

Scottish Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Universities and Scotland, HC 673](#)

Thursday 8 October 2020

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Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Mhairi Black; Andrew Bowie; Deidre Brock; Wendy Chamberlain; John Lamont; Douglas Ross.

Questions 1 - 29

Witnesses

I: Dr Vicky Johnson, Director, Centre for Remote and Rural Communities (CRRC), University of the Highlands and Islands; Alastair Sim, Director, Universities Scotland; and Professor James Conroy, Dean for Global Engagement (Europe) and Vice Principal Emeritus, University of Glasgow.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Vicky Johnson, Alastair Sim and Professor James Conroy.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Scottish Affairs Committee and our first evidence session on universities in Scotland. I am pleased to announce we have a stellar panel to kick things off. I will let them introduce themselves.

Alastair Sim: Hello, I am Alastair Sim. I am the director of Universities Scotland, which is the representative organisation for Scottish higher education institutions. Would you like me to make some brief remarks now?

Chair: Yes, I should have said short introductory comments as well.

Alastair Sim: Thank you for the Committee's interest in Scottish higher education and for inviting me to give evidence today. This is a time of exceptional uncertainty for universities and a challenging time for students starting the academic year in the midst of a global pandemic. There are several dimensions to this uncertainty. There is continuing uncertainty over whether international students will turn up in the numbers that institutions have planned for. There is uncertainty over whether the post-Brexit negotiations will deliver the aspirations that we share with the UK Government about participation in Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ and what happens if we are not in these. There is uncertainty about how much Government will support universities to be a full part of the recovery when the full scale of that need is apparent. And there is uncertainty, shared with the rest of society, about how long the pandemic is going to go on and how long students have to have an experience that is necessarily compromised by the pandemic.

In the meantime, universities are getting on with serving students and society as best they can in these challenging times. The core of what we provide to students, developing their resilience, aptitude and skills, will be critical to their success in the post-pandemic economy. We are also developing more agile short courses to help people upskill and reskill. Universities' research and innovation will be crucial to building a green and inclusive recovery.

We will need both the devolved and UK Governments to support our capacity to be a strong part of that recovery. We have seen useful elements of support from each Government so far, with a focus on supporting research rather than teaching. It would be good to see this developed into a co-ordinated plan for how to support Scottish higher education as part of Scotland's, and the UK's, recovery.

Dr Johnson: Hello. I am Vicky Johnson from the Centre for Remote and Sustainable Communities at the University of the Highlands and Islands. Thank you very much for asking us, because I do feel the University of the Highlands and Islands has some differences to other universities in Scotland, not least because we are a long way from Westminster. Not



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only that, but we have 13 academic partners who are very much embedded in communities, and therefore we have a very strong relationship with those communities. We have had a significant amount of European funding, so that is one of our challenges.

We are also one of the only tertiary education providers, so further education and higher education. We have a particular perspective here in that we support and mentor young people through their post-school educational experience right up to PhD. We are a fairly new university, just coming up to 10 years old, which is exciting, but we have a lot of innovative and entrepreneurial thinking and our research excellence is growing. However, with the loss of structural funding, and then the effects of Covid, we are very interested and delighted to be asked by you to give our perspective on ongoing concerns relating to structural funding for continuing our research and research-informed teaching.

Chair: Thank you ever so much. Last, but not least, Professor Conroy.

Professor Conroy: Good afternoon. Again, thank you very much for the invitation. My name is James Conroy. I am professor of religious and philosophical education at the University of Glasgow, but my remit here today is as dean for global engagement for Europe and vice-principal emeritus for internationalisation at the university.

I think it is fair to say that all universities have both common challenges and peculiar drivers, and the University of Glasgow is no different in that regard. We work closely with colleagues across Scotland, across Europe and internationally. As Alastair has said, maintaining productive relationships with European colleagues is hugely important to us. We are the No. 1 university in the UK for mobility funding from the EU, whether it is Erasmus master's degrees or standard student mobility. Clearly losing that will be significant for us, as it will be for every Scottish university.

Q2 **Chair:** Excellent. Thank you ever so much. Let's get right into this. We decided that we wanted to do this inquiry because we have been told that the Scottish university sector is facing a perfect storm, with a variety of different challenges obviously coming at once. How sustainable do you find the current funding model for Scottish universities? I know that is a big question, but we will maybe take your one or two top lines when it comes to this.

Alastair Sim: Obviously the current storm has shown up fractures. It has exposed the extent to which what we do for the common good in Scotland is hugely dependent on our continued entrepreneurial ability to earn international income. With teaching funded at about 90% of the actual cost of provision for Scottish students, and with research projects typically funded at 80% or under of the cost of doing the project, universities are entirely reliant on entrepreneurial activity, principally international activity, to fill that gap and enable us to do those things at the core of supporting the common good and the charitable mission.



This is a question about Government choices, about what money they put into the system. The choices about how you fund undergraduate education, for instance, are very much political choices. Different choices have been made in different parts of the UK; different choices have been made in different countries of Europe. You can argue the merits of any particular way of doing that, and I think that is for the politicians to do, but if we are going to maintain the current basic funding model in Scotland, which has broad political support, Government need to make a decision at devolved level to fund teaching and research sustainably. It is also for the UK Government to do their part in making sure that research is sustainably funded, since that substantially falls into the reserved area.

Q3 Chair: Dr Johnson, I know there are different challenges as a primarily rural university with its own specific model. What particular challenges do you face when it comes to the funding arrangements?

Dr Johnson: Obviously we are very grateful and reliant on the Scottish Funding Council. Out of our student body, which is in the high 30,000s, almost 10,000 of which are in higher education, only 2% are international, therefore we are very reliant on funding from the European structural funds and also the initial structural funding that we got from Highlands and Islands Enterprise. With the decline of that structural funding, we are very concerned about how to fill the gap. At the moment we get £27 million from European structural funding, and we are not sure how to fill that.

We were going to increase our international student income. However, Covid, as you say, is the perfect storm. The new roadmap for UKRI research funding talks about levelling up. However, we are very much hoping to see that social science funding does come up to Scotland. We get quite a bit for marine sciences and natural sciences, but we need that levelling up. We are facing particular challenges because of our remote and rural population and, indeed, remote and rural deprivation, which is very particular, so we have additional economic challenges because of distance and low population densities, sometimes 14 people per square kilometre. These kinds of economies need support from Government.

