



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 3 April 2019

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

12th Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Alan Armstrong (Education Scotland)

Morven Cameron (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)

Gayle Gorman (Education Scotland)

Scott Harrison (City of Glasgow College)

Joan Mackay (Education Scotland)

Dr Marsaili NicLeòid (Sabhal Mòr Ostaig)

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Alastair Sim (Universities Scotland)

Jenny Watson (Education Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 3 April 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decisions on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning and welcome to the 12th meeting in 2019 of the Education and Skills Committee. We have received apologies from Gordon MacDonald, and Gil Paterson is attending the meeting as committee substitute.

Agenda item 1 is decisions on taking business in private. Does the committee agree to take in private items 3, 4 and 5 today and consider in private evidence that we take in the future for our subject choices inquiry?

Members indicated agreement.

Subject Choices Inquiry

09:30

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is the committee's first evidence-taking session for its subject choices inquiry. We will hear from two panels of witnesses, the first of which is made up of representatives of Education Scotland.

Before we begin the formal evidence session, I want on behalf of the committee to give a sincere vote of thanks to all those who have engaged with us so far on the inquiry. We have received more than 1,100 survey responses from teachers and hundreds from parents and young people, and they will be published over the course of our inquiry.

I also thank those who joined me in attending the members of the Scottish Youth Parliament sitting workshop on subject choices as well as the young people who have been part of the lively discussions on the inquiry that have been hosted by our outreach team. Their contributions are very valuable, and the committee very much appreciates the time that has been taken to make them.

I now welcome from Education Scotland Gayle Gorman, chief executive and chief inspector of education; Alan Armstrong, strategic director; Joan Mackay, assistant director; and Jenny Watson, senior education officer. Most of the questions will be directed to you, Ms Gorman, but you can nominate someone else to answer, if required. I should say that we are under time constraints, as we have another panel to take evidence from, and we want to get through as many questions as possible.

We will start with a question from Jenny Gilruth.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): Good morning, panel.

Gayle Gorman (Education Scotland): Excuse me, convener, but I think that I had mentioned that I wanted to make a very brief opening statement.

The Convener: Oh, right. I think that that would be okay.

Gayle Gorman: Thank you. I thank the committee for the invitation to give evidence on an issue that is central to Education Scotland and on which we are currently working.

Someone once said that in order to set sail on a journey of discovery, you first have to leave the safety of the shore, and that seems appropriate for this inquiry. For the teenagers leaving our schools and colleges in the next couple of months, their whole educational career has been involved with curriculum for excellence. As I am sure many of

you will agree, the future that they face in the 21st century is different from what I experienced at school. As a nation, we designed curriculum for excellence to be flexible in order to enable the education system, and the children and young people within it, to adapt to a rapidly changing world and the skills needed to thrive in it. CFE still has real untapped potential, and we need to set it free and let it happen.

We should not be surprised that our young people have adapted to and are revelling in their CFE experiences. They expect to make more choices about their learning and careers than we ever had to or are used to, and they expect to have more options to choose from in an ever-changing system and world, where, even in their lifetimes, the pace of change has been unprecedented.

There has been much debate on the topic of subject choice. I am clear that we should not lose sight of what young people are telling us about what they want from their education. It is little surprise that many of our young people are not expressing concern about not doing enough qualifications. Instead, we more frequently hear complaints from them about too much of a focus on traditional qualifications at the expense of innovative pathways through their final years at school—the years in which they prepare for the world of work.

There is still work to do to achieve that for our young people. We are still seeing too many settings with a focus on a one-year qualifications ladder and a drive to the next batch of national qualifications, highers and advanced highers—and too often in the traditional subjects that you and I might have studied. There is a wealth of courses and programmes that are available at the same level as highers and which have been certificated by not just the Scottish Qualifications Authority but many others, too. There is no doubt that we need more help and support for parents, employers and many others to understand the options and changes that are available. It is not easy to change the mindset in a system such as education, but collectively we need to do it.

That said, we have highlighted encouraging evidence in our latest thematic inspection, on curriculum empowerment, which was published at the end of last week. The good news is that almost all headteachers and schools feel empowered to make decisions about their curriculum, and almost all are now revisiting the broad general education to plan better-aligned learning pathways, particularly between the BGE and the senior phase.

We found that, in secondary schools, teachers are concerned about the number and timing of changes to SQA courses over the past few years

and their impact on planning for progression. Moreover, schools, particularly but not solely in rural areas, continue to find it difficult to recruit teachers. Although schools are finding creative solutions to deal with that, that situation can—and in some cases does—limit opportunities to lead extensive curriculum improvements, and in some instances, to provide a local curriculum that fully meets the needs of the children and young people whom they serve.

The education governance review strengthened the remit of Education Scotland, and we recognise our role in taking the sector forward through the next phase of curriculum for excellence. Indeed, we have been developing with partners a refreshed narrative for CFE to support teachers moving into the next phase in a changed and changing system.

We have also been reorganising over the past six months. I am excited about our new regional structure, which was introduced two days ago and which will support schools, local authority and regional improvement collaboratives. We are also excited about our plans to engage with thousands of teachers in the next academic session on improvement topics, in respect of which innovative curriculum design is one of our highest priorities.

The debate that I want us to have is about how we ensure our young people make the choices that they want, often from a much wider range of options than the traditional academic subjects, delivered in the traditional way, that formed the mindset of many of us. My question is: how do we deliver the greater choice and personalisation that our young people need? The answer is much broader than just having five, six or eight options to choose from. We must deliver a modern curriculum for excellence—our children and young people deserve and expect no less.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We move to Ms Gilruth.

Jenny Gilruth: Good morning, panel. I want to go back to the issue of curriculum empowerment, which Gayle Gorman mentioned in her opening statement, and the broader curriculum offer, because I think that there is a bit of tension between the line from the SQA and what we are being told by Education Scotland.

Let me get this right in my head. According to the SQA, every national 5 course comprises a notional 160 hours. If every class teacher has a maximum of 22.5 hours of class contact time and there are 38 teaching weeks in the year, that brings the total to 855 hours, which means that, under SQA guidelines, only five subjects can be taught in a teaching year. There is therefore a tension between the ethos of BGE, which is meant

to last until the end of secondary 3, and what the SQA is advocating.

My question, therefore, is: who takes responsibility for curriculum design? Is it driven by local authorities, Education Scotland or the SQA?

Alan Armstrong (Education Scotland): The schools design courses, and the SQA sets qualifications and standards. Its notional 160 hours for a Scottish credit and qualifications framework-related 24 points is based on notional learning, not all of which requires teacher contact. As I have said, the schools design courses and the timetable around the young people and the pathways that they need to move towards the qualifications. In recent years, we have seen schools settling on anything between five and eight options—and sometimes experimenting from year to year—to make sure that young people, building on what they have learned in primary school and in S1 to 3, are ready to move into the senior phase and get the right amount of learning and teaching in S4.

Many schools are also looking to move away from the rather stale diet of examinations in S4, S5 and S6. We know that an increasing number of young people are staying on after S4; in fact, two thirds now leave from S6, and the numbers not leaving in S4 but moving into S5 have increased. Ten years ago, only about one in nine young people stayed on into S5, and now it is one in six. That gives schools opportunities to design courses over more than one year. We are seeing young people begin to take a mix of courses over one and two years. They sometimes stop after a year and sit an examination, maybe in two or three subjects, before continuing with other courses over two years.

Jenny Gilruth: I take that point, but my point would be that, unless you start earlier, it is impossible to timetable more than five subjects in an academic year. I am trying to understand what Education Scotland's advice to schools would be. Are you saying that BGE should not start until August, or are you saying that you can start gathering evidence in the Easter term—at about this time of year?

Alan Armstrong: Young people progress through S1, S2 and S3 at different rates. As I said, the notional period of 160 hours is the learning required to reach a qualification. That learning does not have to take place after the start of S4. You could, for example, have a very able young person in S2 who is totally inspired by a novel, and gets deep into that novel, and into understanding the craft of the author and so on. Those are the kinds of skills and experiences that mean that we might be looking at national 5, perhaps even higher, once in a while. However, teachers do not then apply SQA qualifications to that. It is about

the natural flow of learning and teaching. You might have an able violinist or artist who is producing really good work in aspects of their learning over S1, S2 and S3. At the end of S3, schools and teachers can determine what stage young people are at, and what their needs will be over the next one, two or three years.

Jenny Gilruth: In its evidence, the Royal Scottish Geographical Society says:

“an obvious solution to both increase pupil choice and reduce the time pressure, is to make it clear that subject matter can be taught in S3”.

That is supported by the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers, which advocates a return to the two, two, two model, which is in direct contrast to the ethos of BGE. What is Education Scotland's take on that?

Gayle Gorman: We have been quite clear about that. The empowerment context that we set there is about the local schools, community and school leaders thinking about what the best option is for the young people they work with and serve. In some areas, that might mean changing the fluid nature of the senior phase. It might mean some young people starting some qualifications in S3. In fact, we have case studies that show a variety of approaches to the curriculum. However, it would be inappropriate for Education Scotland to say, “You must all do this and this.” What we are saying is, “Here's some best practice, where we've seen the right choices being made for young people at the right time in their community, but you have to look at your curriculum rationale and the learners in your school.”

That applies over time, too. We do not want a static curriculum, because our young people are not static—they are dynamic. We want a dynamic curriculum, so our job is very much to say, “Here is good practice, and here is why it was good practice in that context”—what is good practice may vary over time—and here is another element of excellent practice that might have a different curriculum design.” What the nation needs is to engage in that debate, and professionals need to think about what the best option is, particularly for different subjects, where the learning demands and the need for the one-to-one interface with the teacher can vary across the course.

Alan Armstrong: The qualifications are the senior phase. The learning can progress through primary school and secondary school, but young people take their qualifications over S4, S5 and S6. The learning that takes place towards that can determine the course choices and levels that young people move into when they take their qualifications. However, we are not saying that schools cannot teach any element of national 5 courses until August of S4. That would not be appropriate.

Jenny Gilruth: I understand that, because I used to teach national qualifications, but I have a concern about the variability of the offer at BGE level across the country. We have heard that inspection evidence has shown that young people in S1 can be studying as many as 15 subjects. That is a lot of different subject areas. Do you honestly believe that the BGE is preparing our young people adequately for a move into NQ level, given that broad variability of subject offer in BGE?

09:45

Joan Mackay (Education Scotland): Not yet, but it is a work in progress. This year alone, there has been a significant increase in the number of requests for help and support with BGE, not only in S1, S2 and S3 but across the transition period from primary school. That is some of the work that Jenny Watson and I, and our small team, are supporting just now. People have turned their minds to BGE and are looking at it more holistically than before.

When we talk about 13 subjects, it is important to remember that that is the way in which the curriculum is organised in secondary education—there are 13 different bits. Also, youngsters who have been going through seven years of primary education—and often two years of early education—have already encountered a lot of what are called subjects in secondary education. Therefore they will have studied, for example, history and chemistry to varying degrees before they come into S1.

In S1 the issue is far more about transition into the way in which learning is organised. It is a shock for a pupil to go from P7 to having 13 different teachers. It is not necessarily the subjects but the way in which learning is packaged that is new to pupils. People are recognising that and, as I have said, at the moment there is significant interest in and focus on BGE at the same time as the senior phase is being developed. That is where we are nationally.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Thank you for your candour. If I have taken anything from your answers to Jenny Gilruth, it is that, as you have fairly described, Education Scotland's role is not to impart firm guidance or dictat from on high. What would you say it is?

Gayle Gorman: It is to work in partnership with the system. We work with Scotland's educators, for Scotland's young people. We are there to develop good practice, evaluate impact on the system, share evidence-based research and ensure that we are creating a network that establishes a professional learning community across Scotland. Especially in a changing, evolving and empowered system, it is critical that

that role is about facilitation, celebration of best practice and identifying the challenge where we see ineffective practice and ensuring that our system addresses it.

Tavish Scott: That is very fair. How should an education committee or education minister assess what is happening if, as you have described, there is a myriad of ways in which schools can take forward both the curriculum and the teaching of it? How can we know more effectively what is happening?

Gayle Gorman: There are a number of ways. There are thematic inspections, which we have restarted this year with a focus on empowerment. We have had a series of three of those inspections and, in the summer term, we will conclude a thematic inspection on the teaching of mathematics across all phases in Scotland, including its successes and weaknesses. So far, that has raised important questions about what we, as a nation, need to do about that.

