone who wants to take a course in Aberdeen has only one college that they can choose. Someone who lives in Banff has only one college that they can choose, and the course might be available only in Aberdeen. There is certainly not equality of opportunity across the country.

In relation to what has happened in the pandemic, an issue that I have looked at this year is the benefits of hybrid learning. I think that someone else touched on that; I cannot remember who. One of the benefits that we have discovered is that some students can now attend college because they can learn online. They would never have been able to do that before. I have worked on that this year—I have encouraged NESCol to keep that on board, to at least give people the option to attend virtually classes that they would

not otherwise be able to attend, much as happens in universities. We really need to keep that.

The Convener: I have a question that follows on nicely from that, although other panel members, such as Heather Innes, might want to respond to Graeme Dey's questions.

It is great to hear that the online and hybrid model is of benefit to some of your students, but I have concerns that it has perhaps been driven by the colleges and that it might not be in the best interests of the students, who are losing out on the campus experience. I am interested to hear your views. What has driven that? How has it been presented in relation to how students will learn in the future?

Heather Innes: When we talk about culture at the University of the Highlands and Islands, we have 13 different cultures because we have 13 different campuses in a vast number of locations. On top of that, we have more than 70 learning centres. We stretch from Shetland all the way down to Campbeltown, so the culture at UHI is vast. I enjoy that; I think that it is a beautiful part of UHI.

When it comes to course availability, we are currently going through a curriculum review. I know that a vast number of courses are available at pretty much every campus, but we have campuses that specialise in particular topics. We have been providing a hybrid model since before the pandemic. I know that there are videoconferencing learning suites in many campuses, so that people can attend online as well as come to a class. The response from students is mixed. Some students love that, because they have such busy lives or they live so rurally. Some students want that, but they also want to have a social experience.

Again, wi-fi is an issue. There is chatter around whether students should have their camera on during lectures. Some of our students simply cannot because of their wi-fi quality—they have to have their camera off, otherwise they keep getting kicked out of their call. Infrastructure is a big issue in the Highlands and Islands, as we know. We have students who take ferries to get to their classes every day. It is a vastly complex situation, with its own unique set of issues, but it is what it is.

Kirsten Koss: There is a belief among students and lecturers at North East Scotland College that that is driven by the college. I think that that is an aspect. In some courses, online lectures have been delivered to more than 100 students at a time. Obviously, that would never have happened before the pandemic; if it had, there would have been enough time for the lecturer to meet the students one on one. That simply is not the case via Microsoft Teams or in person now.

There is a fine line between ensuring that online availability—whether the approach is hybrid or fully online—is provided in a way that benefits the students and staff and ensuring that it does not overload the lecturers. If it overloads the lecturers, it undermines the student experience.

Heather Innes made a point about cameras. That has been an issue at NESCol as well. Some lecturers have said that, if people do not put their camera on, they will not mark them present. That is not okay. It comes down to privacy. I know that there is the wi-fi issue—that is by the by—but some people have things going on in the background. In general, a person would not invite their lecturer into their home, so people should not need to have their camera on. We also have to accept that a number of students go to college as a last-chance saloon, and they might have other things going on in the background that prevent them from turning on their camera and therefore attending the lecture or whatever online.

Alex Bryson: I am a Scottish Wider Access Programme student, and most of the people in my class are fairly grown up. We all have families. Luckily, there is quite a good scheme at Fife College in which we have been given laptops and netbooks, for example, but we have had technical issues. Throughout the college year, there has been a green screen issue with Google Chromebooks, and we have struggled with that. Some students have had to come out of lessons because they could not see the whiteboard that was being shared, for example.

For me, the issue has been lecturer led. They have decided. Some lecturers said as soon as they were able to that they would not teach online. That meant that, on some occasions, we travelled in for lectures that lasted for an hour or two. I suffer from mental health issues, and the idea of getting on public transport absolutely terrifies me for lots of different reasons, so I missed a lot of lectures when I had vehicle trouble.

I think that there should be the online option for students. It should be an either/or issue—a person should not have to do one or the other. That would open up the whole concept and make things much more available for many more people.

The Convener: John O'Hara is online.

John O'Hara: When we were working online during the pandemic, the help from Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland, or SPARQS, in using the toolkit for learning engagement to be able to gather evidence from students who were working from home was crucial for us in New College Lanarkshire. From gathering that evidence from students and representatives during that time—the student association played a huge part in that—there was a mixed bag. Higher national

students were positive about online learning. They could learn, and they were really up for that. However, we can see the point about lower courses—some of the mostly practical ones—in which people had to learn practically to be able to complete the course. Make-up artistry students could not work on each other face to face, and they could not complete their course by doing it in a hybrid way.

We had a positive look at some of the online courses, and the evidence is really good for us to be able to plan and help. We need to look at the courses that are delivered in a hybrid way—especially practical courses—and consider whether they will or will not work. A lot of further education colleges have quite a lot of practical courses. The higher national courses and the courses with fewer practical elements definitely worked better for the college.

10:30

The Convener: Thank you, John. Amy Monks is online as well.

Amy Monks: With our students, it has been, as John O'Hara said, a bit of a mixed bag in respect of who has thrived with online learning and who has struggled. I was a hairdressing student, and hairdressing is quite tricky to learn in Microsoft Teams calls. We have looked at things at the department level, seen what has worked and spoken to students. For example, could aspects of the hairdressing course stay online? Maybe the odd theory class that is bolstered in the practical learning could. Flexibility of delivery will help. We do not have things set as 80 per cent on campus—there is not a number. The approach is fluid from department to department.

It has been said that everybody will have the opportunity to come on to the campus if they want to. I know that a few classrooms have been set up for hybrid in-and-out learning so that people can call in as and when they need to. That flexibility will be key to helping people with mental health issues, which Alex Bryson referred to, with travel, and with the security of going forward.