Q4 Chair: Professor Conroy, we have already heard in these opening remarks that there is an anticipated change to learning and research in Scottish universities if this current model is not sustainable. What is your view about what is required to adapt to what we are experiencing now in the funding arrangements?

Professor Conroy: It is unsustainable to have fee levels where they are at the moment. To put it in perspective, in a previous incarnation I was dean of the faculty of education, where we got at the time £8,400 roughly per capita. It is £2,000 less today, and that is something like 12 years later. The present levels of funding are unsustainable to maintain a world-class university system. As Alastair said, Scotland has a world-class system. We are increasingly dependent on international student fee income not just to plug the gap, but to create the facilities, the capital



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spend that maintains our infrastructure, so we have to think very carefully about fee levels. We have to work towards 100% FEC for research projects.

We cannot develop an education system that becomes overly reliant on international students. We welcome those students. We have had a fantastic relationship with them, and it has enhanced our universities beyond measure, but we cannot expect them in the long term to fund our universities' development, and certainly not on their own.

Q5 Chair: I think there is even broader political consensus emerging about the tuition fees issue, as we heard yesterday. I will let my colleagues maybe reinforce that with their contributions.

Can I ask about the support you are receiving in terms of funding throughout this period? I am looking at some of the figures now, where the UK Government have announced an investment of £7.2 million in research projects across the UK. I know the university and college sector was asking the Scottish Government to find up to £25 million per year with their promise to make sure there are places for school leavers.

What do you make of what you are receiving and securing in Government funding? You are obviously going to tell me it is not enough and that you require more, but could you help us out on what difference this funding is making and whether it is sustaining you through this difficult period? Obviously you are going to tell me a little about what you would like to see, so this is your opportunity.

Professor Conroy: We are very grateful for the extra funding we have received. We have had funding from the Scottish Government that has not required us to have too many strings attached to it, so we are able to use that to mitigate some of the current difficulties. There is no doubt that research funding will also take a hit.

Again, in Scotland this is particularly challenging around charitable funding, so we will need to look at the total funding package. Because of Covid, it is clear that charity funding is going to be reduced. Scotland has been rather overly dependent, or at least more greatly dependent on it than some of our English colleagues, and that presents a very particular problem. A lot of that is, of course, around biomedicine, and we need to make sure that biomedical work in Scotland, which is world leading, is sustained. We need to find ways of making up the shortfall that is likely to come from charitable funding.

We are very grateful for the flexibility, and we are also very keen that the dual commitment of 2.4% of GDP and the £22 million public funding in R&D is a strong message, but it needs to be followed up and we need to work towards full economic costing for our research projects because we cannot afford to keep cross-subsidising these things with international students. We are cross-subsidising everything at the moment from our international student base, which has been a mark of our great success and our international reputation, but it does carry problems.



Chair: Dr Johnson is enthusiastically shaking her head with much of these comments, so I assume she agrees with much of that.

Dr Johnson: Yes. I would add that, in 2019, UHI got £45 million into HE from the Scottish Funding Council and £56 million into FE. I will talk about the HE, because that has been very much appreciated for, as I say, this structural funding in funding research and our graduate and postgraduate teaching. However, as I said previously, with the loss of the structural funding from Europe and the decline of the structural funding we got 10 years ago from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, we need this kind of funding to work with these very remote communities. If I could tell you about the spreadsheets I have been doing all week—

Chair: We will maybe leave that.

Dr Johnson: We are working with tiny fisheries trusts in remote communities that bring in tiny amounts of money each, but all of this adds up to what communities need in remote and rural areas. We need the structural funds to support the research with these very remote communities. Also our university covers the size of Belgium, it is the Highlands and Islands, Moray and Perthshire, so you will know it well. We have those challenges of distance and the sheer size of the area that we cover.

To follow up James Conroy, this reliance on charitable funding will be very difficult post-Covid. Some of the philanthropic funding that we are accessing and trying to access will be going to very specific areas of Covid recovery as well now. There is some fund diversion.

I agree with full FEC for UKRI, but also to look at that level playing field, so that the newer universities and those facing some of the challenges of not previously getting a lot of UKRI funding could be looked at as well to try to get that funding into universities that are more remote and newer.

Q6 **Chair:** Mr Sim, is there a sense that the funding arrangements are joined up between UK and Scottish Government? Is that your experience of this?

Alastair Sim: To a point. It would be good to acknowledge what has been done so far. Building on what Professor Conroy and Dr Johnson have said, I think both Governments have contributed meaningfully. The Scottish Government's investment of £75 million in May to support university research was extremely welcome. That has been very good. They have also put another £3 million into capital. Obviously that is a relatively small amount compared to the needs of the estate, but again it will be spent in ways that benefit the economy. They have put additional money into student hardship, digital inclusion and mental welfare for students. All these are good things.

The UK Government also invested in research, particularly to allow the continuation of research contracts that otherwise might have come to a halt. I think we have about £17.5 million from the UK Government into



Scottish universities for that. Obviously that goes straight out the door to pay for researcher salaries. It is money in, money out, but none the less it is really important in sustaining valuable activity. The UK Government also have a scheme—the output of which we have not yet seen because we do not know the international student numbers—to underwrite in part the loss of international student fees through a mixture of loans and grants, but it is qualified in some ways that make it not necessarily fully beneficial for all our members, because it only underwrites up to the loss of non-publicly funded research, which is a subset.

Looking ahead, what we really need, once we see what the international student fee income loss is—and that will become more apparent over the autumn—is for both Governments to say how they will use each of their policy and funding instruments to help to meet that gap and to be in a joined-up conversation about how they use their respective powers and financial levers to help higher education be part of the recovery. The Scottish Government have a huge part in that. The UK Government, through Innovate UK and UKRI, also have a huge part to play in supporting us to be part of the recovery. We are desperate to see the shape of the UK shared prosperity fund. Picking up on Dr Johnson's points, the structural funds have been particularly important to UHI and a range of others, and we need to see what is coming.

Q7 Chair: We will leave that there, because my colleagues will bring up issues to do with international students and some of the loss of structural funding. It is important that we hear from you.

Lastly from me, and this is for you, Mr Sim. The return of students has not been without challenges this time around, you will probably be the first to concede.

Alastair Sim: Indeed.