There are also individual school inspections, which we collate into an annual report that identifies key themes. In addition, there is regional work in which we do a deep dive into the system and suggest a particular subject area in which there might be an issue. If I were to specify such an area now, people might think that there is an issue with that, but I can give the example of the review of mathematics, which is an area in which it is known that there has been a significant issue with recruiting teachers and with the pedagogy and the quality of teaching across BGE and all the way through to the senior phase. When we find such issues, we should take an independent view, go in and touch base with all layers in the system, evaluate and come back with findings, next steps and questions for the system. Those can then go into the political system.

Tavish Scott: The 32 local authorities, never mind the 389 secondary schools, could all be doing different things. My question is about how we can draw lessons from what is happening, whether that is in geography, maths or languages. For example, the number of pupils who are taking languages is falling. How do we learn?

Gayle Gorman: I have outlined how we draw such lessons. We do so through the work that is done in local authorities through inspection, by adding to that through an independent review and then by collating that into a report that draws conclusions and asks questions of the system.

Tavish Scott: Nowadays, we are not asked to make any judgment about the number of young people who pass higher exams, because that is said to be a very narrow measure of their performance or that of schools. In her opening remarks, Gayle Gorman made a point about work

experience and various other pathways, and Jenny Gilruth subsequently asked about that. If we are not to concentrate on that number because a range of measurements are now used, does subject choice actually matter?

Alan Armstrong: Subject choice matters, because we need to make sure that young people are on the right pathway for them. With more young people staying on at school and with many more opportunities for their careers and better careers advice in S1, S2 and S3, young people's expectations are growing.

The young people who are in S3 at the moment will move into their senior phase in August. They started school in August 2009, and the experiences and outcomes were published in April 2009. Those young people have had curriculum for excellence right the way through. That growing experience and vision of the teachers, and the growing awareness of the young people about their future life in Scotland, the UK and well beyond is influencing young people's expectations. We need to make sure that our senior phase provides as much course choice and variety as possible.

In schools where there are six or seven course choices, some columns might have subjects that have three or four different short courses. The young person can be taking three or four SQA qualifications—full qualifications at national 5—and lots of short courses to meet their individual needs. They can change that over S5 and S6, or study those courses over one or two years. The approach is entirely flexible. We are seeing schools, teachers, young people and parents co-creating that experience, and the situation constantly changes each year as the different year groups move through the school and have different ideas.

Tavish Scott: Your contention is therefore that the committee's survey, which showed that the majority of schools surveyed said that only six subjects were available to fourth-year pupils, does not matter too much.

Alan Armstrong: In some cases, that hides the fact that some young people could be taking two or three short courses in one of those—

Tavish Scott: How many would that be?

Alan Armstrong: We do not know that exactly. Education Scotland does not keep that information.

Tavish Scott: Out of 389 schools, how many are offering those four short courses that you have just described?

Alan Armstrong: I would think it is quite a number. We know this from developing the young workforce.

Gayle Gorman: I mentioned in my introduction the focus that we, in Scotland, have on traditional academic subjects. However, our young people tell us that they want to be ready for the world of work, which as members well know is changing and dynamic. There is therefore much more focus on foundation apprenticeships, modern apprenticeships and other pathways.

Great partnerships are also evolving with colleges—Joan Mackay and Jenny Watson could say more on that. In the past two years, there has been an acceleration in that approach. When young people are given those options or the timetable, there are often options that involve two or three days a week when children go out to further education colleges or the lecturers come into the school. There is a wide range of qualifications. If we narrow the debate to whether there are only six or five or eight choices or whatever, we do our young people a disservice. The offer is very different from what it was even five years ago.

Tavish Scott: Absolutely—I entirely get that.

In your opening remarks, you said that there are teacher shortages and that they are not just in rural areas. I am acutely aware of where they are. How significant are those shortages to the choices that are being offered in Scotland's secondary schools?

Gayle Gorman: It is clear from our evidence and from the evidence of the committee's sample that that is an issue that every school, particularly those in rural areas, has found challenging. It is a challenge and we do not want it to be a reason. A school should design its curriculum to meet its learners' needs. It should discuss those with the community and those around it. A school needs to be able to shape the curriculum with the resources that it has.

It is encouraging that we see real innovation coming out of some of that hardship. An example is schools partnering with businesses and employers to offer, for example, computing science when lots of areas are struggling for computing science teachers. Schools are setting up partnerships with employers to bring real-life employment opportunities and modern techniques into the classroom to support that learning and offer different qualifications.

There is an issue with teacher shortages; we have found that ourselves. We as a system need to provide support and share examples of innovative ways of overcoming that, as some schools are doing. They are still in the minority, but we want to share that message so that they become the majority.

Jenny Watson (Education Scotland): I have seen two great examples this week. One

secondary school was short of computing science teachers, so it worked with a local college, and now fifth and sixth-year pupils go to the college for a higher national certificate course. The HNC is a great qualification for them to end up with.

Only yesterday, at a secondary school in West Lothian, I again heard about a shortage of computing science teachers. The school has retrained a teacher who had an interest in the subject. At the same time, the school created a partnership with a cybersecurity company in the area that uses drones for the cybersecurity around the businesses there. The school and the company have co-created courses that are engaging for young people and given them great experiences and that have upskilled the staff in the school. There is a win-win situation because of that co-creation.

Tavish Scott: We are terrible people, because we always want the negatives rather than the positives—

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Speak for yourself. [*Laughter.*]

Tavish Scott: Okay. I am a terrible person—Alasdair Allan, on the other hand, is a wonderful person. He will not ask you any negative questions at all.

Since you have mentioned computing science, how many computing science vacancies are there in Scottish secondary schools at the moment?

Gayle Gorman: I cannot give you that figure, because the figures are held by each local authority as the employing authority. The local authorities would be able to give you those figures.

Tavish Scott: Yes, but you must know. Is it not Education Scotland's responsibility to have a good grip of what is going on across education? You are shaking your head, Mr Armstrong. Are you saying that it is not your responsibility to know what is going on?

Gayle Gorman: That is not what he is saying.

Alan Armstrong: It is not our responsibility to know about teacher numbers in each school. What is important is knowing about the impact of all that and making sure that schools have creative solutions where there is no computing science teacher.

Tavish Scott: But what about all the schools that do not have—

Gayle Gorman: The Scottish Government has responsibility for teacher numbers. Of course, through our inspection reports and so on, we report on that issue, as you can clearly see. We reported on Friday that it is having an impact and we have reflected that that is what we are hearing across the system. Teacher numbers are the

Scottish Government's responsibility, so it might be better to ask our learning directorate colleagues that question.

Joan Mackay: To go back to Jenny Watson's first example, the fascinating thing about it is that there is a computing science teacher in that school but, because there is such demand for youngsters to learn about cybersecurity, coding and so on, the school freed up that teacher from teaching the traditional subjects and qualifications and instead the youngsters now do HNCs, which is a higher level, with Dundee and Angus College. The teacher is therefore free to develop more courses for more youngsters to meet their needs. That is the sort of creativity that we are seeing.

Tavish Scott: That is a fair point. Thank you.

The Convener: Before we move on, I have a question about your opening statement, Ms Gorman. You said that pupils will now have spent their whole careers going through curriculum for excellence, but you added that there needs to be a mindset change in society about where we are with it and said that you want to have a debate around that issue.

It is difficult for us to choose the debates that we want to have, because they are often influenced from the outside. Parents and pupils have one chance at school and one experience of it. Can you therefore understand why people are concerned when they hear about schools experimenting, as Mr Armstrong said, as well as it being a work in progress and that there is a need to engage more? What more could have been done to get society and parents on board? There is deep concern out there about the situation. Who was responsible for shifting that mindset and who is responsible for doing it now?

Gayle Gorman: As I said in my opening statement, there is a need to share what is happening with CFE. As part of the inspection process, we talk to the parents and the community of the school and it is interesting that, predominantly, across the board, parents are very positive about the experiences that their children and young people are having. Parents hear the narrative about what is wrong but, for them, that is not what is happening in their child's school. Of course there is the odd exception, but that is the general narrative that we get back.

With CFE, we are guilty of using shorthand, as may be reflected in our conversation today, with all these acronyms such as CFE. We use a different vocabulary in education. Any profession has its specialist vocabulary, but we have not been very good at articulating what is happening and what it means for parents and young people. We have become better at that over time, but there was perhaps a missed opportunity at the beginning of

CFE to publicly talk about the four capacities, for instance.

Fundamentally, the world agrees with those four capacities. Education communities around the world look at the construction of CFE. We have a flexible curriculum for the future. We need to be able to talk about that locally and, for example, explain to a parent of someone in S2 what the choices are and what pathways the new and varied qualifications will lead to.

10:00

It is a societal and systems change, so everyone has to shift their mindset. We have to talk more about having a fluid and flexible senior phase; we need to talk more about getting off the ladder of traditional qualifications and having to pass through one gate to get to the next. We have to look at the messages that higher education institutions and employers send to the system and to parents and young people about the value of the traditional model of five highers in one sitting.

We are ready to develop and progress that work, and I think that the system is, too. Having gone through quite a bit of confidence building and, as we touched on earlier, having had secondary schools very much engaged in six years' worth of changes to qualifications, the debate in schools has shifted to the BGE and the varied qualification approach through developing the young workforce. We need to support that narrative nationally. A lot of work is going on in that regard, and there is more to do. The whole system needs to support that narrative, too.

Parents do not want to listen to my voice; they want to listen to the voice of the local school. Parental engagement is about the local school. I know that a lot of leadership development work is happening on community links, but more needs to be done. In our inspection, we have picked up on the need to work more closely and at an earlier stage with parents in particular on curriculum design across Scotland.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The convener mentioned that we have had an extraordinary number of responses. The vast majority of them are extremely articulate, do not use jargon and strongly make the point that subject choice has been diminished. Do you agree or disagree with those representations?

Gayle Gorman: Without having seen their content, I would be ill-placed to comment about—

Liz Smith: Sorry, but I am referring to the committee papers.

Gayle Gorman: Yes but, as I have not had individual dialogue with those people, I would want

to know about the context of each of their responses.

We recognise that, where there are teacher shortages, there has been a reduction in the curriculum—that is what our evidence-based inspection shows. That is happening sporadically throughout the country, but predominantly around the edges.

As I said in response to the first question, we recognise that there has been a reduction in some schools' curriculum offer, and we would like to support schools to innovate and to widen that out a bit more.

Liz Smith: Will you confirm whether you have read all the evidence?

Gayle Gorman: Yes.

Liz Smith: It is not all about teacher numbers, although that is very important.

Gayle Gorman: I know that it is not.

Liz Smith: Do you accept that there are serious concerns about the number of subjects that are being offered in different year groups in different schools? Do you accept that the general opinion in the evidence that we have received is that choice is being diminished?

Gayle Gorman: Yes, I accept that the general evidence that has been submitted to you absolutely represents that view.

Liz Smith: Given that you accept that, why do you think that subject choice is being diminished?

Gayle Gorman: The issue of teacher numbers is one of the major factors, but some of it is to do with curriculum innovation, choice and thinking about what young people want.

As I said in response to Tavish Scott's earlier question, wider qualifications are taking up more of the curriculum choice. That should be seen as positive. Young people are doing higher national certificates or modern apprenticeships and are taking different pathways. There is also wider learning, such as Duke of Edinburgh and saltire awards. There is a whole range of choices. The issue is about the definition of qualifications and subject choice. Looking at the outcomes of CFE, we see a much more fluid picture and a wider landscape of qualifications.

Liz Smith: I will pick up on two points. Many but not all of the responses point to the fact that their schools are offering fewer choices at higher and at advanced higher. They also point to the fact that there is no facility to bypass national 5. Those qualifications matter a lot to pupils and parents and to colleges and universities. I fully understand and support the fact that there is a wider spectrum of qualifications, but do you accept that, when it

comes to highers and advanced highers, which were described by the Scottish Government as the gold standard of qualifications, the availability of many subjects at those levels has diminished in many schools?

Gayle Gorman: We must think about the consortia arrangements that local authorities have.

Liz Smith: I do not understand—what do you mean by that?

Gayle Gorman: I will explain. Because of the size of Scottish schools and in order to offer the widest curriculum choice, there are consortia arrangements in and across a number of local authorities, although they are called different things in different areas. That might mean three schools coming together because, between them, they have 15 young people who want to do a particular higher subject or a lower number who want to do an advanced higher. The schools timetable collectively so that the young people get to experience that offer at one school, which is the host school.

Young people can take a subject through a shared curriculum offer across three or five schools or under a city campus model. That widens rather than narrows the choice for young people. There might be less choice in individual schools in some areas, but the collective offer to young people is wider, because subjects are offered across three, five or six schools, for instance.