Micole Cochrane: Our students enjoy being on campus, and a majority of our students have been on campus, but we deliver a lot of practical courses. Our FE students also need social interaction in order to build relationships with their peers and lecturers, to feel that their mental health is supported, to feel supported academically and for peer support. It is really important that the colleges look at individual courses, see the needs of their students and listen to them. I think that our college has done that.

We conducted a survey in the student association and got a mixed response. We had a

lot of student carers and a lot of students with mental health problems and wi-fi issues, who liked to be on campus. It is really important that the approach is course led and that the students who participate in the courses and their individual needs are understood.

Al Wilson: We have hit on two fairly large challenges for students in Scotland's colleges, one of which is digital access and digital poverty. I know that that has been talked about a lot during the pandemic, but it is a real challenge for students. Just putting a course online is not necessarily an answer, as that throws up other challenges that need to be planned for, and support needs to be put in place. That is not always the case from day 1.

The other challenge is travel more generally. We have talked about different campuses, travelling in and out for one-hour classes and the rest being online. Alex Bryson talked about that. Travel has always been a challenge for students, regardless of the pandemic. It has been a barrier to education. Even in the area that my city institution covers, travel from one local authority area to another for a specific course is a challenge.

We have been lucky in the student association in that we have been able to access funding to run a project for active travel and supporting students to access the best forms of public transport. Unfortunately, that funding is coming to an end and we will not be able to do that any longer. Supporting students to get to their course is definitely a challenge.

A digital approach can solve some of those problems, particularly if we consider the demographic of students who are coming through. A lot of students are coming back into education, and a lot have family commitments and caring responsibilities. As Micole Cochrane said, it is about ensuring that students on particular courses have their voices heard on how those courses are delivered and ensuring that the approach works for everybody.

Kirsten Koss: A few very good points have been raised, and what has been said led me back to something that I have done this year. I conducted a survey with the student body about how it would like to learn. It was really important that we asked about that, and we followed on from that with focus groups.

A lot of the younger students have said exactly what Micole Cochrane said. They need to be there for the social aspect. Forty-seven per cent of the students who were surveyed said that they struggled with their mental health learning online, 34 per cent said that they preferred to learn online and 55 per cent said that they preferred a flexible,

mixed approach. Lots of students have said that such an approach is easier with childcare or caring responsibilities. We are in a cost of living crisis, and they cannot afford to come to college. The focus group results are being collated now, but people have said that they want a mixed approach. They want the opportunity to have both approaches, because they then find it much easier to manage other responsibilities.

Most of our students have said the technology is not an issue, although a percentage still say that it is difficult. The college really supports them, and the only issues that they have are on an operational level, when things maybe do not go quite to plan.

Our students want to access online classes, but they also want the option to learn on campus. For a student association survey, our sample of 216 people was quite big, but we have 21,000 students. Perhaps we need support from the college. Someone else needs to run a survey at a higher level, as that was a very small sample, although it was, as I said, a big one for a student association survey. It would be useful to have a survey at a regional or national level.

The Convener: Michael Marra has some questions.

Michael Marra: How we balance those models in the next phase following the pandemic is really interesting. It sounds as though you are all struggling with that issue, but it is great to hear that you are addressing and engaging with it proactively.

How attractive is going to campus? Al Wilson has mentioned how challenging that can be in relation to travel costs and so on. Are the campuses places where people want to be? Is that work being done? College principals tell me that they have no capital budget and have no money to make the transition to net zero. In my local area, people are worried about Kingsway campus in Dundee. Gardyne campus has had a lot of money spent on it, but there is a worry about whether we can attract people to these places. Is there a gym that people can use? Are there childcare facilities? Do colleges have to do more to attract people back and to make campuses places where people want to go?

Alex Bryson: I am at Carnegie campus, which does not have a gym but does have childcare facilities, although they are for young children. As I said, I am a SWAP student, and most of us are parents. For half the month, I am a single father. I have three kids, so I have to get my kids to school and get myself to college. Flexible learning is good because it allows for that.

I enjoy being on campus. I enjoy spending time with my peers and being face to face with

lecturers. However, at the same time, a busy campus is a terrifying prospect for me because of my mental health issues. The flexibility is fantastic, because I can pick to come in depending on whether I think the college will be busy. If it is not busy, I can find a quiet place to sit and listen to the lecture online. I am not stuck; I am free to work to my own abilities, if that makes sense.

Micole Cochrane: The issue is really important. Following student feedback, our college redeveloped the whole bottom floor of the main building to make it more student friendly. We offer all students a free lunch and a free breakfast when they come on to campus. We have a free gym for students, and we are redeveloping an outdoor space for students, too.

All those elements are really important in relation to creating relationships and an overall community feel. A big part of students coming back to college is making friends and feeling part of a community before they go into employment. Colleges have to look at all those elements. It is not just about the course, although that is really important. It is about ensuring that our colleges provide placements for students so that they are employment ready. It is about having facilities in our colleges that support our students while they are there. It is about having staff support to help students. There should be a person-centred approach, with colleges saying, "We care about you as a person. We care about your journey and about where you will go and how you will progress."

Al Wilson: A good example is the social care course at Edinburgh College, which was delivered across four campuses but is now being consolidated broadly within one campus, with some at a second campus. It is about the facilities that students can access and the quality of the student experience when they are on campus. Are students coming in just to sit, completely anonymous, in a classroom, which they could do anywhere, or are they accessing expert facilities?

In relation to the social care course, the department that has been developed at Sighthill is incredible—it is award winning and all the rest of it. It is great for students to have a practical element to their course, rather than it being totally theory based in a classroom, with students then punted out to a placement. Before they go out on a placement, they can experience what it is like and learn from mistakes through that process, which makes them more confident.