Chair: I am wondering where we are now. There have been outbreaks in halls of residence, which have been widely reported in the press and we have seen you address that on a number of occasions. Are we starting to get past the worst of that now? Has this had an impact on some of the funding arrangements you might have had in place and that you have had to divert to deal with this situation? Just give us an idea about where we are with the current situation.

Alastair Sim: Where we are, particularly with those institutions that started their terms a few weeks ago, is kind of getting past the worst. What happened broadly was that the overwhelming majority of students have behaved extremely responsibly, having lived through this crisis for so long. There was a bit of a minority that did not quite get it and, because of the sheer infectiousness of the disease, it spread more than anyone had foreseen or wanted.

What we are seeing now at those institutions that started their terms early, such as Edinburgh Napier, is that the spike is now levelling out, people are coming out of self-isolation and they are getting on with it.



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Some universities that started later are slightly behind the curve on that. I do not think, given the prevalence of the virus, we are ever going to be in a position where there are not any outbreaks among students, but I think we are getting through a real spike at the moment.

There have been some enquiries by students, thinking, "Do I want to stay here?" but, speaking to my members, in general students are staying. They have seen this through, they want to get on with a blend of digital learning and safe in-person teaching on campus, and we are very supportive of them doing that.

I think you asked about the financial and staff implications. A lot of residences are operating at reduced occupancy at the moment just to try to spread out the students and manage the risks, so I think there will be a range of residences that are operating at a loss this year, but the important thing from our point of view is that we keep going, we service students as well as we can and allow people to have the best possible educational and social experience they can have in quite challenging circumstances.

Chair: From all the Committee, we wish you all the best in these efforts. Looking around at all my colleagues, we are all products of the higher education system in Scotland and we want to make sure that students can have the most positive student experience in the world and that these arrangements will work themselves out.

Dr Johnson: Very briefly, I think there is quite a lot to learn from this period of remote and blended learning. There are some quite innovative pedagogies for remote learning that we could all continue to use in a blended learning way. We should use that learning and share between the universities on that. A call out for students and staff, they have been amazing.

Chair: They certainly have. You will know that I have Perth College UHI in my constituency, and I know the efforts that have been made to try to ensure that students' experience has been as "normal" as possible. Thank you for that.

Q8 **Andrew Bowie:** Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you very much for joining us this afternoon, really interesting so far. I am going to go back to the very beginning of the conversation. Professor Conroy mentioned—and forgive me if I am misquoting—that universities in Scotland all face similar challenges but peculiar drivers. Could you expand on what peculiar drivers universities in Scotland face?

Professor Conroy: Dr Johnson observed that the particularities of the University of the Highlands and Islands produce a particular set of challenges. A large metropolitan university like Glasgow, a comprehensive university, faces other challenges around things like large international student numbers, significant research funding coming from the European Union and significant mobility funding coming from the European Union. If you look at a smaller, more specialised university like



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Stirling, it has a very particular focus and it needs to make sure that, in having that focus or set of foci, it is well supported in developing its work.

Every university is very different. They serve very different constituencies, but we all have common problems: we are all educating our students; we are educating our future citizens; and we are trying to make sure that we give them both an intellectual education and a civic education. Indeed, the way we have been handling Covid is an object lesson in civic education. I am happy to expand on that at any stage. There are huge complexities but huge similarities.

Q9 Andrew Bowie: Interesting. Alastair and Dr Johnson, speaking about the huge discrepancies in the size of the universities and the impact they have locally, especially in the case of UHI, which is spread over such a vast area, but specifically looking at the funding for research announced by the UK Government—I think roughly £300,000 is being given to the University of Edinburgh to study coronavirus in Africa, and the University of Strathclyde for another project—is there a risk that the smaller, more diverse universities like UHI miss out if this is the funding model we proceed with in the immediate future, more money for specific research projects? Are the bigger universities going to be getting more money at the expense of maybe the smaller ones?

Alastair Sim: I think that depends on how things are crafted. Looking at the roadmap, one of the things that is strong in that—Dr Johnson has already referred to this—is levelling up and levelling up across the country. That has to be taken seriously as an objective. Obviously I have 19 members with diverse interests in this, some of whom strongly benefit from the concentration of research into major research-intensive universities, some of whom less so, but I think our objective across the whole of Scottish higher education is to make sure that excellent research and innovation is supported wherever it occurs and to recognise that, even outside the research intensives, every single institution in Scotland is doing at least some research that, in REF terms, is four-star research. That is international world-leading research.

Take Queen Margaret with audiology, and there is brilliant stuff going on at UHI in archaeology and so on that Dr Johnson might want to talk about. There has been stuff at the University of the West of Scotland in physics that has been published in *Nature*. I think maintaining a diverse research ecosystem is important, and using the tools that are available to secure that levelling up throughout the UK is going to be important, while also protecting our real focuses of research excellence wherever they are, and they are not always where you expect them to be.

Dr Johnson: Thank you both for raising those points and also on our behalf. With research intensification, there are some concerns because we are fighting historical hierarchies. We are a new university and we are building up our research excellence. Within 10 years, in the last research excellence framework in 2014, we were one of the highest rising universities, but there is still a concern that the UKRI money tends to go



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to the older universities, and not the post-1992s or the very new universities. I would ask for that consideration.

We also have to consider the whole range of different funding mechanisms. We need a certain amount of career development and early career development in order to build up the research excellence and to have this levelling up.

Q10 Andrew Bowie: Do you think we do enough of that right now? Do you think we could do a lot more in terms of career development?

Dr Johnson: I am thinking of some calls that I have been involved with to the British Academy that specifically mention career development. There possibly could be more in UKRI about career development and early-career researchers getting support, but we have to grow our environmental excellence in the newer universities. We have to build the culture of research and acknowledge the place-based strategies where we are building up in particular disciplines. We might be well known in, for example, marine science, aquaculture, heritage and archaeology, but we would have to build up areas of social sciences, for example, in particular universities. There needs to be a mix of research intensification to a certain extent.

I am not only talking about research across the Highlands and Islands. We are very outward looking and we learn from the global south and the global north. I have partners in Nepal, Ethiopia, Kenya and now Chile. I am talking about working with remote and rural communities across the globe, but we need some structural funding to build that and to build careers and mentor young researchers.