Liz Smith: If most people accepted what you describe, the committee would not have had the responses that it has received.

I will also ask about teacher shortages, as you seem to think that they are the main problem. I fully accept that you are not responsible for employing teachers—that is absolutely true—but is it not your job to know the subjects that have teacher shortages and, in order to address the subject choice issues that have been very much part of the evidence to the committee, to know exactly where the problems are? You hinted that it is not your responsibility to know where the teacher shortages are.

Gayle Gorman: That perception does not reflect the comments that we made.

Alan Armstrong: We can tell where the issues are in relation to the number of teachers in two ways—from thematic reports, one of which was published last week and which take a deep dive, and from the on-going inspections. When inspectors who do a secondary school inspection think that a tension exists between the availability of teachers and the offer that can be made to the young people, and when there are no links with other schools, videoconferencing arrangements or

whatever to widen the offer, they remark on that in the inspection report.

Through all our evidence, we can make the Scottish Government aware as and when geographical or other issues arise. On many occasions, Gayle Gorman has made exactly such points. We pass on to the Government information about teacher numbers, subject teacher numbers and so on.

Liz Smith: Does Education Scotland know how many teachers we are short of in each subject? Even if the shortages are not your fault, do you know exactly where they are?

Alan Armstrong: No, because we do not have an audit of every school in Scotland. The Government has commissioned and is scoping a piece of research on the senior phase that will look at issues such as the availability of subjects in each school. The Government has decided to do a trawl across every secondary school, so that research is coming. We know from the teacher census and other sources how many teachers are available nationally—that is the same information that members and the public have.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I will follow on from that and touch on issues in rural areas. What should be the minimum offer of subjects? I get that there should be flexibility and that schools should be able to make decisions up to a point, but is there a minimum in order to deliver equity and excellence for all young people that you expect to see in all schools?

Joan Mackay: I will give a couple of practical illustrations. We are not in a position to specify a minimum number of subjects—if we are still in a debate about traditional subjects, although I am not sure that we are.

Oliver Mundell: So there is no minimum—

Joan Mackay: No. We base our judgments, help and support on a school's rationale for what its children and youngsters need.

Oliver Mundell: Is it okay that young people at schools in my constituency cannot take the subjects that would enable them to do veterinary studies or medicine? Is that an acceptable minimum?

Joan Mackay: I will give an illustration from Highland Council. When I previously spoke to Mr Mundell, I talked about Dumfries and Galloway, but I will not use an example from there today.

Oliver Mundell: That is because there are no good examples from Dumfries and Galloway, which is why I am so angry.

Joan Mackay: That is your view. I will not engage in that discussion—we did that previously.

I will give an illustration of what is happening in Highland. I mentioned earlier that, as our submission says, the senior phase involves a naturally evolving process, part of which is about tackling what happens when children want to study subjects that they cannot easily access directly in their school.

I recommend that people look at what was discussed last Friday in Highland. It is moving towards the Highland senior phase strategy, which will involve 29 secondary schools plus two or three special needs schools that cater for youngsters who are in their senior phase of learning. Highland has the advantage of having three college bases and the University of the Highlands and Islands. Highland is moving towards a system in which a child in Wick or Inverness, for example, can see what is on offer, and if they want to study a specialist subject, they can access it digitally or in other ways, including consortium arrangements such as Gayle Gorman described. The level of ambition is high and the work has started. I recommend that the committee look at that example.

Oliver Mundell: So, I am to look at what is happening in the Highlands, and it is not for Education Scotland to look at what is happening in Dumfries and Galloway—

Joan Mackay: That is what we are doing—

Oliver Mundell: —and identify that there is a serious problem. Consortium arrangements sound very nice, but they lead straight away to talking about cities, and my experience is that they do not work well when schools are far apart. Schools in rural areas are small because it is unreasonable to ask pupils to travel long distances—travelling back and forth wastes a huge amount of pupils' time. In such areas, pupils can be far from colleges and other resources.

Gayle Gorman: I will use an example that illustrates exactly what you are talking about. In the Western Isles, communities and learners are remote, rural and isolated, so the innovation of e-Sgoil ensures, through electronic media, that the offer that Joan Mackay talked about is particularly strong there. It is engaging young people and it ensures that the offer for young people is as wide as possible. We must consider such approaches for 21st century learners.

The e-Sgoil model is now working in eight other local authorities and has been used as a model of best practice for rural authorities including Dumfries and Galloway Council, which is thinking about how the approach could work for it. Individual schools in Dumfries and Galloway are working hard and are making an impact and achieving success by making connections across and outwith the local authority area. The e-Sgoil

model and other measures are enabling authorities in Scotland to do that.

Oliver Mundell: I do not deny that individual schools are working hard; lots of excellent teachers and other staff are busting a gut. However, my impression is that teachers and pupils do not feel well supported. Do you genuinely think that e-learning is a viable alternative and is better than having a teacher in the classroom? Is the experience for pupils the same?

Gayle Gorman: The recent evaluation of e-Sgoil shows clear impacts on young people's attainment and includes extremely positive feedback from young people. The e-Sgoil model is operated in partnership—it does not mean just young people and a television in a room. A teacher is in the room—there is facilitation—and there are usually pupil support assistants. The experience is very much collaborative and is about learning. The evaluation shows that young people feel strongly that the model is effective.

Oliver Mundell: Does the approach work equally well for all subjects?

Gayle Gorman: Yes, although in, for example, a practical subject such as home economics, thought would need to be given about the point at which the model is appropriate, because children and young people will need to engage with a practical learning experience. It would not be like "Ready Steady Cook".

The approach is absolutely appropriate for some subjects and is appropriate for part of the learning in other subjects. It requires that teachers and educators construct a course in such a way as to ensure that young people get the best out of it.

Oliver Mundell: How does the system allow people to study advanced higher chemistry, for example?

Gayle Gorman: Advanced higher chemistry is done through taught sessions via e-Sgoil using a collaborative approach, and sessions that are led and developed as workshops in the school.

Oliver Mundell: So, you still need qualified teachers and other people to be present in schools to deliver such subjects.

10:15

Gayle Gorman: Yes, but e-learning allows the range and design of subjects and the number of young people taking them to be extended, beyond what is currently the case.

Oliver Mundell: That is available and is happening in some places, but why is it not happening throughout the country?

Gayle Gorman: That is because of system development and schools moving forward on a journey. E-learning is much more widespread than it was a few years ago, but it needs to go further: we want to develop it. Sometimes the problem is infrastructure, and sometimes it is about the stage in the system's development. The approach should also be about learners and schools making decisions about what best suits their needs.

Oliver Mundell: So people are, in effect, missing out because we are on a journey but we are not there yet.

Gayle Gorman: That is your perception. Our evidence has shown us that great strides have been made in system change and system movement, especially in the past two years.

Alan Armstrong: We are seeing more and more school innovation, but there is also much richer discussion with and between local authorities. They are getting a grip of the issue—they are looking very carefully at what is available and are ensuring that for subjects such as advanced higher chemistry, which Mr Mundell mentioned, a block of time is made available at a local college for practical work to be done with the required equipment. Authorities are looking at the issue creatively.

Dr Allan: I want to make a factual point that is relevant to Mr Mundell's question. E-Sgoil has been described in the Western Isles as a great thing. It has its headquarters there, but it is available to and is used by other local authorities. It is not just for the Western Isles; it is available to other local authorities, should they need it.

I accept what Mr Mundell said about the need for human interaction, but if it gives a school in Argyll or on Uist the option to offer an advanced higher class for one person, surely e-Sgoil, or something like it, widens subject choice, rather than narrows it.

Joan Mackay: That is the tension that we are sitting with just now. I can think of several schools that have doubled what is on offer, although I am wary of using the word "subjects". If we are talking about this in the traditional sense—in other words, what I learned at school—the range of options is, typically, expanding and youngsters are making more informed and precise choices.

We cannot look at that as requiring a one-to-one correlation—an adult having to be there for the subject or topic—because we have to have flexibility in the system. That is where the digital offer—e-Sgoil, in particular—is exciting. It also considers pedagogy; for example, how to teach advanced higher physics to a small group of children, one of whom might be sitting in Dumfries and Galloway and another two of whom are in

Aberdeen. Youngsters respond very well to the system. Why would they not?

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I understand that for remote communities in which there are very few young people we need to be as creative as possible to allow them to access subjects. However, has an equality impact assessment been done on the policy to determine which schools in a city such as Glasgow would be expected to make consortium arrangements, and which would have access to a subject in their own premises?

Gayle Gorman: I am sure if the local authority were to go for consortium arrangements—

Johann Lamont: I point out with, with respect, however, that you are saying that consortium arrangements are a good thing.

Gayle Gorman: Yes.

Johann Lamont: What equality impact assessment have you made for a city that includes some areas where such consortiums will necessarily be organised, and some areas in which they will not? I will give you an example. Pupils in some schools in Glasgow cannot sit five highers, so if they want to do so, or if they aspire to do a subject at university or in further education that requires those five subjects, they will have to be involved in a consortium arrangement. Pupils at another school that is half a mile away, and who it could be argued are already advantaged, will not have to go somewhere else to do those five subjects and can do them all in their own school. Have you done an equality impact assessment on a consortium proposal, which is a concept that you have already said is a good thing?

Gayle Gorman: We would not do an equality impact assessment, because that would be for the local authority to do in designing its offer—

Johann Lamont: Why would you not carry out an equality impact assessment on a proposal that you are commending to us, when it might reveal that some young people would be obliged to go into consortium arrangements while others would not?

There is an issue: disadvantage already exists in the education system and you are advocating a system that will increase disadvantage. Surely, as an agency, Education Scotland is expected to look at the impact of the proposal that it is commending on youngsters who are already disadvantaged.

Gayle Gorman: What you describe is not our understanding of the situation. We already inspect numerous schools that are part of consortia. They are not an innovation: in some parts of the country, consortia have been around for 10 years or so.

Johann Lamont: Absolutely, but, with respect—

Gayle Gorman: That is the focus—

Johann Lamont: I am asking you to address the question—

Gayle Gorman: I think that I have clearly said that Education Scotland would not do the equality impact assessment.

Johann Lamont: It is not about whether, theoretically, an individual school has a consortium arrangement because it is necessary for it to offer young people a broad range of subjects. It is about whether there is an equality impact on some young people, for whom it looks as though they are getting the same education as a young person up the road but are not, in fact, because they have to travel to do one higher and then come back to their school afterwards, so they lose time.

It might be that it is a necessary proposal; I am asking whether you have looked at the possible equality impacts. You look at individual schools, but do you ever compare one school with another? The learner journey for a youngster in one school will be different from the learner journey of a child in another school, and the consortium proposal might reinforce that. Education Scotland is commending it as an option although it might increase disadvantage to young people, so is not it your responsibility to look into that?

Gayle Gorman: Responsibility for curriculum delivery lies at school level. If the school has changed its curriculum offer, it can justify that change if it has designed something that meets the needs of its learners. It is for the school to show, with its community and with the support of its learners, that there is a positive impact.

When we inspect schools, one of our core quality indicators is equity. If we pick up, through that indicator, that there has been a significant impact on a learner group for any reason, that would be reported. That is our role.

Johann Lamont: I am not talking about what is happening within the school.

Gayle Gorman: The curriculum consortium offer is within the school offer. If we inspect a secondary school, we look at the curriculum as a whole. If children from it also go to another secondary school, that is taken into account and evaluated, so we can pick up any issues. We have a system that would pick that up—

Johann Lamont: What would you do about it?

Gayle Gorman: We would report it. If there was an issue, it would be an area for development. There would probably be action for a follow-through inspection and there would be a

conversation with the local authority. We have clear processes if—

Johann Lamont: With respect, I say that you have already commended consortium arrangements. Are you now saying that at no point has it occurred to Education Scotland to assess whether there is an equality issue here—

Gayle Gorman: That is not what I am saying; that is your interpretation of what I am saying.

Johann Lamont: So, you have looked at that.

Gayle Gorman: I have tried to explain several times that, if the local authority is changing the curriculum offer, common practice is that that local authority would take that through its education committee, or its equivalent, and it would do an equality impact assessment. That is a duty of the local authority.