Michael Marra hit on the point that, unfortunately, those wraparound services are the first things to go whenever budgets are tight. Although it is great to see investment in facilities for specific courses, social spaces and other such facilities, and improving access to them, are not

necessarily a priority for all colleges at the moment because of budget constraints. That is definitely an issue. As a student association, we feel that we have to plug that gap by providing those activities.

Heather Innes: We have campuses that have amazing facilities. We have top-of-the-range facilities at our larger campuses, but we also have much smaller campuses that are, in essence, offices and some classrooms—there is nothing else. The big thing that we have been hearing from our students is that they want flexibility. It is key to them that they feel welcome on campus. Just yesterday, a student told me that, given that their course is entirely online, they did not feel welcome at their own campus. They had to find their own way—they had to force themselves to come on to campus, to go to the library and to meet people in order to feel welcome. There is an issue in that regard. If we have courses that are just online, do our students feel part of the community? Do they feel welcome at their own campus? Although flexibility is key, we still need to address that social aspect, because people want to see and be around other people. That is key for our students.

John O'Hara: I want to make a point about how attractive services are to students when they are on campus. From the years that I have worked in education, I am aware that students who come through the door now have more complex needs than they did before, so wraparound services are really important. In my experience, wraparound services are more attractive to students than a classroom or something else in a college. When we talk about cuts and the future, we need to ensure that wraparound services are at the forefront and that we look at the needs of students.

Amy Monks: A big part of making campuses attractive relates to the people who are there. As has been said, people should be there to welcome students, and there should be more informal wraparound services, such as lunch clubs or breakfast clubs. So much happens at college outwith the classroom and the academic space, and that is a huge part of the whole college experience for our students.

During the pandemic, when it was allowed, we took the opportunity to bring people from all our campuses together on picnics or walks, for example. That created a culture and a community across the board. It was not necessarily a counselling or a wellbeing session; it was just a social opportunity for people to meet face to face, to have experiences together and to form friendships and relationships. We are keen for that to continue. I echo what other people have said about the effect of cuts being a big worry, because

we know that such resources will probably be cut first.

10:45

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Heather Innes touched on the consistency of investment across smaller campuses. I am interested in whether there is a uniform position or whether smaller campuses tend to miss out.

A second issue is whether staff are always there on smaller campuses. It is not just about students being on campus. With the move towards more digital delivery, I have had feedback that teaching staff are often not present on smaller campuses, or they are beamed in from other sites. Have you experienced that?

Heather Innes: The situation very much varies across the region. For example, one of our campuses never reopened. It is still shut, and the courses are entirely online. I have been around a few of the campuses, and you tend to find that the support staff are there. I am not entirely sure about the position with lecturers; I would have to come back to you on that. Larger campuses feel quite busy again, but smaller campuses still feel a bit empty and quiet, which could be because of lower student numbers, for example. The situation varies vastly across the region.

Oliver Mundell: Have other people experienced that issue? I am particularly interested in whether teaching staff are present on smaller campuses or whether there is now a move to beam people in to teach.

The Convener: Does Kirsten Koss have any experience of that?

Kirsten Koss: No, I do not have anything to add.

The Convener: That is fine. Amy Monks wants to come in on that point.

Amy Monks: Gardyne is one of our biggest campuses, but it is also the campus in which the more theoretical or academic-based subjects are taught. At the start, we found that fewer people were coming back to that campus, because those courses were all being delivered remotely. Kingsway and Arbroath are slightly smaller campuses, but they provide very practical-based subjects, so the buzz around campus came back a lot quicker. Gardyne is still slightly quieter.

The Convener: Stephanie Callaghan has a question on this.

Stephanie Callaghan: I have a wee supplementary question, which goes back to what we were talking about in the first place. It seems that wraparound support for wellbeing is a key priority for students—that seems to be what they

are looking for. Going back to the point about the parity of students' views, do students have the power to insist that boards and principals make that a priority for their colleges?

The Convener: Micole Cochrane, are you in a position to answer that?

Micole Cochrane: I would say absolutely. Our officers have taken that issue to the board and they have been clear about their discussions and their feedback from students. Our college is making it a priority. As I said, funding is obviously helpful, but there is now a lack of funding; some aspects of it are stopping. Boards are keen to draw resources from other areas of the college in order to support students because it is necessary. A lot of students have been impacted by the pandemic, a loss of jobs and lots of other things that are going on in their lives. It is important that colleges understand that. Ours definitely does, and it is putting in internal support mechanisms. However, funding allows that to be expanded more widely. We can do bigger and better things with more funding.

Kirsten Koss: NESCol really has tried to invest in improving the spaces that we have available for students on campus. As students come back, we are seeing that they appreciate music on campus, televisions and nice places to sit, although our campuses—especially Aberdeen city campus—do not have a lot of room for social spaces, so it is difficult to create that. The college is investing in improving social spaces and wellbeing services, but, as I said before, although we have staff supporting students with mental health or wellbeing problems and a counselling service, I am not sure whether that will continue when the SFC grant goes. That is a real concern for the college and for student associations.

John O'Hara: The student associations at New College Lanarkshire would be confident in bringing up that agenda. A huge part of the work on the student mental health agreement with the college is about allowing us to put in place what the students need. Working together in partnership on the agreement gives us a way to say what the students need and what the college will do to support them.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We will now move to some questions from Bob Doris.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): It has been interesting to hear about the varied experiences across the country. One of the aims of regionalisation was to make it easier and more straightforward for young people not only to move from school into the college sector, whether to do higher national diplomas, higher national certificates or foundation apprenticeships, but also to articulate from

colleges into universities—to move straight into second year at university. Has it been students' experience that things have improved in recent years in relation to both of those things? Is there an equality of status for those who are at college and doing an HND because that is what they need? There is not a self-fulfilling prophesy that they have to go to university; they go for the HND or the apprenticeship. Any comments on the equality of status across various courses would be very welcome.