Q11 Andrew Bowie: On that, and this is a question for all three, if you were sitting in a room right now and in front of you was Kate Forbes, Richard Lochhead, Rishi Sunak and Gavin Williamson and they said to you, "Right, we are sitting here right now today. If you could ask us for anything to make your lives easier, what would it be?"

Professor Conroy: One of the things that my colleagues and certainly I have noticed over the years is that sometimes everything is not sewn together quite as well as it might be. UKRI is supposed to be bringing everything together, but it still feels like separate research councils under an umbrella organisation.

We need to get more consistent in the messages, notwithstanding Dr Johnson's point, and I think she is absolutely right about the broad sweep of investment in research, including the social sciences and humanities, but we need a clearer account of how we are going to invest in particular key areas. Those key areas, in my view, include the social sciences, but they also include things in which Scotland excels, in AI, in quantum, in biomedicine. We have to push, but we also have to have the same levels of funding that our English counterparts get.

Q12 Andrew Bowie: Professor Conroy, before we move on to the other two,



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what would be your dream scenario for how we get to parity of funding between English and Scottish universities? How would you solve the issue there?

Professor Conroy: Sometimes I think SFC is an afterthought in the deliberations about how UK-wide funding is to be delivered. We need to have much more robust engagement between SFC and the English bodies, particularly UKRI, to make sure the funding is level and to make sure that the various additional investments that sometimes come on the back of QR and so on also make their way into Scottish universities at the same level as in English universities.

Dr Johnson: First of all, I would want to stop the young people going out of the Highlands and Islands, Moray and Perthshire. I would want to stop the brain drain, and I would want to see support for early-career research development and for building up focal research areas in universities. For example, Highlands and Islands Enterprise helped to build up our Environmental Research Institute at Thurso. These kinds of focal research areas need that structural support and early-career development.

I would also say that we need more community-driven research to see the needs and requirements of communities and people in remote settings, particularly in our case. We have community-driven and youth-inspired research, so listening to children and young people can help us. They have the most innovative, amazing ideas. We have a programme called Rejuvenate, which is trying to do that.

Lastly, I would ask for more support for knowledge exchange and collaboration across Scottish universities, because I think we can do a lot together. I know you are already doing that, and many of my colleagues have said how much they welcome that. We already collaborate, but more funding for that collaboration and learning within Scotland would be fantastic.

Alastair Sim: Top of my wish list would be a joint plan, the two Governments acknowledging that higher education is something that, by design, straddles the devolved and reserved territories, and coming together to say, "Here is our coherent plan for how we will use the different capacities, policies and funding instruments available to us to support Scottish higher education and to support it as an asset for Scotland and the entire UK."

Within that, we would want to see teaching supported at cost for those students we are taking in from Scotland because, as we have said, that is currently only 90% of cost. We would want to see research supported at cost, but research across diverse locuses supported as part of the levelling-up agenda, and an intelligent co-design of how you support universities to be a strong part of building the nation's recovery from this pandemic.



How do you invest in the skills needs that people are going to have to change their skills and aptitudes? How do you invest in mission-led research for how we build a green and inclusive recovery and a better society and economy after that? How do you target investment at innovation that is going to translate from university ideas into things that business can translate into economic growth? These are all things where both the devolved Government and the UK Government have a role to play and where a conscious co-design of how you support higher education to be a strong part of Scotland's, and the UK's, recovery would be absolutely brilliant to see.

Andrew Bowie: Thank you very much. I am conscious of time, so I will hand back to the Chairman.

Chair: Thank you. I hope this inquiry and report will go some way towards making that mission come true, Mr Sim. We will see how we get on with the rest of this inquiry. Wendy Chamberlain has had to go to make a contribution in the Chamber, and she will be rejoining us to ask her question.

Q13 **Deidre Brock:** I am going to ask a little more about some of the challenges you have had to face recently in the face of the pandemic, but I want to pick up on something you said, Mr Sim, about the shared prosperity fund. You said universities are anxiously awaiting the details of that. Could you remind us of the sorts of areas that the shared prosperity fund is supposed to be replacing that would ordinarily be spent in universities? We are all anxiously awaiting the details of the shared prosperity fund. Could you tell us a little about the effect this delay in understanding what is going to be involved in the fund is causing, the sort of headaches it is causing universities currently?

Alastair Sim: I will comment in general terms, then I think Dr Johnson may want to comment on UHI, because there is a specific concentration there. It has been supporting a lot of infrastructure, in fact, across Scottish higher education. There have been investments in new facilities over the course of the ERDF that have been valuable. What it is supporting now, particularly across the whole of Scotland's universities, is work-based learning, graduate apprenticeships, developing new models through the European Social Fund of how students can earn a university degree while spending a considerable amount of time in the workplace. That is great, and we are really supportive of that.

I think there is a risk. It is about £10 million a year or something, and if that comes out, then to support that brilliant initiative one might have to raid other things that are being done to support students, which would be a risk. We had hoped there was going to be a seamless transition from the structural funds to a UK shared prosperity fund, with a central devolved element to how it would be implemented. Given the timings, that now looks a lot less likely. It looks like there may be a gap during which other funds, possibly other funds within higher education, get raided to support worthwhile things that the structural funds have been



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supporting. That is a real worry in terms of what we can do to support learners and support society, but UHI has been in the eye of this storm.

Dr Johnson: I would say that, yes, apprenticeships, and indeed a cross-cutting theme of our whole strategic plan is entrepreneurial thinking and innovation and basically trying to train people, both our students and also small and medium-sized enterprises across the Highlands and Islands, to build up sustainable small businesses and communities. This structural funding can help us to do this. What we have found in the light of Covid is that, with the gap, we are not able to support that type of activity as much and we are lacking the funds to do the entrepreneurial work across the board. I am possibly missing a bit of information on this, and we might want to follow up with some evidence on it from colleagues at UHI.

Deidre Brock: I would appreciate it, any examples.

Dr Johnson: Interestingly, the challenges during Covid are perhaps more spread out and perhaps have been more manageable in some ways for us because we have 13 partners, very small bodies of students and people, and very remote populations, so the effect has possibly been less marked in some ways than for universities like Glasgow and Edinburgh. In some ways, there is a positive story there and immense creativity, but in other ways, yes, we are missing that structural support to provide the kind of provision for students, because students cannot pay for it and our small and medium-sized enterprises cannot pay for it.