In our role, through inspection, we look at the quality of education that is provided for young people—and not just within the walls of the institution. We look at the quality of their education experiences and we report on that through our normal processes. That has not changed; it is clearly our role and our duty to do that.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I will stick with consortiums. Do you accept that, although a consortium might reduce the problem in one area, it is simply displacing it? A pupil who has to travel to another school to take a subject will miss the opportunity of extracurricular activities at lunchtime or after school or will miss part or all of the period on either side of the one for which they have gone to the other school. It might reduce the problem because it has given a pupil the opportunity to study that subject, but it has caused them to miss out on other opportunities.

Alan Armstrong: We find that, when local authorities are looking closely at the consortium arrangement, they take such matters into account. I have evidence from speaking to many young people who are involved in such arrangements, and the motivation that they receive from going to that different institute or that different school and being involved in the activities there can more than compensate—

Ross Greer: Hold on, Mr Armstrong. You are saying that the motivation that is gained from going to another school for a subject—which would have been available to them in the first place if they were a pupil at that other school—compensates for the fact that they miss out on the opportunity to take part in an extracurricular activity at lunchtime, such as a band or football team, or the opportunity to fill a period in their timetable with other study.

Alan Armstrong: I can see two different things happening. I can see the pupil still being able to

attend various activities in their own school when they are not at the other school, and I can see them joining in in the other school—

Ross Greer: No. Hold on. Please do not suggest again that the motivation that pupils get from taking a subject at another school compensates for missed opportunities. If the school football team in a pupil's year group practises on a Thursday lunchtime but the pupil has to travel on a Thursday lunchtime to another school to do a subject, they cannot participate in that team. That could be true of any other extracurricular activity or anything else in the timetable that they are missing out on.

Can you not just concede that having to travel to another school to take up a subject reduces the pupil's opportunity to do something else? I accept that it is fantastic that they get the opportunity to take up that subject, but can you not see that other opportunities are lost? Surely that is just a fact.

Alan Armstrong: It might be that opportunities are lost. If, when we visit or inspect a school, it comes through in the questionnaires or the discussions with inspectors that young people are missing out, that is noted. It has not come up in discussions that I have had, but it might have come up in other discussions. That goes back to the equalities impact. We would note, for example, that young people were missing out on Duke of Edinburgh awards work because that is done on a Thursday afternoon when they are at college. We would ask what the school is doing about that. If there was a fundamental issue, we would expect the school to address it; in fact, we would also expect it to be aware of the issue in designing its approach.

Joan Mackay might want to describe some other work that we are doing with local authorities. We are looking at the whole offer across the local authority as more of a regional-type offer. That is to make sure that where a young person feels that they are missing out, that is catered for. If we pick up that that is an issue—I have not come across it—we would certainly flag it up. We are beginning to build up more work in schools, as Gayle Gorman noted at the start of the meeting, so we would certainly be aware of such issues.

Ross Greer: I will move to a wider point. What work has Education Scotland done to evaluate the impact of deprivation on subject choice and availability?

Alan Armstrong: Every inspection that we do looks at the curriculum offer, the uptake of the curriculum and the achievement of young people in the context of that school.

Where it is felt that the learning pathway needs of young people are not being met—either because the curriculum in the school is not right

and does not reflect some people's needs, or because there are no links with other schools to meet those needs—that would be duly noted.

Ross Greer: I get how the overall inspection programme works and I get how you would identify those issues within an individual school—

Gayle Gorman: Can I add something? I think that I will be able to answer your initial question.

Ross Greer: I hope so.

Gayle Gorman: We have Scottish attainment challenge advisers in all 32 local authorities who work directly with individual schools on their plans. As part of the attainment challenge work, we report regularly—it used to be quarterly; it is now biannually—on the detail of what every local authority is doing to close the attainment gap. We look at what they offer and at their use of a variety of approaches, such as pupil equity funding.

Ross Greer: What impact does deprivation have on subject choice in our schools?

Gayle Gorman: Our evidence shows that the deprivation factor has not been as significant as we initially hypothesised. It is about the range and quality of education. Schools in Scottish attainment challenge funded local authorities and schools have been able to continue to offer, in many cases in an innovative way, quite a wide curriculum because of the additional resource. There is a rounded and strong offer, with a variety of experiences in it.

We are finding that, in areas that are not attainment challenge authorities or that are not receiving significant pupil equity funding, deprivation is a bigger factor in their curriculum offer and what they are able to do.

However, geography and demographics still always play a part. Sometimes it is about the ability to recruit teachers, with which we started the discussion.

10:30

Ross Greer: The education correspondent for *The Times* did some work on the issue and found that, in areas where more than three quarters of a school's pupils live in an area of deprivation, the average highers offer is 17 subjects, whereas in an area where fewer than one in four of a school's pupils live in an area of deprivation, the average offer is 23 subjects. What is your response to that?

Alan Armstrong: We would need to delve into that more deeply, school by school. The question is, how appropriate—

Ross Greer: Hold on, Mr Armstrong. Those numbers were put out 18 months ago, so you have had the time to delve into that.

Alan Armstrong: How appropriate is the offer to the young people in each school? What is the full range of subjects on offer? Yes, there is a large catalogue of SQA highers, but there are many more courses at the same level as highers. There are short courses, qualifications and awards that young people can build up. Rather than look at the issue through one lens, you have to look very carefully at the entire offer. The Government has begun commissioning research that looks much more deeply into not just what might be seen as one awarding body or, indeed, one group of subjects, but what the entirety of the available offer is.

We know that, in the past few years, the number of skills-based qualifications, courses and awards has more than doubled—it was up to 50,000 last year. Many schools in all kinds of areas are offering those courses. Again, we are interested in getting underneath those statistics and looking much more broadly at young people and whether the short or full courses that they are on matches what they require—and that can change every year.

Ross Greer: Does Education Scotland accept that, if I were a pupil choosing highers in a school located in one of the most deprived communities, on average, six fewer highers would be offered to me than would be offered to an equivalent pupil in an area that is not deprived?

Gayle Gorman: No, we do not accept that. Those are the facts that the article and research are based on, but our experience and evidence show us that there are other factors. Using that one indicator would be unfair to the—

Ross Greer: But that one indicator is very relevant if I need to take specific highers in order to get on to a university course. I accept your points about the expansion of non-traditional subjects, qualifications and other opportunities, such as apprenticeships. However, if we are to get more working-class pupils into university, they need highers. The school that they go to and the level of deprivation in the area where they live clearly have a significant impact on the number of highers that are available to them. Does Education Scotland accept that?

Gayle Gorman: That is not our experience.

Ross Greer: I am telling you that that is a reality.

Gayle Gorman: I can tell you only what our evidence tells us, and our evidence does not indicate that.

Ross Greer: Education Scotland has looked into the availability of highers in our schools, based on the level of deprivation in the area, and has found there to be no significant differences

between our most and least deprived communities.

Gayle Gorman: You are asking whether, as a nation, we are seeing that differential. I think that I clearly said that, looking through our evidence reports on the Scottish attainment challenge authorities, which is where our most deprived schools are clustered, we are not currently seeing that. We are seeing sporadic pockets of choices that are based on various factors, which we have already articulated through our answers.

Ross Greer: I think that the committee would benefit from your supplying the evidence that contradicts what *The Times* is telling us. Its research seems to be based on a simple set of freedom of information requests to 32 councils.

Gayle Gorman: The Scottish attainment challenge reports are in the public domain.

Ross Greer: I do not think that the Scottish attainment challenge reports contradict what I am telling you about the availability of subject choice for highers.

I do not think that we are going to get any further forward on this matter.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): We have been talking quite a lot about the breadth of choice. I want to ask a couple of questions about outcomes and attainment, and I seek clarification on a couple of paragraphs in Education Scotland's written evidence. Paragraph 4, which talks about changes to the senior phase, says:

"That may well mean young people taking fewer qualifications ... We should be comfortable with these changes as it enables schools and partners to prepare young people with the 21st Century learning, knowledge and skills".

I think that that reflects some of Gayle Gorman's evidence today. Can I be clear that that is saying that young people taking fewer qualifications is not an unintended consequence but an objective of curricular change?

Alan Armstrong: Yes, it is. It is part of the design, within the senior phase, that young people will experience qualifications and a range of leadership, volunteering and other wider experience that will help them through their lives.

Iain Gray: That is good, but are you saying that pupils coming out of school with fewer exam passes is a deliberate outcome of the curricular change?

Alan Armstrong: We are measuring attainment differently. We are measuring young people's attainment and achievement on the point of their exit from the senior phase, when they are 18 years old, wherever that learning has taken place. We are looking not so much at the figures year on

year as at what qualifications young people are exiting with, and the statistics show that the number of qualifications that they have and their standards are going up.

Gayle Gorman: Back in the day, the building the curriculum 3 guidance that went to schools articulated that clearly. It is about having a changed, different set of qualifications and about an exit point rather than measuring at S4. That was certainly part of the architecture and design of curriculum for excellence. It was about getting a variety and range that reflected individual needs.

Iain Gray: That is not happening, is it? The evidence that was given to the committee shows that those who exit with national level qualifications are coming out with fewer qualifications. In the past two years, the percentage of young people leaving school with no formal qualifications has increased, year on year. The numbers are small, but they are going in the wrong direction.

Alan Armstrong: But behind those statistics is the range of courses that young people are taking. There are short and long courses, and not all of them appear in the current statistics.

Iain Gray: I am sorry, Mr Armstrong, but a moment ago you said that young people are coming out with more qualifications. That is not true for that cohort of young people who are leaving with national qualifications rather than higher.

Alan Armstrong: Yes, but the range of qualifications that they have—

Iain Gray: Those short courses are not recognised qualifications.

Alan Armstrong: They are. They could be bespoke qualifications for certain young people for whom nationals 3, 4 and 5 are not appropriate. They could be skills-based courses. They could be community-based courses.

Iain Gray: Could you give me an example of the kind of qualification you are talking about?

Alan Armstrong: They could be saltire awards. They could be awards for working in the community for young people who have very particular requirements.

Iain Gray: One of the other things that the evidence that the committee has received appears to indicate is that the changes that we are talking about have led to a number of subjects being squeezed out of the curriculum—particularly languages and computer science, which we have spoken about. Perhaps you could explain how a change that has had that effect will prepare young people with

“21st century learning, knowledge and skills”

for modern life.

Alan Armstrong: It will do it in two different ways. The broad general education was purposely designed to provide a much higher platform of learning and of expectations of learning by the age of S3. It was designed for the educated young Scot. The experiences and outcomes to which young people are entitled right up to the age of 15 take them to a higher level than would have been the case under the previous system. Many schools are looking at S4 to S6 as one group of young people, so that, for areas such as modern languages and others, young people in fourth year can work with young people in fifth year.

Iain Gray: Are you saying that it does not matter that languages are being squeezed out of the senior phase, because the level of achievement in languages in S1, S2 and S3 is now greater than it ever was?

Alan Armstrong: There is a stronger experience of modern languages up to S3, but languages also start being taught in primary 1, under the Government’s one-plus-two language initiative. Another language comes in at—

Iain Gray: So, you are saying that it does not matter that young people cannot study languages because they have been squeezed out of the senior phase curriculum, as they have been studied earlier in school.

Alan Armstrong: Not all young people study a language at any one time anyway. Nowadays, they start at the end of S3 with a much stronger understanding. The range of course options over S4 to S6 is mixed. A young person might not study a language in S4 but could pick it up in S5 or S6. Many short courses are also available to allow young people to learn a language or other subjects over S4 to S6.

Iain Gray: I am conscious of the time, and I want to ask about another paragraph in your submission. Paragraph 9, which is about promoting young people’s mental wellbeing, talks about

“an increase in stress and mental health issues for young people”

and says:

“There is no doubt that large numbers of examinations and year on year examinations over S4-S6 are a cause for stress in many young people.”

Is that paragraph saying that the number of subjects in which pupils work towards formal examinations is being reduced, in part, to reduce stress and improve mental health? Is that the purpose of the change?

Gayle Gorman: I have quite a lot of engagement with a learner panel that has been

newly set up; I have also been talking to young people, and we worked with Young Scot and others as part of the year of young people. The persistent narrative from young people—I am sure that other people who give evidence to the committee will articulate it, too—is that they are under huge pressure, some of which they place on themselves and some of which comes from society, and they are experiencing anxiety. That relates to a host of things, but they are particularly anxious—rightly—about their own success, examinations and the workload in key year groups.

In the senior phase, CFE should deliver a phasing so that we get away from the ladder and the gate from national 5 to higher to advanced higher. If a young person is gifted in an area or has a strength in mathematics, for example, they do not have to take the national 5; they could go into the higher course and not take the subject in S4 or take out a few subjects so that they would study only four in one year and pick up another two the next year.