Micole Cochrane: Our college has increased the articulation routes. We now have more than 200 articulation routes and agreements with universities, which has been fantastic.

In addition to that, we work very closely with our local schools. We might be slightly different from the bigger colleges, as we are a medium-sized college in one region. We are not split across different campuses, so we can build and develop those relationships across the sector and support our students. We work with organisations such as Skills Development Scotland to provide careers advice for students who are coming in. We have one-to-one support for them if they change their mind mid-course or if they do not want to go to university, and we obviously work with employers and the SWAP programmes.

It is important that we look across the wider community and understand the needs of our employers, what is available in further education and higher education and how we can interlink with schools.

Al Wilson: I have three things to say on this. One is that the schools college partnership programme at Edinburgh College has really boomed over the past few years. The college is working with three different local authority areas and three different groups of schools, giving school pupils the experience of being on campus and learning subjects that they would not have access to through school. It has been a real success.

At the other end, as Alex Bryson attested to, the SWAP programme, whereby students sign up to a programme that they know will end up in university, has been very positive.

Edinburgh College—let me get the marketing speak correct—is the biggest single provider of students to Edinburgh's universities. A huge proportion of our students go on to universities in Edinburgh, but the retention and attainment levels in HND courses are high and have been consistent for a long time. I think that proves, as Bob Doris said, that people come to college to achieve an HND in its own right and that it is seen as a qualification that can help them in their career.

From our point of view, those three things are very positive.

Bob Doris: Okay. That helps.

The Convener: Alex Bryson wants to come in on this.

Alex Bryson: Quite a high proportion of SWAP students go on to university. Every one of my classmates has achieved the university place that they have been looking for. I have come back into education after 20-odd years, so I have struggled a little bit to get back into the way of it. The advice and help that have been given to me and the lectures that have been set up by the guidance staff and the tutors have been fantastic. Carnegie campus is quite a small campus so it is quite student led, but it has been a fantastic experience from start to finish.

Bob Doris: Any other comments on that would be welcome, but I have one final thing that I want to ask about. Another aspect of regionalisation was that we wanted to make sure that, in colleges with a number of campuses, there is community outreach work to attract learners who would not normally go to college. I am not talking about learners who are at school, but those in the wider community who have not had a conventional learning pathway—that would be the jargon, I suppose. Hard-to-reach groups would be the other jargon. What work is going on, and has that been enhanced in any way by college regionalisation? How do we reach those students who would not normally get into learning? That is, of course, what the further education sector is there for as well. Any comments on that would be welcome.

Micole Cochrane: We have created programmes such as the trauma responsive unique support tailor-made—TRUST—project, which is for students who may have come from a trauma-informed background and are not quite ready to go into mainstream full-time education courses. They are brought in. In addition to that, we have skills boost courses and the young persons guarantee. Again, it is about reaching out across our local community, to students who maybe would not come in through school routes naturally or would not apply to college, and saying, "Look, college is for everybody. Even if you do not feel ready to do a full-time course, there is a stepping stone into college. Come along and find out about it."

The Convener: Amy Monks, who is online, wants to come in on this.

Amy Monks: I want to answer a couple of the previous questions as well. We have a senior phase programme that is run through our academic development team. Recently, we have had the secondary 3 open days. Those learners, who will be our future senior phase, are coming in

for taster sessions now, before their choices need to be made, having a good experience on campus and getting to meet the different support teams that they will have available to them when they are on campus as students. That bolsters the community feeling and the support from the get-go.

I do not know the number of articulation routes that we have. I have Covid at the minute, so I have a bit of brain fog, but I know that they have increased and that we have a number of the SWAP courses as well. When it comes to equality of status, we promote the idea that there is no wrong path. Whether it is linear or a bit of a rollercoaster, or whether you are coming in to do something that will progress you as a person, your confidence or your learning, you do what you need to do, in HE or FE. You do whatever you need to do as a person.

When it comes to reaching those who are most disengaged, our learning engagement team—again, the name of the project is lost from my head—goes to community groups, young mum groups and carers groups, to reach those people and give them a point of contact, to plant the seed about coming back to education. The team is fully supported in that role, and I know that it has been really successful across the board.

Kirsten Koss: In response to Bob Doris's first question, like Dundee and Angus College, NESCol has taster sessions on at the moment to enable school pupils to come and experience what college is like. Personally, I think that we have a culture problem in Scotland whereby college is seen as secondary to university. Going to college does not have equal status to going to university, but I think we would all agree that college is a great place to go. A lot of students flourish at college who maybe would not flourish in fifth or sixth year at school or at university. They might think that they are ready in terms of grades, but they might not be ready in other ways. College is a supportive environment for those students.

We have a number of articulation routes. Universities come to the college and say, "This is what we have to offer. This is how we can support you as a college student." I think that the college helps to create that equality of status and to remind college students that they are just as able as the university students—so do the teams at the universities who help with widening participation.

In relation to your question about other students, I do not think that university and college experiences are open to everyone. Funding for Student Awards Agency Scotland has not increased for a number of years, and a number of people feel that they cannot afford to go to university or college—I am talking about articulation. They think that they will have to work

full time alongside it. They think, "I can't. I have kids. I have this. I have that." College is not open to everyone. We have to be aware of the fact that we are in a cost of living crisis and that, if people choose college, they need more money.

11:00

The Convener: Thank you. I am looking around to see whether anyone else wants to come in on that. Do you want to say anything else, Alex?