Q14 **Deidre Brock:** Are you saying that is directly linked to the lack of surety about the shared prosperity funding at the moment, the gap that Mr Sim referred to?

Dr Johnson: Yes, and that is where I may have to fill in my gaps, to be perfectly honest. Certainly some of the structural funds and access to funding that businesses could previously access, sometimes there are some missing links, so we are looking for structural funding from HIE at the moment to provide things like catalyst funding, which is of course for small and medium-sized enterprises. We get University Innovation Fund funding for our business competition for students, for example, who are on apprenticeships and who are starting small businesses. That is where we are, waiting for details of that prosperity fund.

Q15 **Deidre Brock:** Getting back to the impact of the pandemic on the university sector, we have already discussed some of the financial challenges and some other challenges that, if you like, are more macro level. Could you give us some indications of the practical challenges of the day-to-day things that you are having to deal with in the university sector with the students coming back? We will maybe start with Professor Conroy.

Professor Conroy: I am not directly responsible for students anymore. I am quite happy to follow up with any detailed information you might want, but I will say the practical challenges include having to move online over a very short period of time when we were not quite certain whether



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we would be able to have a hybrid model, then having to have a hybrid model for some students but not others, those working in practical subjects. Trying to maintain social distancing in practical subjects is hugely complex, hugely time-consuming. Also there is making sure that students who are self-isolating continue to self-isolate without feeling that they are in a prison.

I should say, I am extraordinarily heartened by what I have seen in my institution and no doubt other institutions, the sheer number of staff who are working to support students over and above the call of duty with things like counselling. Of course if you are a first-year student and you have come to Scotland—Glasgow, UHI or wherever—and suddenly you find you cannot have the normal social engagement, that is a huge shock for these young people, because they have come to university not just to become students of a subject but to develop themselves as human beings. There are quite difficult issues around the social psychology of small groups and the intensity of those small groups.

I had a meeting the other day with senior colleagues about this on a slightly different matter, and the reports from students and parents are incredibly positive. They think staff are going above and beyond the call of duty. I think that is true. I think they are pleasantly surprised at the quality of online learning, given how quickly we have had to shape that up. But of course we remain vigilant, and keeping that level of vigilance going for a long time is hugely demanding. We have had to put in a series of measures, command and control, if outbreaks do happen.

You are diverting a lot of energy into something that is not particularly productive, and then of course there are all these other questions around potential research funding on the back of this, the loss of research funding, the loss of income, how you manage all that and maintain a world-class system. They are pretty complex and myriad. I am more than happy to follow up with detail. I know many of our universities will be sending in their own responses to you.

Deidre Brock: I see you nodding a lot, Dr Johnson. Is there anything you wanted to add?

Dr Johnson: What we have found is that a lot of the senior management teams in the different academic partners are needing to spend a huge amount of time on protocols and how to deal with not only student isolation, but also staff are going above and beyond. You may notice, as we are looking more and more exhausted.

Again, I come back to these incredibly creative, innovative remote pedagogies. People have gone above and beyond. In Inverness College, we have something called Yammer, which is an online forum for people to share jokes and how they are feeling, iConnect, but that is taking time, and it is taking time away from putting in more research bids, et cetera. The time it takes to change your pedagogy, to deal with psychological



issues for students and to deal with the isolation and some of the very practical day-to-day issues they are facing should not be underestimated.

Alastair Sim: It is maybe also worth saying that, collectively across the sector, and I think Dr Johnson and Professor Conroy have captured this very well, there is a huge amount of effort going in to support students. Last week, on behalf of all the university leaders, we published commitments to standards that students could expect for how they will be supported through this difficult period. I will write to the Committee afterwards with that.

Gosh, looking ahead, when will we get through this? One of the worries is what happens to students next semester, particularly in practical subjects such as nursing and the allied health professions, where to get yourself qualified you need to have a certain amount of practical work experience in the NHS or a private or care home setting. It is very difficult getting these placements at the moment.

It is also quite difficult getting the regulatory bodies to recognise simulations as a substitute. Goodness knows, we hope we are getting over the worst of this, but I think we need to prepare for the next semester and supporting students, particularly in practical subjects, to get the experience they need to work towards their qualifications, and also just generally. This has been an incredibly difficult time for staff. What a time to be a student. Let's hope we are getting past it.

Q16 **Mhairi Black:** It has been really interesting listening to you all so far. Are there any lessons that have been learned during this pandemic, or any ways in which you have changed protocols or whatever? Is there any of that which you would look to maintain post-Covid? Dr Johnson used the word "positive" earlier. Initially I was going to ask whether there has been anything positive, but I was not sure whether that was an appropriate word, given the situation. Is that something you have thought about and considered?

Alastair Sim: I will say something very briefly because, unlike Dr Johnson and Professor Conroy, I am not at the frontline of managing what is happening in institutions. There has been an awful lot of learning about how you make the digital learning experience as good as it can be, and as interactive as it can be, so that it is not just good for learning but is helping people to bond with their peers. It is used as a tool for keeping an eye on people's welfare, so it is used to identify who is struggling a bit and who needs a bit of extra support.

The experience at the start of this term, the sheer intensification of support that has been needed for students in these difficult circumstances, with so many having had to self-isolate, has been a learning experience that we will have to carry forward so that we make sure we can sustain the quality of support to students because, with the best will in the world, there will still be some people who get this virus or have to self-isolate over the next few weeks and months.



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There has also been a huge amount of learning about how to set up a teaching environment safely. That has been very intensive, but we are at a point where there is broad confidence that, with all the spacing that is being done and all the other measures that are being put in place, the teaching environment is as safe as it conceivably can be. Dr Johnson and Professor Conroy are on the frontline of this more than I am.

Mhairi Black: Professor Conroy, you have made the mistake of putting your hand up again, so on you go.

Professor Conroy: It is a disease I have never really recovered from. There is always the seduction of thinking that an emergency should somehow become normalised. That is a very great danger, and there are a great many private companies out in the world at the moment looking for a market possibility. I have been looking at some of this, and it is quite staggering how some of the largest global corporations are joining together because they think there are market opportunities. What we give in Scottish universities and, indeed, in UK universities is a very distinctive experience. I do not think we should be seduced into merely finding a new way of doing things for the sake of novelty and because we are in an emergency. An emergency does not and should not dictate normality.