The approach involves fluidity and flexibility. Schools need to identify situations and help to take out additional stressors from the system, which arise when young people and teenagers are going through quite a lot of changes anyway. Schools are working closely with their learner panels to think about what they can do to reduce stress and how the system can ensure that it does not add further pressure that affects young people's mental health. We want young people to have good health and wellbeing.

Iain Gray: Your submission says:

“There is no doubt that large numbers of examinations and year on year examinations over S4-S6 are a cause for stress in many young people.”

Apart from the dialogue that you have had with learner panels, what is the evidence for that statement?

Gayle Gorman: The evidence has come mainly from those discussions, from discussions with pupils during inspections and from the experience at events that we all attended for the year of young people and at school celebration events, where young people often engage with the wider team and talk to us. The issue is also a major priority for the teacher panel, as it is for unions, which focus in their evidence on the fact that young people's mental health and wellbeing have been and are affected by the stress of an examination diet that is sometimes tightly channelled.

Iain Gray: There is no clinical evidence about mental health to support the statement.

Gayle Gorman: Not in the way that we have articulated it.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I will follow Iain Gray's line of questioning. Was the fall in the take-up of languages expected when the senior phase was designed?

Joan Mackay: I understand that the take-up of languages has fallen generally across the UK—that is the trend.

Rona Mackay: We are concerned just with Scotland.

Joan Mackay: I know that, but my point is that some of the fall is the result of young people's choices. That is at the heart of the question. I say that as a parent who is trying to convince young people to study such subjects.

Young people's attitude to languages—sometimes it is partly because they have done French for a long time, for example—is that they have done enough of them and know enough, and they are not a choice for a qualification. That plays hugely into the situation. I have no statistical evidence to support that, but that has come out of the conversation with young people.

Rona Mackay: Does the fall in take-up concern Education Scotland?

Joan Mackay: Any loss of any option is a concern. We want to keep them all in play.

10:45

Rona Mackay: How does the senior phase interact with the strategy for science, technology, engineering and mathematics, where there clearly are problems? Is the senior phase design compatible with the strategy?

Joan Mackay: What do you see as the problems?

Rona Mackay: There is a huge push to encourage more people into STEM subjects, which are part of a wider issue. Does the senior phase encourage people?

Joan Mackay: Are you asking whether it encourages people into STEM subjects or whether it competes with languages?

Rona Mackay: Yes—whether it encourages them into STEM subjects.

Joan Mackay: I go back to my earlier comment. By its nature—the fact that three or four subjects coalesce to make up STEM—it brings together the focus on what is going on in BGE on interdisciplinary and project-based learning right through from primary to get people to see in STEM the science working together with the maths. The work around the STEM strategy has provided impetus and energy in the system, with the debate and conversation about what has taken place in our very short year since the strategy was

launched. That goes back to the request for further help with the planning and design of BGE. It is very positive—

Rona Mackay: But has that translated into activity in the senior phase?

Alan Armstrong: There has been take-up of a wider range of opportunities in STEM, particularly in the sciences. Instead of looking at higher physics and chemistry or national 5 physics and chemistry, young people are looking at options in, for example, the fish industries. The application of science in different areas is allowing such pathways to grow quite a bit, so different STEM opportunities are opening up. We have mentioned that young people find cybersecurity very interesting, as they can see the potential for work in that field. The strategy is manifesting itself in the breadth of choice that schools are beginning to offer.

Joan Mackay: An example of that is Grove academy, in Dundee, offering advanced higher engineering science. Two or three years ago, in consultation with parents and youngsters, and after conversations with employers and universities, it took the view that it was not giving the youngsters what they wanted or needed. It has therefore created an interdisciplinary and project-based learning approach in which youngsters in their sixth year undertake an engineering project. The results have been pretty impactful for young people, and we want to share them more widely with other schools. We want to explore the feedback and develop that approach further.

Dr Allan: The panel probably knows that I am a supporter of CFE and its flexibility, and it probably expects that I will ask about languages and then focus on Gaelic. However, on the former, I am looking at languages in general. It cannot possibly be a good thing for Scotland that the number of formal qualifications in languages in fourth year declined by 18 per cent between 2014 and 2018.

Gayle Gorman: That decline is a concern, as Joan Mackay has articulated. We want our young people to be global citizens, and in order for that to happen they need to be able to communicate. Post the SQA examinations diet and the results that Education Scotland has been looking at, we have been working with our partners across the sector to develop language learning. The statistic that you have quoted is the S4 drop. Given Alan Armstrong's and Joan Mackay's comments, we need to reflect on the fact that young people will pick languages up, particularly in S5.

Dr Allan: Is there any evidence that a significant number of young people are picking up languages in S5, given what was said about many young people thinking that they have had enough of languages in the third year?

Joan Mackay: I do not have any evidence of that, but I know that young people have conversations about dropping languages and picking them up later. It would be interesting to find out whether they do pick languages up later, because there is a perception that there are certain qualifications for which they can do that. However, I do not have the data.

Alan Armstrong: We need to look more closely at what options are offered to young people in the senior phase of the curriculum. If they do not wish to take a full qualification, what short courses would prepare them for what they might do or think about doing in the next stage of their learner journey up to the age of 24? Are schools and teachers aware enough of the learner journey approach, and are teachers ready to offer a much greater variety of opportunities for young people in the senior phase?

Dr Allan: That leads into another question. You said that, when it comes to languages, one of the driving forces is the choices that young people are making. I return to the point that some young people in their third year feel that they have learned enough about certain things. At school, as a grumpy 14-year-old, I felt that I had done quite enough of several subjects, thanks very much.

Tavish Scott: Or all of them. [*Laughter.*]

Dr Allan: Probably all of them, yes—apart from Latin. The school kind of saved me from myself by making sure that I took a variety of subjects in the third and fourth years. I am slightly concerned as to whether we are—I am looking for the Gaelic for “laissez-faire”. I think it is coma co-dhiùbh. Are we laissez-faire about what pupils are doing in the third and fourth years?

As I said, I support what the CFE is doing. I support the flexibility and I understand that, when it comes to languages, there are languages for life—I think they are called that—and all manner of other courses, but are we completely agnostic about the fact that there has been a drop of almost 20 per cent in formal qualifications in languages in fourth year?

Joan Mackay: I do not think that we are agnostic about that. We see that we need to do a bit more work to understand why youngsters are choosing to drop languages for other subjects. I do not think that that is down to the number of column choices. It is much wider than that. In all our conversations with youngsters, we are picking up far more questioning about the purpose of learning and why they are doing something. There is a belief that they can pick it up from the internet or wherever, which I suppose we all had in varying degrees. However, in the broad general education, children are still being asked to study a language right up until the end of third year. That would still

be the normal ask. It is at that point that we have to ask why they choose not to take a qualification in it, and I think that could bear more examination and questioning about what is going on.

We know of individual departments that are far more active in making whatever language it is—French or Spanish—applicable and purposeful. I do not want to quote any schools because I am not secure enough about the facts and I would not want to land them in it, but there are schools that have been more hands on, applying the learning and the language in real situations, and I think that that is more attractive to young people.

Dr Allan: The decline in the number of pupils taking either fluent or learner Gaelic at national 5 has been much more extreme. I do not have the figure in front of me, but it is much more extreme than the figure that I quoted for languages—it is probably between twice and three times as extreme. Is that not at odds with the increase in the number of pupils who go through primary school entirely in the medium of Gaelic and the increase in interest in it? Have you done any study of what unusual factors could possibly drive such an extreme drop in the number of people doing those two national 5 subjects in Gaelic?

Joan Mackay: Is everybody looking at me? [*Laughter.*]

Dr Allan: I was not looking at you in particular.

Joan Mackay: I like the way they all look at me.

We have always known that there has been a struggle. An increasing number of youngsters come through Gaelic-medium education, and that is great, but equally there is the issue of getting enough subject teachers and having a wide enough variety of subjects in Gaelic medium at the other end. That is an on-going issue about where we get the staffing to support—

Dr Allan: I am not talking about staffing. I am talking about schools that have Gaelic teachers but where there has been a decline in the number of young people taking Gaelic.

Joan Mackay: I am probably not close enough to give you an answer to that question. I will check my notes, but I do not think that I can give you a direct answer at the moment.

Dr Allan: Okay. In that case, can I ask you about—again, this is related to Gaelic—regional improvement collaboratives? Those were mentioned earlier, in another context, and Education Scotland is making appointments to them. In doing so, given its Gaelic strategy and so on, does it fully recognise the distinction between Gaelic as a subject, which we have just talked about, and Gaelic-medium education? Is part of its strategy to try to overcome the situation that

seems to have arisen with the place of Gaelic as a subject in the secondary school curriculum?

Joan Mackay: Yes. Our colleague who has been assigned to one of the regional collaboratives is very much working on the basis of the density of schools that are offering Gaelic, so that decision has been based on where the need is greatest. We should see some impact from that.

The Convener: I am looking for a one-word answer to this question, or as close to that as you can get. Does what you have said about broad general education up to third year mean that you are content that schools are not still following a two, two, two model of the curriculum for excellence?

Gayle Gorman: This is almost a one-word answer: yes, in the context of shaping the curriculum to meet the needs of the community and young people. As we said earlier, there are a variety of approaches to the delivery of the curriculum, and people are in different places on that journey.

The Convener: Does that mean that there are schools that are still using the two, two, two model?

Alan Armstrong: It is not that easy to explain. It is three plus three. Qualifications do not start until S4 and they run until S6. However, as we explained earlier in response to Ms Gilruth, the learning for some qualifications starts in primary school, in the same way that the learning for a driving test can start when the person is young and they learn about observations on the road, what traffic lights mean and so on.

The Convener: Could there be situations in which pupils are stopping learning languages far earlier than third year?

Alan Armstrong: Their entitlement is to be involved in all experiences and outcomes up to the third curriculum level, over primary school to S3.

The Convener: Mr Paterson has a supplementary question.

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): It is about the differential in attainment. My constituency covers two different council areas, one of which is a challenged area and the other is a well-off area, and the difference in the availability of subject choices is quite stark. I have a chicken-and-egg question. You said that the choice of subjects is for the pupils, but if there are no teachers available, how does that work? Does the issue arise because there is a lack of particular teachers in a given area? Is that driven by the school or by the local authority? As I said, the differential between the two areas in my constituency is quite stark.

Alan Armstrong: Local authorities employ the teachers and decide on the range of teachers.

Gil Paterson: Is the lack of choice because of the lack of teachers, including specialist teachers, in your view?

Gayle Gorman: It is variable. That is a particular factor in more rural areas, but it is also a factor in other areas, as I am sure you have seen from the evidence. Sometimes it is about subjects—we have mentioned computer science, although there are really great computer science teachers out there—as the through-flow of teachers from initial teacher training into the system is very limited in some subject areas. Sometimes that is the issue, but sometimes it is a geographical issue. There are a range of factors.

Gil Paterson: If we look at the numbers, the situation in my area is similar to the situation in Glasgow. I do not think it is a coincidence that there is a differential between areas that are challenged or deprived and areas that are affluent. Something is happening there, and we should be looking at it very carefully. It seems to me that it is a lack of specialist teachers, or teachers of particular subjects, that causes the problem to kick in.

Alan Armstrong: Alternatively, it could be the young people's requirements and wishes for the range of options that they wish to pursue in their senior phase. One follows the other; what we are looking at—

Gil Paterson: That is the chicken-and-egg question that I am raising. If there is no teacher, there can be no option to start with.

Alan Armstrong: As I said, schools are looking at much more creative ways to make sure that young people from S1 to S3 experience all the curriculum areas that they should experience. At every inspection, our expectation is that young people will experience their full entitlement up to the end of S3.

Gil Paterson: You expect that there will be that offer.

Alan Armstrong: Yes.

11:00

Johann Lamont: Education Scotland has a role in inspecting, but it also has a role in informing and shaping education policy and, I hope, in understanding how inequality can be reinforced through the education system. The suggestion that inequality comes because young people choose it is a bit of a misrepresentation of what happens.

The number of subjects that are taught in bi-level and tri-level classes has been flagged up both anecdotally to me and in the committee's

evidence. Have you done an analysis of where such classes are in the system?

Alan Armstrong: No. We do not have classroom-by-classroom information at that level.

Johann Lamont: You do not know whether some young people are disproportionately affected. You do not know whether, in some schools, some areas or some communities, a young person is more likely to be taught, for example, higher physics in a tri-level class.

Alan Armstrong: We do not have a national overview of that. When we see examples of that, as we do in many schools—primary schools have a range of learning needs as well—it is the quality of learning and teaching that really matters.