Alex Bryson: I came from full-time work into education and was given some not very good advice on funding at the start. As a result, the right funding was not in place for me. I was not getting enough funding. Essentially, I was getting £240 a month to live off and 75 per cent of my rent was being paid because I live in a private let. As a result, I am now in quite substantial debt. Luckily for me, I am ex-military so a lot of the military charities are now helping me out. For somebody coming off the street, from full-time employment into full-time education, there is not a lot of advice and there is not a lot of funding available. For example, you cannot get a bursary if you are claiming universal credit, and you cannot claim universal credit if you are a full-time student. It is very complicated. I think that that really needs to be addressed.

The Convener: Kaukab Stewart has some supplementary questions.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I am interested in parity of esteem for all courses. It was good to hear about the widening participation routes. If a student chooses one of those routes, how well prepared do they feel to take the next steps, whatever those may be? You have demonstrated that, by and large, students can choose different routes, but how well prepared for that do they feel? Are they nervous or apprehensive? Are they supported? Do they get advice from the right people at the right time?

Is there anyone who would particularly like to answer that?

The Convener: Alex Bryson is nodding, so he might be able to go first.

Alex Bryson: As a student at Fife College, I can say that the advice and help are there from tutors. I have been really fortunate with the tutors that I have had. They are fantastic and have been able to say, "Yes, that's the path for you," or, "No, that's not the path for you." They suggest other routes if they do not necessarily think that you are capable of doing something. Yes, the help and advice are there.

Al Wilson: One thing that colleges in Scotland are particularly good at is links with industry. The work-based learning approach and the ability to

give students a taste of what their working life could be like are essential for a lot of our students. That helps them to make decisions about their next steps, such as whether they need further qualifications or whether they can directly access employment.

Micole Cochrane: I agree with Al Wilson—we are exactly the same. As a student association, we have just done a survey of our students. We had 1,000 respondees and 78 per cent of them said that they felt ready for the next progression routes, that they were able to speak to the staff and that staff had spoken to them at the beginning of the course and obviously throughout their course.

It is necessary to have a person-centred approach, because people can change their mind halfway through. Someone might decide that they do not want to do that type of career or they might have had a placement that they have not enjoyed. Therefore, it is important that they have that relationship with not just their lecturer but the college and that they know that facilities such as careers support or student advice are available to access at any time should they change their mind or just wish to know what the next steps are.

Students also consider the money side and whether they can afford to progress to university or the next course and what the college does to support them. It is really important that they have that relationship and communication and that support staff are there to support them on their journey while they are at college.

Amy Monks: My personal experience was that I was very supported in my next steps. Obviously, as I was on a practical course, I missed out on a lot of practical learning during the pandemic, so there were nerves there. However, in my experience and the experience of people in my class, the lecturing staff have been amazing and are still there for us if there are any questions or we need a bit of advice. We still feel comfortable and confident about going back to them and saying, “Could you maybe just remind me of this aspect?”

Now that we are coming out of the pandemic, the work experience is back and there are the industry talks and, as has been mentioned, careers advice and the Business Gateway. All sorts of external resources can be called on to support our learners, whether they are going on to university or, like me, going out into the workplace after a practical course at college.

Heather Innes: At UHI, we have a fantastic careers team who put on skills workshops. There are variations of the name, but every student has a personal academic tutor to whom they can go for advice.

UHI is unique in that it is tertiary as well, so you do not have to leave UHI to take the next step. Personally, what I love about UHI is that you can enter with no qualifications whatsoever and could leave with a PhD. Things look slightly different for our students. If you are somewhere rural or on an island, for example, you could go right the way through UHI. Moving on to degree level might be slightly less intimidating, because you do not have to leave, and you have the same people around you the whole time. The same careers service and support staff are available, which potentially makes the process slightly easier.

Kirsten Koss: Going back to the question about parity of experience, I think that the students who progress to university feel very well prepared. The universities are there from the beginning—they are at open days, they speak to the students and they are at workshops. The student advice team runs skills workshops to help you to write Universities and Colleges Admissions Service statements and things like that.

However, our students who are studying practical courses such as construction and engineering do not feel as well prepared. All of my experience comes from Covid years, which I think is part of the problem, but students feel that they do not have enough practical experience. A number of our students have also said that they do not feel that they have enough support to get an apprenticeship or move into work.

I think that we do enough for our students who are progressing to uni, but we need to do a bit more for students who are going on to a different kind of work.

Kaukab Stewart: Just to explore that a bit further, what suggestions could be given to the students whom you consult with? I was going to come on to the ones who might slip through the net, because we want to be there for everybody and leave nobody behind. What do colleges do to make sure that they catch everybody? Do students who are not so prepared feel that they can ask for extra support, and can the colleges respond to that?

Kirsten Koss: As I said, our student advice team runs employer workshops and skills workshops. Students also have a noticeboard where they can see the apprenticeships that are available. A student suggested to me that it would be a good idea to have employers come along to their classes so that students could see what employers do and how they do it. That particular student said to me that the students who get picked for apprenticeships are sometimes kind of cherry picked, and perhaps that would be a good way to find out who was capable.

There was something else that I wanted to add, but it has slipped my mind.

The Convener: You can come back in, or you can always send it to us by email if it comes back to you.

Micole Cochrane: We work with a number of employers that visit classes and develop relationships with students. In addition, there are placements. The key thing is that we listen to students. For example, if a student does not turn up at class once or twice, we have a team that will follow that up. We want to find out what the problem is and how we can support them, so that we can nurture our students and support them on their journey.

Many of the students enjoyed the flexibility that the Scottish Qualifications Authority provided during Covid with regard to continuous assessment and open-book exams. We hope that that flexibility will continue as the Covid years come to an end.

The Convener: We will move on to questions from Oliver Mundell.