On the other hand, there is much to be said, and Dr Johnson has alluded to this, about preparing our students for living in a digital age. The difficulty with that is that, while we may all live in a digital age, many of the skills we need to navigate it continue to be analogue, and it seems to me that we have to be careful to make sure that we know how to navigate this digital age in a way that still empowers people to control their lives, both technologically, scientifically and socially.

Mhairi Black: That is helpful.

Dr Johnson: I would back that up by saying that we all miss the experience of face-to-face interaction with students. Indeed, my area of research is community-driven, youth-led research. It is very difficult to do participatory research using creative visuals, but we are learning new ways. What we are finding is that we would not lose all those new pedagogies that we are discovering and spending time creating. We had a staff survey recently, and some staff would like to continue some remote working and some face to face.

I held a meeting with the Ethiopian Ministry of Women, Children and Youth and a whole range of Ethiopian academics and policymakers, and we had a greater attendance than if we had had to do a face to face, so there are some positives and we should learn from them, but not normalise them. What will we do? How will we do research next year? We are thinking about that now, so when we put bids in, there is a, "If we can meet; if we cannot. If we can hold focus groups; if we cannot."



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It is a very uncertain time, coming back to the uncertainties in the first place, and we are having to spend quite a lot of time developing new creative methodologies in case we cannot meet online. It also takes time to create those new creative methodologies without coming face to face. We are trying.

Q17 **Mhairi Black:** One of the things I have heard a couple of times is how important the international sphere is when it comes to higher education and further education. Is there any immediate way, until we get to the end of this pandemic, that that international engagement can be put online? I am thinking that a lot of the funding comes from, as you say, international research and international student fees. How has that been impacted by Covid so far? Is it possible to secure that online in some sense?

Alastair Sim: I will kick off, and then colleagues who are more directly managing it might come in. In general, what is happening is that for international students who are still having difficulties travelling or who are just concerned about travel—this is particularly the case in China—they are being given the opportunity to start their studies online. It is not online in the sense of a book; it is online in the sense of participative experience, working with academics, working with other people on the course who may be from a range of different countries, including Scotland and the UK.

Another thing that many institutions are doing is setting up a January start date as an alternative so that people who are having visa or travel difficulties now, or who aren't quite confident in travelling at the moment, have an option to come later. All these things mean it is quite uncertain still what the ultimate impact is going to be on international student fees, because people may have paid a deposit but are not going to pay the full fee until they arrive, or people may taste the course and do not know whether they will stay if the experience is online for a number of weeks.

The Scottish Funding Council is going to start doing frequent monitoring of this from next week so there is real-time information coming in to Government and the sector about what is happening and the scale of the gap in international fees. In the meantime, I think people are reaching out to international students to support them, either to come, and substantial numbers are coming, or to start and have as integrated an experience as they can digitally, accepting that there are limits to that.

Q18 **Mhairi Black:** You mentioned earlier that the investment from the Scottish Government has been welcomed, but it does not cover the extent of the damage Covid has inflicted on our institutions. On what areas do you three think money should be focused or prioritised? Is it trying to secure international relations, or is it trying to invest in something more practical, like keeping the lights on? Any direction from you would be appreciated.



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Alastair Sim: I will give a brief summary, and others may have perspectives to add. What would I prioritise? Getting teaching funded at a sustainable level, because that is what enables us to offer the best quality experience to students. It is what students deserve, and that is fundamental. Getting research funded at a level that covers the costs. Again, so much of how we are going to respond to this crisis is going to be through research and how to do things better in future. How do you protect people's health and wellbeing? How do you build economic growth? How do you develop ideas that translate into business? All of that is dependent on having a vibrant world-class research base. At the moment across the UK, not just in Scotland, that is being done at a level that is vastly cross-subsidised from international fees.

A third thing is building the recovery, the new additional things that we can do to build the recovery, whether it is more short courses for upskilling and reskilling as people adapt to changed needs in society and the economy, whether it is more interaction between universities and SMEs to help them to rethink their businesses and products and come successfully through the recession, or whether it is bigger areas of innovation, where we have a real intellectual lead in Scotland. Investing in those at cost so we can really help to build the recovery will be important.

International is hugely important, particularly as we change EU students' fee status. Maintaining our openness to the world is really important, keeping some element so we can invest in scholarships so that people of talent from the EU and more widely can come to Scotland, bring their talents and enrich our community, even if they may not be people who, from their own or their family circumstances, have the means to pay a full international fee.

Dr Johnson: I completely agree with everything Alastair Sim just said, but I want to come back to keeping the lights on. There are delays in student completions of PhDs, and my PhDs are in circumstances where their countries are going through not only environmental and political crises, but then Covid, so their delays not only leave them sorely short of money to even keep their families going, but they have delayed their PhD completions, et cetera, and these are just taking a snapshot. But also the delay in the grants, the research that is ongoing, that is all taking our time, and somehow we are then meant to justify how we have spent every hour of our time. We have had to delay, so we need some keeping the lights on to pay university staff, who have had to delay, delay, delay.

Picking up on Alastair's point about keeping the businesses going, we have a programme called Catalyst to train businesses to think differently and to try to build themselves up, but no one is paying for it and they cannot pay for it. There are some keeping the lights on things that need to be done as well.



Professor Conroy: Perhaps I could pick up the point that Mr Sim alluded to, which is European student fees. When we lose that concession to European students, we also lose from our universities one of the most vibrant bodies in Scotland. They populate a huge number of our postgraduate specialised provision, often in STEM subjects. They bring some of the most numerate people in our universities. Many of them stay, make their lives in Scotland and add enormously to the lifeblood of the country.

It is one thing to say we can get lots of students from China and India, which is true, and we still have a world-class education system, a world-leading education system, but in those students' interests as well as in our students' interests is diversity. Diversity was brought to us by a huge range of very smart European students who were incredibly hardworking, incredibly focused and delivered so much. It is not just that we lose the fees, but we lose the future potential of those students to contribute to the life of Scotland and the UK.

Mhairi Black: That is helpful, thank you very much.

Q19 **Chair:** We are still waiting for Wendy Chamberlain to rejoin us, and I hope at some point she does. In the meantime, can I go on to not international or European students, but English students? Probably the most disruptive policy announcement we have had in the past few weeks is the student number controls. I know that you, Mr Sim, have written to the Government asking for clarity on all this. I note your concerns about this element. I know it is English only, but this has profound impacts and effects upon Scotland's student population. Can you outline your concerns and what risks this presents to the Scottish higher education sector?