Johann Lamont: You think that someone who is taught higher physics in a class with 20 other pupils who are doing higher physics will have the same experience as someone who is taught higher physics in a class with pupils who are doing national 4, national 5 or advanced higher alongside them.

Alan Armstrong: The learning experience of those in bi-level or tri-level classes can be very good.

Johann Lamont: I have no doubt about that, but is the experience the same? Have you done an equality impact assessment of the differences between a young person doing higher physics in a class with 20 peers who are also doing higher physics and a young person being taught in a tri-level class?

Alan Armstrong: Tri-level classes have been used for a long time in small schools in which pupils in S4 to S6 are in the same class.

Johann Lamont: You do not know whether the number of such classes is increasing.

Alan Armstrong: I do not have a national overview because we do not have information on teacher numbers and classes in every school.

Johann Lamont: Has an assessment been done of where such classes are taught geographically? I accept that they will need to be used in remote, rural and fragile communities, and I understand that schools will make individual choices. However, depending on which school they go to, a young person in Glasgow will be more or less likely to be taught in a tri-level class or a class in which everyone is doing the one level. Have you done any assessment of whether that makes a difference to the young person's learning?

Alan Armstrong: We do that when we inspect schools.

Johann Lamont: You have not extrapolated from those findings and formed a policy that there will be better outcomes for young people and teachers if pupils are in classes where they are taught at one level.

Alan Armstrong: We do not have that level of analysis.

Johann Lamont: You do not assess that.

Alan Armstrong: We do not.

Johann Lamont: Do you have a view on that, in terms of education policy?

Alan Armstrong: What happens in the classroom is what matters. We could have a policy, but the teaching of one cohort of pupils might not be as good as the teaching in a bi-level or tri-level class. That is the important element.

Johann Lamont: With respect, I understand that. That relates to your inspection role. I am asking about education policy. Does Education Scotland have a view on what approach there would be in a perfect world, and whether there is a consequence to a young person being taught in a tri-level class as opposed to a one-level class?

Alan Armstrong: No.

Johann Lamont: You have no view on that.

Gayle Gorman: Our inspection evidence—

Johann Lamont: I am not asking about inspection evidence; I am asking about policy.

Gayle Gorman: If you had let me finish, I was going to say that our inspection evidence drives the research base, our advice and our policy. We need to be clear and articulate about that.

We do not have a substantial body of evidence from our inspection of secondary schools that shows that learning in a bi-level or tri-level class is either a hindrance or a success. We inspect schools and we have a back catalogue of inspections. If such teaching came up repeatedly as a significant issue, we would of course report on that and raise it as an issue with a variety of partners and stakeholders including policy makers. Nothing is coming out of our inspections on a recurring basis that shows that such teaching is hugely successful, a model that should be developed in some subjects but not others or something that has a negative effect. If we found such evidence, we would take it forward.

Johann Lamont: Would it be worth while for you to do some research and ask teachers? Why not ask a physics teacher how easy it is to teach at tri-level rather than at one level? I accept the quality of the teachers who are involved, but surely logic would tell you that some teachers are doing

extremely well despite the circumstances in which they find themselves.

It seems evident to me that young people in some parts of Glasgow will be obliged to do their higher physics in a consortium, away in another school, with the consequences of that, but that, even if they are in their own school, they may not get the same experience as other children in other schools. Will you at least look at that issue with regard to the equality impact?

We need to consider the impact on pupils who are already disadvantaged in their learning. In a school with a big fifth or sixth year, there might be those who aspire to the very highest, a medium and a lower class all doing higher physics. In another school, a pupil might be in with 20 other young people, some of whom are doing one qualification and some of whom are doing something else. Are you willing to research the impact of those two different sets of circumstances on teachers and on young people's wellbeing and outcomes?

Gayle Gorman: We are always listening to the sector and we are always having conversations. We have just rearranged ourselves to be able to do that more regularly. From the autumn term, we are going to have big conversations with teachers on important educational issues, and we will be co-constructing the agenda for those across the summer term. If that is something that the profession feels that it wants to talk about and engage on, of course we will do it—that is our role. It could be part of those big conversations, but we are engaging with the profession on which big topics it wishes to grapple with.

One of those topics is curriculum design. We really need to spend some time having practitioners collectively think about the future and the offer both across the country and locally for their young people. Another topic is how professional learning and professional leadership will develop across Scotland so that those decisions will be evaluated at a local level and taken forward. We will certainly commit to asking in those conversations whether that is a subject that people want to engage on and have a conversation about, and if it is, we will certainly do that, because we want to facilitate the addressing of some of these big issues in Scottish education.

Johann Lamont: I would be interested in establishing how many tri-level and bi-level classes exist and in which subjects. I recall from when I was teaching that general science—standard grade science at general, foundation level—was a completely different beast from physics, chemistry and biology as subjects. They were completely different subjects, and that applies to other subjects as well. Will you look at that?

If you are committed to equality in education, I urge you, regardless of whether anybody raises it with you or not, to at least examine whether there are disproportionate numbers of bi-level and tri-level classes in poorer and more disadvantaged communities, and to assess the consequences of that for young people and their teachers. That should go along with an assessment of the clustering of subjects that are taught in bi-level and tri-level classes so that you know whether they are disproportionately languages or science subjects, and whether there are consequences to that.

The Convener: That ends questions from the committee. I thank you all for your attendance at committee today.

I will suspend the meeting until 11:14 for a quick comfort break and to allow the next panel to get in place.

11:08

Meeting suspended.

11:14

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel of representatives, from Highlands and Islands Enterprise and higher and further education providers. I thank you for your patience. We ran on a bit in our first session. I welcome Alastair Sim, director of Universities Scotland; Scott Harrison, associate director of learner journey at City of Glasgow College, who is representing Colleges Scotland; Morven Cameron, head of universities, education and skills at Highlands and Islands Enterprise; and Dr Marsaili NicLeòid, vice-principal and director of studies at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

Liz Smith: My first question is to Alastair Sim. You heard the evidence that we took this morning and you have seen the committee papers, in which there is considerable concern about the reduction in the availability of the vast majority of subjects. Are you aware of discussions in the university sector about the implications of that?

Alastair Sim (Universities Scotland): We are dealing with that as one of the factors in the landscape that we have to respond to. From conversations that I have had in the sector, I know that there is concern at the moment that some students in some schools, particularly in more deprived areas, do not have the range of opportunity that we would expect them to have at national 5, higher and advanced higher and that their opportunities for progression are being diminished by that. The committee's evidence is clear on that; for instance, there is an 18 per cent

fall in entries for modern languages at SCQF level 5. Those are issues of concern.

From a higher education perspective, part of the issue is what we need to do to address the potential reduction of opportunity for learners in the senior phase. There are a lot of things going on. The evidence cites the Glasgow Caledonian University advanced higher hub as a way to increase opportunity for people from schools that cannot offer the full curriculum that we might expect. Other examples include the access to professions programmes that various universities run to enable people to come in and build up the academic knowledge that they need to succeed in a demanding programme, if they have not had the opportunity to gain that at school. Programmes such as Heriot-Watt University's SCHOLAR programme or the Open University's young applicants in schools scheme open up a wider range of learning opportunities online.

Our response is to recognise that there is an issue and that, in particular, learners from less privileged backgrounds might not have as rich an opportunity to gain qualifications as we might hope. We are having to respond creatively to bring opportunity to people who might have been restricted at school level.

Liz Smith: You mentioned modern languages. From the evidence, are you aware of difficulties in other subjects?

Alastair Sim: The evidence also cites some focus groups at Glasgow Caledonian University that are looking at access to science subjects. There appear to be schools where it is difficult to study three sciences at advanced higher. There are plenty of choices that students could make at university that do not require them to have three sciences. Nonetheless, for instance, in the pathways to medicine and access to medicine programmes that they are designing, universities are making a conscious effort to say that there might be some people with ability who have not had the required breadth of curricular opportunity at school but who could be great doctors or great vets, and that we need to do a bit of retro-engineering to create access pathways that enable them to realise their full potential.

Liz Smith: I will pursue that point, because it is very important. Within the sector, is there evidence that the first-year courses in universities are having to be tailored to address a growing number of youngsters who might be coming into the university sector without qualifications in particular areas that previous generations might have had? Is it fair to say that universities are having to spend more of first year imparting that knowledge and those skills than they would have done in the past?

Alastair Sim: I might not be sufficiently pedagogically qualified to comment, but I do not think that I am seeing that as a norm. I am seeing more that there are exceptions, such as pathways to professions and access to medicine programmes or the academy model at Queen Margaret University, where, in recognition of the fact that not everyone has the full range of opportunity at school, the university is getting engaged in creating a breadth of opportunity, so that people of potential—whatever their background—are able to succeed at university.

Liz Smith: We know from the statistics that various bodies have compiled that the availability of advanced highers is pretty patchy. There are particular concerns about some of the more deprived communities, which Mr Greer raised in the previous part of the meeting. There are hubs that can deal with some of that, up to a point, but in some areas it is virtually impossible for a youngster to do an advanced higher, because not just their school but their area cannot provide that. Is the squeeze on advanced highers a concern for you?

Alastair Sim: One would wish to see equality of opportunity wherever one lives. The university response is that the higher remains, in essence, the core qualification for university entry. We could not make advanced higher the normal core qualification for university entry, because so many students do not have the capacity to study a wide range of advanced highers—

Liz Smith: Despite it being well recognised that the advanced higher is one of the best qualifications that Scotland has.

Alastair Sim: It is an excellent exam. However, we have a system at school level that enables most students to study a reasonable range of highers but does not support a wide range of students to be able to study three advanced highers. From the learner journey review, we find that the proportion of learners who get three advanced highers is tiny—it is about 2.6 per cent of school leavers.

Liz Smith: Thank you.

Rona Mackay: Will the witnesses talk about the extent to which the widening of education providers in the senior phase at school, for example through collaboration with colleges, which we heard about from the previous panel, is improving outcomes for young people? Have vocational courses such as foundation apprenticeships displaced entries to the national 3 and 4 qualifications? Is that an impact?

Scott Harrison (City of Glasgow College): I do not have data on that, but I can tell you that we are expanding our offer. For example, in the Glasgow region next year, we will offer level 4/5

pre-foundation apprenticeships in construction, automotive and hospitality. I cannot comment on whether that is displacing activity in schools, but I can say that there is more on offer for pupils in schools.

Rona Mackay: You obviously think that that is improving outcomes for young people. Will the approach keep growing?

Scott Harrison: I think so. The pilot ran in a couple of schools in the previous year, and now we are adding the approach to the three Glasgow regional colleges. Some level 6 pilots will run next year—my college will not be involved for the first year, so I cannot comment on that, but I think that the approach is expanding.

Rona Mackay: You are talking about Glasgow colleges. Is the same thing happening throughout Scotland? Is it up to individual colleges to introduce such courses?

Scott Harrison: I can comment only on my region. I do not want to speak out of turn.

Dr Marsaili NicLeòid (Sabhal Mòr Ostaig): At Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the national centre for Gaelic language and culture, we will offer two foundation apprenticeships next year—we are offering one this year—to senior 5 and 6 pupils through the medium of Gaelic, which is what we do. That is widening pupils' choice to do a Gaelic-medium subject in the senior phase; for example, our local school, Portree high school, currently offers only three subjects through the medium of Gaelic in the senior phase.

Rona Mackay: Did you say that you are currently doing that or that you are planning to do it?

Dr NicLeòid: We currently offer one foundation apprenticeship, in children and young people. As of next year, we will offer two. The second will be in creative digital media.

Rona Mackay: What is the take-up on the one that you currently offer?

Dr NicLeòid: This year, nine pupils in Portree and Plockton high schools are engaged in our foundation apprenticeship. That is a good take-up.

Rona Mackay: Is it what you were anticipating?

Dr NicLeòid: It is beyond what we were anticipating.

Rona Mackay: Thank you.

Alastair Sim: It is great to have diverse routes to attainment, because young people—indeed, people of any age—have very diverse aspirations and talents. We welcome the growth in routes. The fact that, for example, universities are offering more graduate-level apprenticeships and are

working more closely with colleges to ensure that articulation pathways from higher national to university study are working effectively helps to provide multiple routes for learners with multiple aspirations and talents.

It would concern me if we were heading towards a situation in which schools in a privileged area had a good range of highers and advanced highers and that route was easy, and schools in less privileged areas had more DYW provision and more of a sense of giving young people opportunities through that route but not so much through the route of highers and advanced highers. They are all valuable and I do not think that where you go to school should determine which of those routes is open to you.