Oliver Mundell: I want to go back to the point about parity of esteem. I am interested in your views on whether, in the policy that is coming from the Parliament and the Government, the message is strong enough in support of college education.

Al Wilson: That is difficult to answer. Certainly, the cuts in the college budget for this year and the coming few years will be really challenging, although that is not to say that they are not replicated in universities. The challenge for colleges is in the restrictions that they have in reacting to those cuts. I will not speak for colleges—I will let them give their own evidence on that.

Colleges tend to have students from a really varied background, with real challenges or experiences that are not necessarily replicated among students in universities. Therefore, college students tend to need a lot more support, particularly those who need additional support, and the funding for that support is not necessarily at the level that it needs to be at in the college sector.

A specific example is counsellors on campus. There was a lot of discussion about the fact that more counsellors were required on campuses, both in universities and colleges. Money came through for that, and there has been a real development in the sector in that regard. Even at the height of that, however, colleges were much less supported to provide the service, even though there was much higher demand. That definitely needs on-going support, because it will be a real challenge with more cuts coming down the line.

The regionalisation of colleges is meant to make the sector more streamlined and more able to adapt to the challenges. However, the way in which colleges operate is very different from the way in which universities operate—for instance, colleges do not have additional income through research funding—and therefore, in many ways, colleges need a lot more support.

I hope that that answers the question.

Kirsten Koss: I mentioned this earlier, but I think that there is less of a policy problem and more of a culture problem. As I said, people think that college is secondary to university. I sat on an SQA working group this year and had to constantly remind the people on that group that it is not just school pupils who do SQA qualifications—it is also college learners. The fact that I had to constantly remind the SQA of that shows just how much of a culture problem we have, given that it is at the heart of the education system.

Oliver Mundell: It will not come as a surprise to anyone on the committee to hear about the challenges that you have in communicating that to the SQA. I wonder whether the issue goes wider, to politicians, the Parliament and the Government, too. We all say that college education is important and that colleges have a key role, but is the political support there to make parity of esteem real? That might be a difficult question.

The Convener: It is a big question. We might have to leave it and come back to it later, unless anyone wants to answer. It is food for thought. As I said, if the witnesses have any thoughts on that, we might have time to pick that up at the end.

We will move on to questions from Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): There has probably been a more positive view of college management in today's evidence session than there was in last week's session with the trade unions. You have probably observed that there has been quite a lot of industrial dissent in the sector and that industrial relations are not particularly strong. Does anybody have a view on why that is and how we might be able to resolve that? Again, that is a big question, but the mood today is very different from last week and I am interested in why that is the case.

The Convener: That is a great question, Willie. I am looking around—Al Wilson, I have caught your eye and I am holding it.

11:15

Al Wilson: Industrial action in colleges has been an issue throughout the regionalisation years. Particularly this year, we have had strikes

among lecturers for over a month, plus resulting boycotts. There was the threat of industrial action from support unions as well. I do not necessarily think that that will go away within the current funding packet that we have.

Overall, throughout that period, real-terms funding has been cut, which will always have an impact. The impact on the student experience is huge whenever industrial action takes place, because of the short life cycle of a student. I am not sure whether the current funding levels or the projected funding levels for the next few years are going to make that situation any better, and that is a concern for the student experience for sure.

Alex Bryson: The level of support from the tutors during that period dropped massively. In my experience, they went from working and doing all the extra stuff that they do for us to doing exactly what was in the contract. It was only for a few weeks, but the level of support dropped off massively. From the point of view of a student, it was not a comfortable place to be. You want to support the tutors but, at the same time, you have this tiny period of time in which you have to complete the course in order to move on to your next phase. It was a difficult few weeks.

Amy Monks: The impact on the students was a mix of anger and upset. Again, of course, they want to see their teaching staff in a good position and want to support them, but we even had students who were fearful about crossing the picket line. Dundee has a volatile history when it comes to industrial action in different places. It was sad to see that they feared coming to college and crossing that picket line. We had to reassure them and say, "Even though they may be taking industrial action, they are still your lecturers. They are still the same people. They are obviously just putting up a fight and looking for support." However, that was not very nice to see.

Willie Rennie: Let me be a bit more provocative.

The Convener: Oh dear.

Willie Rennie: When I was in higher education, student unions were a source of revolution and agitation. I have not really picked that up today. The college sector has faced 10 years' worth of cuts, it is getting flat cash over the next few years and 43,000 whole-time equivalent places have been lost over several years. I wonder why you are not angry and why you are not protesting.

Kirsten Koss: I think that it goes back to forming good relationships in the college and being part of the college. We are angry and we have gone through the National Union of Students, which has said how angry we are about it. Whatever we do, it does not seem to make a difference. We are angry about the cuts and we

want to see education flourish but, whatever we say, we do not seem to get anywhere. We do not really know. I think that we are at a brick wall now.

For example, we completely agree with the industrial action by the lecturers but, at the same time, our education is being impacted and, unless there is a change in funding, nothing will happen. Therefore, on one hand, we agree with and support the lecturers but, on the other hand, as Alex Bryson said—this was not such a problem at NESCSA but it has been the case in other institutions—students are not having their assessments marked and are having issues with progression. Therefore, they become angry at the wrong people because of that. However, the problem is the funding.

John O'Hara: I totally agree with Kirsten Koss. We can look at how we have been constantly cut over 10 years, but the fact that we are not sitting here angry does not take away from how passionate people in student associations are about what we believe in. We believe that student associations have to be funded going forward. They have to be funded because of the work that these students do on the ground. We believe in what we are doing as a student union. As a student movement, we will always believe in what we do. We are angry at times, but sometimes anger does not change anything, so what we do is we constantly fight the battle.