Alastair Sim: It has been an adventure. I will lead you through what happened and where we ended up, very briefly. Back around Easter time, I think early May, the UK Government said they would introduce student number controls to stop institutions in England predating each other in the recruitment of students during the crisis. They were clear at that point that it would not apply to Scotland, so we were surprised when about a month later that was reversed and they proposed to impose student number controls on English students at Scottish universities. Given that we were well through the recruitment cycle, it threw a spanner in the works of things that had already been planned. It also seemed wrong, as an intrusion on Scottish universities' discretion about who they admit. That was unwelcome and unexpected. It certainly had not been trailed.

Then faced with the change in A-level grades as a result of using centre-assessed grades rather than algorithmically generated grades, and with many more people now having the A-level grades to get into university, the UK Government quietly abandoned the student number controls, so they are not there anymore. It was a bit of an avoidable storm. We are back to where we started, but with a big investment of energy.



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Q20 **Chair:** The concerns and issues around SNC, has that all gone now? Are you satisfied with where we are currently? Do we have nothing to concern us anymore?

Alastair Sim: Yes. After that adventure, we ended up in exactly the same place as where we started.

Chair: I do not know about you, Professor Conroy. What did you make of it?

Professor Conroy: It is simply worth adding that, should something like this occur again, it is important that the UK Government hear representations from Scottish HEIs and, indeed, the other devolved nations before they go public with these kinds of things, because they are hugely disruptive; they are very unsettling. If we are serious, going back to one of your earlier points about how we sew things together and make everything more coherent, then having policies which are landed on you without prior discussion makes it very difficult. Going forward, if there are to be such discussions, the devolved nations need to be involved.

Chair: Anything to add, Dr Johnson, about the situation at UHI?

Dr Johnson: No. I do not think I have anything to add but, again, we could add to that if somebody else at UHI can add anything else.

Q21 **Chair:** Wendy Chamberlain was going to bring up some of the issues around international students, but she has not been able to rejoin us. I know Mhairi Black asked some questions around this, but I want to ask a couple more.

We know, and you have said this repeatedly in the session today, how important international students are for income streams. We have talked a little about what they do to the culture of our universities. Could somebody clarify for the Committee what the risks and dangers are if we lose out on some of our international students who are due to come to Scotland? What will that mean to your whole general finances as you go forward this year?

Alastair Sim: The Scottish Funding Council looked at this. It collected information at the first point, in April to May, from institutions to look at their projections of what they had hoped to recruit internationally and what would happen if they did not. At that point the Scottish Funding Council's briefing note on financial impacts projected that, if there was a complete collapse of the international student market for Scotland, institutions would be facing a loss in the current academic year of £651 million, which is on an overall turnover for the higher education sector in Scotland of about £4 billion. That is a massive hit. They thought a mid-range projection of a loss of £450 million to £500 million was more realistic, on the assumption that some international students would come.

As things have moved on, some students have come. Enrolments have looked better than expected at that point. The last estimate the Scottish



Funding Council made was of a potential £191 million loss across the sector in the current academic year, which is still pretty serious. Some institutions are still optimistic that international student numbers will keep improving and people will travel from China, will pay their fees and will stay. But there are other losses that you have to take into account. A lot of conferencing business has gone out the window for the foreseeable future, which for a number of universities is a really important way of using their facilities.

Q22 Chair: Have most international students made the journey to start their coursework now?

Alastair Sim: I wish I could give you a figure for that. I do not think I am going to be able to do that until the funding council does its surveys. I have spoken to a lot of members about this, and the universal response from members is, "I can't tell you yet, because I do not know" because some have arrived, some are studying online, some may have paid a deposit but we have not heard from them since. Obviously there are some with a January start date who they are not sure are going to turn up yet.

I would say the general picture looks significantly better than was feared in the spring. Some institutions, on a best possible estimate, are potentially holding up to their projections for international recruitment, others probably not, but nobody is quite sure how this is landing. It is important that the funding council and the Government keep their eyes on this over the autumn as the situation stabilises.

Q23 Chair: I have heard there is a particular issue around Chinese students. I know, Dr Johnson, the particular importance of Chinese students to the campus in Perth. Are there any particular issues for UHI with international students now?

Dr Johnson: Compared to many other universities across the UK, we have a very high proportion of Scottish students from our catchment area and quite a low proportion of international students. In some ways, we are not suffering quite so much. Perth has more than the other academic partners, which are on the islands and in the highlands. However, in our strategic plan, internationalisation was a major strategy to plug the structural funding gap from Europe, and it is now looking to be a difficult strategy to follow. We saw it as part of our future funding, and we are now finding that difficult to materialise. Perth has more reliance than the rest of UHI, I believe, but across UHI we only had a small percentage of international funds. We are almost up to last year's levels on our HE students.

Q24 Chair: Do you have any particular thoughts about this, Professor Conroy? Maybe in responding with your own experiences, is there anything that the UK Government can do to continue to show the UK—obviously our interest is in Scotland—remains an attractive destination for international students?



Professor Conroy: Absolutely. The restoration of post-study opportunities, I could not tell you how important that has been. We see that particularly in places like India, where they are extraordinarily sensitive to those opportunities. It is about maintaining openness. This is a difficult political thing to say, but having a Scottish view on migration and post-study work and how long that duration can be is incredibly important. Scotland does not have some of the problems that some parts of the UK have.

When I first came to Scotland in 1990, the population was dropping to just below 5 million. I am delighted to say that a lot of the population rise has been of skilled migrants, particularly through universities. If there is something that can be done, it is to take a more regional approach to post-study work. That would make a big difference to Scotland. It has been done elsewhere, as we know, in Canada and so on, and it has been perfectly successful there. It offers real opportunities to Scotland. If we go back to the place-based investment and levelling up, then population size matters. We know that. It is not an accident that the Manchester conurbation is seeing lots of energy. It is about size.

Q25 **Chair:** If my colleagues who are still on the call feel they might want to contribute or ask further questions on this issue, please feel free to ask those questions.

I am going to come back to Mr Sim, because he will know about our work on post-study work schemes in the past. I think this Committee has now recommended twice that Scotland either gets them as part of a UK scheme or, if that is not available or possible, is given a devolution of powers that will enable us to do that. Is this the one important attraction to international students?