Rona Mackay: We explored that with Education Scotland because we also think that is important. We still have to get some definite answers on that.

Iain Gray: A lot of the evidence that we heard from Education Scotland about the changes to the senior phase was about flexibility and personalisation. Education Scotland told us that we have to get away from the old-fashioned mindset of doing standard grades—now national exams—then highers in S5 and maybe advanced highers in S6. Students might skip stages in certain subjects. They might do some highers in one year and then other highers in another year.

My question is probably for Alastair Sim. Does that not mean that universities will have to look at their entry qualifications? Achieving qualifications at a single sitting is still an element of requirement, at least for some institutions. If schools are developing in the way we heard described earlier, I might be a very able young person in a school that is not particularly deprived but, because of the way the curriculum is designed, I cannot do all the highers that I need for the course that I want to do in a single sitting. Are the universities addressing that issue?

Alastair Sim: That is fair. I would characterise a single sitting requirement now as an exception rather than the norm. As a matter of generality, universities recognise that the flexibility of the senior phase means that people might well be accumulating qualifications over a number of years.

From the evidence, some courses, such as medicine, in particular, require extreme academic rigour and look for the learner to demonstrate that through undertaking a substantial diet of exams in one year or, if they spread them over two years, achieving slightly better grades than if they had done the exams in one sitting. I am not going to say that that is unfair; I can see why they do that. However, as a generality, the principles of Scottish university entry are to look at the qualifications that

have been attained over the senior phase rather than in a single sitting.

Iain Gray: You sort of alluded to the related question in a response to Liz Smith. Education Scotland argued that our failure to change our old-fashioned mindset from traditional qualifications did not recognise a range of short courses, vocational courses, saltire awards, Duke of Edinburgh awards and all of that. Are the universities looking at any formal way of recognising that kind of attainment alongside highers as part of entry qualifications?

Alastair Sim: Universities are certainly looking at a wider range of attainment for courses where the content is relevant. The majority of universities are now looking at the foundation apprenticeship as an entry qualification that is broadly equivalent to a higher.

When we get into things such as Duke of Edinburgh awards and what people have attained outside the formal curriculum, we get into the quite tricky territory of social capital. Many learners who have had a home background that has enabled them to do Duke of Edinburgh awards or the Raleigh project get easy access to internships and can demonstrate professional expertise. One of the things that we are thinking through is how the personal statement is used for admissions purposes. A personal statement that shows that the individual is committed to learning and their subject is fine. A personal statement that is used to display social capital in a way that says that the person has had a privileged upbringing, has a gold Duke of Edinburgh award and has completed an internship in a law firm is socially divisive. We have to be careful about how we recognise such wider achievements.

11:30

Iain Gray: I do not know much about this, but I believe that the Welsh baccaulaureate is very different from the Scottish baccaulaureate, in that it tries to recognise attainment more broadly. Have you looked at that system?

Alastair Sim: My first job, in 1989, in Government, was looking at a baccaulaureate model. At that stage, it was considered politically difficult to do that, and I do not think that the idea has come back much.

Iain Gray: The Welsh model is different. It is a qualification that encompasses some less formal elements.

Alastair Sim: I can see the merits of that. There is an international baccaulaureate that is used by a number of schools. Recognising breadth of attainment is a good thing. It is one of the things that we are trying to do at university level. We are

not just teaching a subject but consciously trying to develop a set of graduate attributes—analytical ability, team working, confidence, resilience and so on. It is right that schools try to develop a wider set of attributes than subject knowledge—without detriment to subject knowledge. If such things could be captured in a way that gave everyone equality of opportunity, there would be a wealth of possibility. I simply commented earlier that there are some ways of capturing experience outside the curriculum that can be socially divisive.

The Convener: I know that you heard some of the evidence from Education Scotland from the public gallery. The evidence was that curriculum for excellence is more than just the subjects but includes additional short courses, Duke of Edinburgh awards and so on. If I am interpreting what you said correctly, you still see subject choice as the minimum differentiator, with an individual's experiences being in addition. Is that right?

Alastair Sim: An individual's ability to present a good range of qualifications is core to university entry. One of the good things about curriculum for excellence, and something that resonates strongly with what we are trying to do at university, is that through the experience of curriculum for excellence pupils develop the broader attributes that I referred to as well as subject knowledge. That helps to create people who have a rounded expertise as well as subject knowledge. I entirely support that intention.

The Convener: One of the things that became evident from the previous panel's evidence was that, although we have good statistics on national 4s and 5s, highers and advanced highers, we do not seem to capture those attributes that Education Scotland says are core to the curriculum. Does that cause you concern? Could those attributes be assessed in the future?

Alastair Sim: That comes down to how we look at the whole set of information that we have in the application to university. There is information on examination results, the personal statement and the reference from the school or previous education provider. There may also be evidence of socioeconomic disadvantage to be taken into account. The process is not mechanistic. We look at a set of information about the individual and whether the course that the individual has applied for will be a good choice for them. Obviously, there are abstract qualities that are harder to capture, but the admissions system is broader than a mechanistic look at what the individual has attained at examination level.

The Convener: Do you have a perspective on that, Mr Harrison?

Scott Harrison: I will add my two cents' worth from my personal experience, although I do not want to detract from what universities are doing. I have worked with students from a wide range of levels and backgrounds, those with additional support needs, adult returners who may have no qualifications, or outdated ones, and high achievers at school. We must remember that curriculum for excellence is about skills for learning, life and work and that not everyone will go to university. There is widening access and alternative awards and qualifications—you mentioned Duke of Edinburgh awards, short courses and national 3s, 4s and 5s. It is important that we recognise those and acknowledge that people might use them not to go to university but to go into further education, employment or training. When I look at a student's application, I value those things just as much as I would value a higher or an advanced higher.

Dr Allan: As well as having responsibility for Gaelic in schools, the committee has responsibility for Gaelic as a language, and its future as a language. I am keen to know what the people on the panel, particularly Marsaili NicLeòid, feel about the recent picture for Gaelic as a subject, for both learners and fluent speakers of Gaelic in fourth year.

Dr NicLeòid: Tapadh leibh, Dr Allan. Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to be here and contribute evidence. I want to pick up some of the points raised in the previous evidence session and to draw some figures to the attention of the committee. According to Professor Jim Scott's figures, we have seen a decline in pupils sitting national 3s to 5s in Gaelic—a 57 per cent decline in Gaelic for learners and a 17 per cent decline in Gaelic for fluent speakers. In national 6s, there has been a decline of 27 per cent in Gaelic for learners and a marginal increase in Gaelic for fluent speakers. On attainment, according to the figures that I have looked at, we have seen a decrease of 40 per cent in pupils studying Gaelic higher for learners since 2012.

Those decreases are quite stark, particularly in the number of Gaelic learners who are undertaking qualifications in school in the senior phase. That is incredibly worrying for us. I am speaking on behalf of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the national centre for Gaelic language and culture. We are an academic partner of the University of the Highlands and Islands. Together with our colleagues at Colaiste a' Chaisteil, Lews Castle College in Stornoway, we train the future Gaelic-medium teachers, broadcasters and those who work in public policy and affairs for Gaelic. We believe that this narrowing in the curriculum is having an adverse effect on the number of pupils who have the choice to study Gaelic.

We heard in the previous session about choice for pupils. One of our concerns is whether pupils can make an informed choice. We welcome the fact that there is flexibility in the curriculum for excellence, but how informed are pupils in the choices that they make and to what extent do they have to choose between Gaelic and other subjects such as a science subject or other facilitating subject, if you like, when they go into secondary 4? That is of concern to us.

Perhaps pupils have the opportunity to study a Gaelic national 5 later on in the senior phase. I have the figures for this year. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig has done some research with schools and we see that very few pupils who are learning Gaelic go on to study for a national 5 in S5 or S6. That is because continuity is so important in learning a language. If we are going to promote Gaelic and increase the number of speakers through the Gaelic learner education in Scotland, we need continuity of learning.

Dr Allan: That was a very helpful and full answer—you have anticipated one or two of my questions. I will ask a question that came up in the previous session. Are we talking about a situation that is driven by teacher shortages in schools, or is this all about the structure of columns and the choices that people are asked to make?

Dr NicLeòid: It is important to bear in mind that Gaelic education is a minority language education. It has distinct needs and it is a national priority. We have had such success in our Gaelic-medium education in Scotland and such growth since the 1980s because of the collaboration between local authorities and national Government in response to parental demand for Gaelic-medium education. I believe that we still need that national level of prioritisation.

We need to look at a broad range of factors that may be influencing the trend. I do not have the evidence but our consultation with schools and pupils suggests that teacher shortages are only one factor; it is an important factor, but competing columns in the school timetable is another important factor.

To return to the issue of informed choices, we need to think about the information that pupils are receiving when they make their choices. Again, a national approach is needed to ensure that we are informing pupils of their choices when they choose Gaelic as a subject at school and as a qualification; for example, we need to tell them what opportunities there are in the workplace with Gaelic. The opportunities are great—we cannot meet the demand in the Gaelic labour market for pupils with high-level language skills.

Dr Allan: Thinking of that demand, although you have mentioned teacher shortages as only one

factor in the choices that young people are making, you have also pointed out that there is already a shortage of people to fill places in Gaelic-essential jobs, not least teaching.

This question is as much for Alastair Sim as it is for Marsaili NicLeòid. What are the implications for higher education institutions, whether that is Sabhal Mòr Ostaig or universities and initial teacher education institutions, if the number of people coming out of school with Gaelic qualifications has suddenly declined?

Alastair Sim: I do not claim any great expertise on this front, but clearly we are part of an educational pipeline and if people are not coming up from schools with the knowledge that will enable them to do a particular degree course, whether it is initial teacher education in Gaelic or whatever, that opportunity is lost to them.

There are plenty of things that people can start for the first time at university—few people, for instance, have done higher psychology but they can still choose to do psychology at university. Plenty of courses are designed to take someone who has a good breadth of education and introduce them to a new subject, but for certain courses there are real difficulties in taking on someone who simply does not have the prior educational attainment.

Dr NicLeòid: For us, the implications are serious. If we are to meet our ambitions as a nation to deliver Gaelic-medium education and grow Gaelic-medium education in the secondary and senior phase, and if we are serious about maintaining what is still a fragile minority language community, we need to seriously consider how we might increase resources and prioritise Gaelic as a subject in the school curriculum.

We want to be as flexible as possible. We have different degree programmes available to any young person or adult who wishes to become a Gaelic teacher. At Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, we offer a four-year bachelor of arts programme. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig also contributes to a five-year Gaelic degree programme at Edinburgh university, which enables students with very little Gaelic to become qualified Gaelic-medium teachers over the course of five years. However, the numbers are still small and they are insufficient to meet the predicted demand for Gaelic-medium teachers. That is an issue of grave concern, so we must consider the special case that we need to make for Gaelic as a minority language.

We heard earlier that we in Scotland aspire for our pupils to become global citizens while also being Scottish citizens. We want to increase the number of pupils who have the choice to study Gaelic in the school curriculum and to increase the

number of teachers who can deliver that, particularly in the senior phase.

11:45

Morven Cameron (Highlands and Islands Enterprise): Gaelic is important to the work of Highlands and Islands Enterprise and to our region. We are concerned that the numbers are dropping, as that will affect the valuable pipeline that comes through the system to support opportunities for Gaelic employment in the region.

Johann Lamont: I will follow up on the range of subject choices that some young people have in comparison with that for others, which has consequences for later choices. I think that the figures show that more young people from more deprived backgrounds are going on to higher education. Do we have figures for the proportion who go to university via college? Are youngsters from poorer backgrounds disproportionately represented in those figures? What courses are such youngsters succeeding in getting into? In theory, we could have a level playing field, but young people from poorer backgrounds might be disproportionately not accessing law, medicine or whatever. Has that been analysed?

Alastair Sim: I cannot give all the figures off the top of my head but, as an illustration, about 16 per cent of entrants to universities come from the most deprived 20 per cent of postcodes. Among people who do higher education at college, the figure is a bit over 20 per cent. The figures are similar, but there is a gap. The pattern is still that someone who is from a more socioeconomically deprived background is slightly more likely to go to college than to university at higher education level. That is a good and viable route for many people, which we support growing.

The commissioner for fair access published a paper that looked at admission to and attainment in various subject levels. I could send that to the committee to provide the quantified evidence about who goes into what subjects. I would have to go back to look for the evidence, but I think that I noted that success rates for applicants to do medicine are growing fastest among those from the most deprived backgrounds.