Heather Innes: There definitely is still anger there, but I have found in our case that being diplomatic about it often yields better results. We have a really good relationship with the regional team at the UHI. Often sitting down and having discussions behind closed doors yields better results than standing up against them, because then there is a bit of an affront. We work together to find the best solutions and I have found that the senior management team at the UHI undoubtedly want the best result for students. They listen to us. They want to know how they can help and whether they can help. I have personally seen how unhappy they are about the cuts and the choices that they are going to have to make. They do not want to have to make those choices, so there is a bit of sympathy there as well.

Amy Monks: I totally agree with Heather Innes. It is about channelling that anger and being smart about the conversations that we have. A lot goes on behind closed doors, we have written letters and we have made phone calls—we have done lots of things. It is about how we team up with our exec to find the best approach to things. The more people who are invested and behind that sort of fight, the better.

The Convener: The last set of questions this afternoon—this morning, rather—is from Ross Greer. Over to you, Ross.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): It is not quite afternoon yet, and I promise that it will not be the afternoon by the time I finish these questions.

I am interested in continuing with Willie Rennie's line of questioning and his reflection at the start about the difference in tone between how you are talking about your relationships with college management and what we heard last week from the trade unions. It is fair to say that the trade unions made it very clear in their evidence that there is a fundamental lack of trust between them and college management.

We have not heard from management yet, but it would be fair to say that that goes both ways. There seems to be more trust between you and management. I would be interested in any reflections that you have on that, but the first question that I have is about your relationship with the unions. You have said a lot about the ways in which you engage with college management. Do you have much regular contact with the lecturers union and with the support staff unions? Is that part of your week-to-week activities as student associations, or does that all sit quite separate from the work that you do?

Al Wilson: I can respond quickly to say that, in my experience, the answer is no. Students associations and trade unions do not work very closely together. Trade unions tend to work at a national level and work directly with the NUS. At a local level, my experience is that trade unions will be in contact with the student association whenever there is industrial action and, outwith that, not so much.

Micole Cochran: My experience is exactly the same as Al Wilson's. In relation to the student association working with college boards, I guess there is a different relationship because the student officers are actually living the experience, so perhaps the board is more open to listening to their individual experiences and understanding of college life and being more open to creating strategy and elements to be able to support the student experience, because that is the key. We all want the same end goal. We all want to have students at the centre. We all want them to succeed. We want them to progress and we want them to be the best that they can. I guess that that may be why there is a bit of a disparity.

Ross Greer: If I could continue Willie Rennie's theme of being provocative—I stress that I mean no offence by this—do you think that the fact that the student associations' relationship with management also involves the funding that you receive from colleges has any bearing on the difference between the student associations' and the unions' relationships with management? Unions do not receive funding from college management; they receive membership dues. Do

you ever feel that the financial relationship compromises your ability to be a bit tougher in that relationship and a bit more combative?

Kirsten Koss: Absolutely. It would be difficult for us to flat out publicly disagree with the college, whereas the Educational Institute for Scotland Further Education Lecturers Association can go out there and say, "We don't agree with this."

In relation to your first question, I think that it would be useful for us to meet the trade unions regularly. The only time I have met trade union representatives outside casual conversations with the staff I know who are union representatives at the college was when the NUS organised a meeting with us and EIS-FELA representatives during the first instances of the strike. That was useful, but—I think because we do not have that regular contact with them—it turned into a bit of a you-versus-us when really we all have the same end goal.

Heather Innes: Our relationship with the UHI senior management team is a very productive one. They regularly refer to us as the experts on learning, so they want our opinion. I think that that is partially why it is so good. I do not feel that the point about funding impacts as much. They want to see us as effective and they were happy to fund us further if we are effective. They have been asking more and more of us recently.

We do not regularly speak to trade unions, and I think that we need to change that. There are probably a fair few at the UHI, with the different levels of lecturers, but it is not something that we do regularly.

John O'Hara: I agree with what Heather Innes said as well. We do not have any relationship with the EIS and the trade unions, and I agree that we have to have that going forward, rather than the unions just meeting us or speaking to us when strikes and so on are happening.

Not challenging management because of funding is not the experience of the students association. If we have reason to, we will challenge the management, whether they give us funding or not. We work on the basis of what we have achieved, what we are achieving going forward, and any development going forward, so whether we are funded by them or not, the right thing to do is to challenge them if we have to. In my experience, that has never been the case.

Ross Greer: It seems like there is an appetite for more engagement with unions. Has the barrier to that so far been one of capacity, because there are many demands on your times as student association officers, or is it the case that neither side has yet reached out to the other to make that a more structured and on-going relationship, which it perhaps could be? If it is the latter, it seems like

an easy enough issue to solve. However, if the biggest barrier to your engaging with staff unions is a lack of capacity on one side or another, there is a bigger structural issue that we need to unpack there before we can fix that.

Heather Innes: For us, there is probably an element of both. As a regional officer at HISA, I am swamped. I sit in many meetings and on many committees, and I have people pulling for my attention constantly every day. However, I also think that we have not reached out to staff unions and they have not reached out to us, so I think that, at some point, we probably should do that and we should sit down and have a talk.

In relation to the recent industrial action, we put out a statement saying that we understood the reasons for it and that any students needing support could get in touch with us. We were trying to cover both areas by saying that, although we acknowledge the reasons for the strike, we understood the impact that it would have on students. However, overall, I think that more work needs to be done there.

Kirsten Koss: I think that the position of NESCol is exactly the same as that of HISA—both elements are involved. Also, with regard to engagement with college staff and union representatives, there is an issue around the fact that some members of staff and union reps still do not value student associations—they do not value what we have to say and do not really care—so it can sometimes be difficult to have that discussion.