Johann Lamont: That is from a standing start.

Alastair Sim: There has been remarkable success in the past few years in the increase in the proportion of students who come into medicine from the most deprived backgrounds, but I would have to go back to look at the data, which I could send to the committee.

Johann Lamont: There might be progress because of active initiatives, but another issue is the extent to which the Scottish index of multiple

deprivation is representative—I accept that youngsters who are from very poor backgrounds might not necessarily live in the relevant SIMD communities. I am interested in whether, if subject choice is being limited in our schools and if that disproportionately affects poorer communities—that is my contention, which is to be tested—that is feeding through into where young people from poorer backgrounds end up in the higher education system.

Alastair Sim: I will go back and look at the evidence on the question. There is evidence of a bit of a difference in the subject that one ends up in, but it is chopped out by the SIMD indicator, which is not entirely adequate, as you recognised, but is illustratively useful. Progress has been made, and higher education institutions have put in a lot of work to get people from the most challenged backgrounds into the most selective courses. However, I do not pretend that the work is complete or that there are no challenges because people from schools in more challenged communities do not have access to the range of qualifications that some of their more privileged peers have. I will look out the evidence on where people are going.

Johann Lamont: If there is evidence that fewer and fewer young people are taking languages, and that young people from poorer communities are disproportionately less likely to take languages, is that playing through into a decrease in the number of languages graduates from our universities? My other question is about that cohort of languages graduates: where are those young people coming from?

Alastair Sim: The SIMD information on the proportion of people going into different subject areas—if I manage to look it out—will answer your question about the cohort. We are not yet in a position in which we cannot fill the places on modern languages courses, but I think that that is more of a reflection of the fact that we are in a capped system, in which only a fixed number of places are available for Scotland-domiciled students, which means that there are more qualified applicants for the courses than there are places. Even if the number of applicants were diminishing—I cannot give you the figure off the top of my head—there would probably still be a sufficient pool of well-qualified applicants to fill the places.

Johann Lamont: Are you saying that you would be able to assess where those students who are successful come from and whether the decrease in the number of students who access particular courses, such as language courses, might be disproportionately affecting poorer communities? Could you provide those figures?

Alastair Sim: I would have to see what is available on that. At the aggregate level, across all subjects, the success rate of applicants from the most challenged backgrounds has gone up more quickly year on year over recent years than the success rate of applicants from more privileged backgrounds.

Tavish Scott: I want to combine three points: Johann Lamont's point about the requirement for the university sector to widen access; your point about the cap on the number of places for Scottish students; and the point about the narrowing of choice in the senior phase of secondary school. How are Scottish universities assessing applications from students from Scotland—as opposed to students from outwith Scotland—for a particular course, given all the factors that you have just mentioned? Is the narrowing of choice having an impact?

Alastair Sim: Because we are dealing with a system with fixed numbers, we are dealing with different pools of applicants. Universities have to, and want to, fill their Scottish places, because doing something for the society in which they are located is intrinsic to the institutions' mission. I have described the ways in which they can do that, which involve looking at exam results, contextual information, the personal statement and the reference from the school. Universities try to make a fair decision for each student. They also try to attract the best students from the rest of the UK and the European Union, as well as the best international students. The recruitment of students from the rest of the UK and international students, in particular, is not done to the detriment of the opportunity that we can provide for Scottish students.

Tavish Scott: Are you sure about that?

Alastair Sim: Yes. If we did not fill our Scottish student numbers, we would be betraying our mission and we would be fined.

Tavish Scott: You made the fair point that we are way over the number of Scottish students on most courses, although you said that, with languages courses, Scottish universities might not be filling the places for Scottish students.

Alastair Sim: No—I think that we are. There are more applicants than there are places.

Tavish Scott: So that is not the problem.

Alastair Sim: No, it is not. If there were more places for Scotland-domiciled students, we could take on more qualified students, but we would be concerned if that were done at the cost of the resource per student.

Tavish Scott: Our inquiry is about the narrowing of subject choice. Is that narrowing of choice having an impact on the decisions that

universities are being asked to make about the merits of a candidate from Scotland relative to the merits of a candidate from outwith Scotland?

Alastair Sim: I do not think so, because I do not think that we are considering those relative merits. Universities are saying, "Here are the places we have available for our Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council-funded students. Now let's make sure that we're allocating those places fairly in a way that recognises potential."

Tavish Scott: That is entirely fair.

I have one final question, which is about the point that you made to Liz Smith about students at Scottish schools taking a range of courses over two years rather than one. The University of Edinburgh asks law course applicants to obtain five As at one sitting. You cannot really get past that, can you?

Alastair Sim: That is an exception. If you are asking how that would be justified—

Tavish Scott: I am not having a go at the University of Edinburgh; I am just saying that that is what it asks for. Some students in Scottish schools will not be able to do those five highers at one sitting.

Alastair Sim: They should have the opportunity to say that they are at a school that has a senior phase that does not enable them to do that, and that therefore they need special consideration.

Setting out a norm is rationing, in a way. I come back to the point that when there are many more applicants than there are places, you set the bar quite high, while recognising that those are courses with a high level of intellectual demand. However, there is also an onus on a system to recognise that not every school has a senior phase that supports students to make those choices, and to retain an openness in relation to the qualifications that students are able to present if they come from a school whose senior phase has deliberately built its qualifications over a number of years.

Oliver Mundell: Would you commit to undertaking the same exercise in relation to rurality and where students on some courses come from? Having spoken to some of your members, I have some anecdotal evidence, particularly concerning veterinary studies and some aspects of medicine.

I know that there are good programmes in place, but those tend to attach themselves to particular schools, rather than to whole local authority areas. In the evidence that we heard earlier, one of the few things that Education Scotland seemed to acknowledge as an issue was a narrowing of subject choice in more rural areas.

Is that a pattern that you see already, and would you be prepared look at that?

Alastair Sim: I do not think that we would be the source of information on subject choice in rural areas. I recognise what you are saying—that, from the evidence that you have heard, there is a potential restriction of subject choices at schools that do not have the cohort of students to be able to resource the breadth of highers and advanced highers that we might need. There is an equity issue in there. To be honest, I do not know whether there is a good information source that could tell me the background, in terms of rurality, of the people coming into highly selective courses. If there is, I will ask the Scottish funding council whether there is somebody who could help us with that, but I honestly do not know whether there is.

Oliver Mundell: Looking at the numbers from the schools and local authorities that young people studying medicine, law, veterinary studies and other very competitive courses have come from would tell you that. That exercise might not give you the best or most robust data, but I think that there would be a very strong trend. There are certain schools that, for a number of years, will not have sent people to do the law course at Edinburgh that requires five As at higher in a single sitting, because they have no pupils leaving school able to apply, due to what is available in the timetable. I think that there might be a pattern there, and I would be interested in any data that you were able to find.

Alastair Sim: I will look, but I do not think that we have data on that. It may have to be collected through institutions, and we would need to look at what we could do that is proportionate on that, but I accept that there is an issue.

Morven Cameron: Perhaps I could add to that point. Highlands and Islands Enterprise recently did some research that looked into the attitudes and aspirations of our young people. As you would imagine, youth outmigration is a big problem for us in the Highlands and Islands, and we are very keen to keep close to the issues so that we can respond to them appropriately.

The recent piece of research that we did in 2018 asked a particular question about young people's views on the choice of opportunities that are available to them, and 71 per cent of the 3,100 respondents said that they were relatively happy and had good or very good provision. However, in rural areas, there is a slight differentiation, and there is a drop to about 50 per cent in some of the fragile areas.

We did not go deeper than that, but on what is behind that differential, our view would be that it is much more to do with a lack of teachers and teacher recruitment difficulties, and the great

difficulty of giving the breadth of coverage in small rural schools, although some new technology is coming in to help with that.

However, that is just a reflection of young people's views of the choice that is available to them.

Oliver Mundell: That is really interesting. Thank you.

12:00

Ross Greer: I am interested in Mr Harrison's view on where collaboration between schools and colleges has increased over recent years. I have seen a huge number of fantastic examples of schools getting a lot of added value from further collaboration with colleges, through bringing college lecturers into schools in order to offer extra subjects and through providing the opportunities for pupils to go to college. However, there is a fair amount of anecdotal evidence that suggests that further collaboration between schools and colleges is now being forced, in essence, by shortages of teachers in specific subject areas and the inability of schools to offer something that they would otherwise want to offer. In Mr Harrison's experience, how often is that the case? Are there examples of particular areas in which collaboration has been forced by a shortage of teachers, rather than collaboration coming from a desire to offer more?

Scott Harrison: City of Glasgow College works with more than 62 secondary schools in more than four local authorities, so we work with different regions. We have close partnerships such as the Glasgow regional vocational partnership, which is an operational group that allows us to meet Glasgow City Council and schools so that we can work more closely and collaboratively.

I give the example of the shortage of home economics teachers. City of Glasgow College is very strong in professional cookery, so we constantly have high demand in that area. We work to support that teaching, because many schools cannot offer that subject. Our hospitality and leisure faculty receives the highest number of applications.

We could improve the system of teachers coming into colleges by looking at what we do with them and what we have to offer. We should also look at the system of lecturers going into schools, because they might not have been in a school previously. That work needs to come from a more strategic, leadership level, with headteachers and directors of faculties liaising and making improvement happen through continuing professional development.

Ross Greer: The home economics example is interesting, because we are well aware of the acute shortage of teachers in that subject. If there is increasing demand from schools in a local area for further collaboration simply because they cannot recruit teachers to be able to offer that subject, at what point does that situation go from being an opportunity to being a challenge for a college? Are there specific areas, such as home economics, in which collaboration is becoming a bit of a challenge for colleges, because they cannot meet the demand that is being displaced from the school sector while meeting the obligations that they already have?

Scott Harrison: Yes, of course. It is about supply and demand. We have only so many staff in professional cookery and only so many kitchens and baking facilities—although the kitchen is not my area of expertise. There is only so much availability so, once we get to that threshold, we are not able to offer more. City of Glasgow College is open four evenings a week and is open on Saturdays, so we try to be creative in what we offer.

For example, there is a high demand for higher psychology, so our staff go into schools to teach psychology, as well as a wide range of other subjects including cooking, personal and social development and sport and leisure. However, I agree that there is only so much we can do in a day.

The Convener: I have a quick final question, and I think that Mr Harrison will be the best person to answer it. When we worked on the developing the young workforce programme, everything was about parity of esteem between vocational and other routes into the workplace and more traditional further and higher education. Today, we have heard about curricular development being done by schools to meet the needs of their area—the word “appropriate” was used several times by Education Scotland.

People in Edinburgh have access to fintech collaborators, and people in the north-east have access to oil and gas. If such areas have many more opportunities than there might be in post-industrial areas that are still suffering from degrees of deprivation, such as parts of Ayrshire and my area, North Lanarkshire, is there a danger that we are not offering parity of opportunity to people across the country, because of the decisions—the appropriate decisions—that schools are taking at the local level?

Scott Harrison: Let me preface this by saying that it is my personal opinion. Yes, I think that there is a danger in that regard. Edinburgh and Glasgow have opportunities that the Borders, the Highlands and Islands and more remote or more deprived areas might not have. Budget is an issue:

I often hear from schools that they just do not have the money, whether it is for teachers, teacher training or transport to get students to other schools or colleges.

We would be lying if we said that there was not a lack of parity between areas. We have to continue to work collaboratively, because we all have the same goal, which is for students to have choices and a good education.

The Convener: Ms Cameron, do you want to comment on the challenges from a Highlands and Islands perspective?

Morven Cameron: I guess that everything is a bit more difficult, given the distance from certain industries, although we have a huge number of industries in the Highlands and Islands. I do not have details, but I am aware that UHI and its 13 academic partners are working increasingly closely with the school systems in their territories to find collaborative solutions that fill the gaps in the delivery of some education offers.

HIE, along with partners and Highland Council, has created a science skills academy, to put in additional, inspirational science support. What we cannot do is step in and fill the gap when science teachers are not available in the council area, but we are keen to come in with additionality, by thinking about what more we can do to support and augment what the council is supposed to be delivering.

At the end of the day, the area faces many more challenges, such as the logistics of getting young people to different places, or businesses not reaching out to small islands. Although it might be appropriate for a schoolteacher or a headteacher to want to do things, they are extremely limited in their ability to do them. Not least are the financial limitations. There are different systems across Scotland, and the approach works better in some places than it does in others.

The Convener: As there are no more questions, I thank the witnesses for attending; your evidence was helpful.

12:07

Meeting continued in private until 12:32.

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