The meeting that I mentioned between the NUS and the EIS-FELA was like an us-versus-you situation, and the message that we got was that the union did not really care what we had to say because there was going to be a strike anyway. It goes back to a culture problem. We must have a culture wherein we are partners rather than a hierarchy.

11:30

Ross Greer: John O'Hara, I have a question for you about your relationship with the regional board. I was interested in what Heather Innes was saying about that being a positive relationship from her point of view but also that there is a variation in the relationship that the regional board has with individual colleges. From some of what we have heard previously, I think it is fair to say that, in Glasgow, although it is not accurate to say that the relationship with the regional board is challenging, it is the case that some folk would question what additional value that board is providing on top of the existing relationship between college management, staff unions, student associations and so on.

From the Lanarkshire perspective, is there an added value that you are seeing from having that additional level of regional infrastructure there? What is your relationship with the regional board like? Do you feel that you are getting something out of that, or are you just dealing primarily with management and the board level at your individual institution?

John O'Hara: My experience of that is that our presidents probably have more experience of the regional board than anyone else. I know that our president sits on the regional board and the outcomes are exactly the same as they are when we present to our normal board. I do not see any difference between the regional board and our normal board. It is the same work. The only difference that I see is that we only have one member from New College Lanarkshire sitting on that regional board and one member from another college within that region. It would be better if we had two presidents from Lanarkshire sitting on that board, but I do not really see that I can have an opinion on something that I do not see as being any different.

Ross Greer: Thanks. That is all from me, convener.

The Convener: It has been really tremendous to hear the evidence from all of you, as you are people on the ground who are going through the education system right at this moment. You do not often get the opportunity to come to Parliament to set out positions and make your voices heard, so, as we have a little bit of time in hand, I will give you this opportunity to say something that you desperately want to say today that you have not had the opportunity to bring to the committee. That is a bit of an open-floor question. Does anyone want to go first on that?

Kirsten Koss: I am sure that you are aware of the NUS talking about summer payments for students. Summer is quite a scary time to be a student. You have to get a full-time job, but who wants to give you a full-time job for two months and then let you go away in August? When are we going to see summer payments for students?

The Convener: Thank you, Kirsten. That is food for thought. Heather Innes, you are nodding away. Is there anything else that you want to make us aware of?

Heather Innes: I am in complete agreement with Kirsten Koss, having been that student who had a part-time job and who then had to get a second part-time job over the summer and worked myself ragged. It is a very stressful time, and summer payments have been spoken about for longer than they have been the subject of action. At this point, I think that they are quite necessary.

The Convener: Anyone else?

Amy Monks: My query would be around that bottom line. There seems to be no bottom line for student association funding. I know that our funding is the lowest—it works out at just 23p per head for our students. We try to run as many things as possible—breakfast clubs and so on—but that money funds barely one pot of porridge per student for the whole year. I would love to see some sort of baseline that involves more of a calculation of where the funding comes from and the amount that each college gets, so that the levels are consistent and, whether you are studying in Dundee and Angus, Aberdeen or Glasgow, your student association is able to support you by offering wraparound services and the informal things that, as I said before, make up your college experience.

The Convener: Thank you, Amy. I should just say that you have done really well with all your contributions, given that you have not been feeling 100 per cent today. Thank you very much.

Kirsten Koss: I would just add to Amy Monks's point that a baseline for staffing would be good as well. I have visited a number of colleges and university student associations, and I know that, for example, Aberdeen University Student Association has more staff in its human resources department than we have in the entire NESCol student association. We have one member of staff who works on a half-and-half basis—half of her job is to manage a student association and half involves engagement generally—and we have one member of staff who is funded by a Scottish Funding Council grant. That means, that, really, we do not have a full-time member of staff. How can we support people who are there for only a year? How can we maintain the student association when we have only half a member of staff, who is also doing work for the college half the time? It would be good to see a baseline number of staff members, too.

Micole Cochrane: It is important to look at individual colleges, because, although we are all part of the sector, we are all completely different. We are all funded in different ways, we all have different staffing and we all have different students. For example, on funding, if our college student association does not have enough, we go to our principal and deliver a case. When the free breakfast and lunch that we mentioned does not come directly from the student association; it comes directly from the college. People just need to look at individual colleges and how their sources of funding are completed and the individual negotiations in that.

Alex Bryson: Again, I support pretty much what everybody else is saying. For myself, it is all about funding. Essentially, for half the month, I am a single man, and the funding for a single man who

wants to go back into education is almost non-existent. It is not there. There is no help for people like me. It is all geared around students who are just leaving home or who are just coming out of high school. What about people like me, who, after 40-odd years, need to retrain because of their physical and mental health but cannot afford to do so? I am not too sure whether I am going to be able to financially afford the next four years or whether I am going to have to bite the bullet and go back to work. Funding for people in my group would be amazing.

John O'Hara: From my experience, over the past 10 years, of the effective work that student associations do, we need to be at the forefront of funding in order for the officers to make the necessary impact on the ground and for the student associations to be able to support them. Our local students in these colleges need to be adequately funded, and we need to make sure that that is always at the top tier. Going forward, that would be my wish.

The Convener: Thank you all for a great and informative session this morning. I thank you for your time.

We will have a short suspension to allow the witnesses to leave.

11:37

Meeting suspended.

11:47

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

St Mary's Music School (Aided Places) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2022 (SSI 2022/173)

Education (Scotland) Act 1980 (Modification) Regulations 2022 (SSI 2022/172)

The Convener: Our next item of business is consideration of two pieces of negative subordinate legislation. Do members have any comments on the instruments?

As there are no comments, does the committee agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the instruments?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: That concludes the public part of today's meeting. We will consider our final agenda items in private. I ask members who are attending virtually to reconvene on Microsoft Teams in a few minutes.

11:49

Meeting continued in private until 12:02.

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