Alastair Sim: It really is. Thanks to this Committee and thanks to the consistent cross-party voices in Scotland that said for years that we need to be in a competitive position with a post-study work visa to attract people who really do benefit our society. The UK Government's decision to introduce a two-year post-study work entitlement is an important step forward and does reflect, among other things, the cross-party weight of opinion in Scotland that this was the right thing to do.

Professor Conroy has referred to the case for having some sort of regional flex for immigration. That is always something to keep on the table. Things have improved with post-study work, and visa processing has improved. In general, over the past months of this crisis, the impression of universities is that UKRI has been trying to solve problems by, for instance, making it easier for people to do their English language assessments without having to turn up to a physical testing centre. Things are probably, in some senses, better than they were, and I think consistent pressure from Scotland has helped in achieving that.

Dr Johnson: Although our international numbers are fairly small, making the destination attractive definitely works. We have a completely full



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course on heritage and culture in Orkney, absolutely full of international students from all over the world. People are coming to Moray College to study aeronautical science; they are coming to SAMS to study marine science. Having that distinctive flavour and destination is extraordinary. I moved up from Brighton. It is beautiful. We should sell the destination because it is extraordinary and inspiring.

Chair: Who wouldn't want to move to Orkney to study? The culture there is fantastic.

Dr Johnson: There is also our Gaelic language provision. People come from different parts of the world—the Scottish diaspora—to learn Gaelic.

Professor Conroy: If we are talking about what can be in the future, it is also worth keeping a very close eye on our, putting it crudely, international competitors. How the migration of students benefits Scotland and the UK is, in some degree, conditional not just on the internal conditions but on what happens in the US and in Australia. One of the reasons we have been relatively successful, or at least not had a worst-case scenario, has been that Australia has largely closed its borders and there is a cultural and economic war with the United States. These are not trivial matters. They make a difference to the flows of students, so having good international relations and having a genuine sense that we have something distinctive to offer that is world class is hugely important in terms of marketing. [*Inaudible.*] It is much more complex and significant than that.

Q26 **Chair:** We have an Australian-born member of the Committee, and I do not know if she wants to contribute to any of the further proceedings. It is also worth noting that we still have three universities in the top 200, so we must be able to communicate the fact that the Scotland university sector is world class, and we are still in a position where we are able to attract international students. Is there anything further that any of you may be able to suggest to the Committee on how we continue to do that and what we need to do?

Dr Johnson: What we need now is partnership. There is support needed to develop but also to maintain our partnerships with international partners. Once you are trusted and once you have connections, you have the students coming and you have the research partnerships and links, as well as the international innovation and impact. We need it with European partners because some of those partnerships have been damaged by Brexit, and very trusted partnerships in Europe have dissolved. As the European funding is going, we need something to maintain those. With partnerships, including with the global south, unless you have a research-funded partnership, these partnerships are eroding and they are so valuable long term.

Scotland, as everywhere else, has an international commitment to the sustainable development goals. Maybe we can think about that in tying together some of the importance of learning and achieving things



internationally, those partnerships for research impact and also for having a relationship for students to really trust universities in Scotland.

Professor Conroy: Chair, given you are looking for practical suggestions, and building on Dr Johnson's observations about European partnerships in particular, the European Centre for Advanced Studies in Lüneburg has created a joint programme between Universities Scotland and the Lower Saxony Universities Association funded by the Government of Lower Saxony. If we were to do something positive around bilateral funding of research and development exchanges in the absence of things like the Erasmus programme—if we do not stay in things like the Erasmus programme, it would be a disaster for us—we have to look at very serious funding of bilateral relationships and partnerships because we will not be able to sustain and build those up, particularly when one looks at the European Universities Initiative. I am not sure how familiar members of the Committee are with it, but it poses a very serious proposition. The Erasmus funds that have been used for it have been increased substantially. I have just seen an announcement online about that. They are determined to create these European universities, and being outside that in the long term would be hugely injurious.

Alastair Sim: Erasmus is hugely important. It supports substantial inward mobility, and it supports the outward study mobility of about 2,000 Scottish students a year. We are sitting here not knowing what is going to come out of the post-Brexit negotiations, and I think there is a real problem. I do not honestly believe that a UK successor scheme, which would be the next best thing, could be built fast enough to be seamless from the end of Erasmus. Erasmus has been important, among other things, for making sure that people from challenged backgrounds who do not have their own money to put behind mobility get funded to get internationalised experience. I do not know what influence we can have, but we hope that is something that is sustained whatever our future relationship with the EU.

Chair: That is one of the issues we will want to raise with UK Ministers when we speak to them about this. It is certainly something that is important to this Committee.

Q27 **Deidre Brock:** A quick question, possibly to Mr Sim. When UKRI was set up, and there has been quite a lot of discussion about research moneys and investment, some concerns were voiced that the institutional structure of UKRI might work against Scotland's voice, if you like, in the decisions being made. Could you give us a wee update on that? I seem to recall from other times on the Committee that this was brought up, and I would be very interested to hear your point of view.

Alastair Sim: It is still something that needs vigilance. I do not think we thought that integrating Research England into UKRI was necessarily the best thing to do. It does give a kind of instinctive closeness to a subset of UK institutions within UKRI just because there are some institutions they work more closely with than others because of the Research England



embedding. We argued at the time, given the whole of the UK's interest in UKRI and given also that devolved Administrations are quite major funders of research, that they should have a structurally integral role in deciding UKRI's priorities, along with the UK Government. I do not think that ever quite happened.

I do not think anyone is acting with bad intent, but there is a sort of gravity of things. For instance, in the most recent project to support Covid, the research grant for that, only about 5% came to Scotland. Similarly, only about 5% of really big infrastructure investment by UKRI is in Scotland and they are big facilities, the astronomy and technology one on Blackford Hill in Edinburgh.

It is an area for continued vigilance, and I would certainly be happy to see some sort of formal structured engagement between UKRI, UK Government and the devolved Administrations on how it can deliver across the UK, support levelling up and support place-based investments, which it does do to an extent in Scotland, to make sure it is working as effectively as possible.

Q28 Deidre Brock: It is early days, obviously. It was only set up in 2018 or thereabouts. Is that right? Does that 5% figure represent quite a drop on what Scotland would otherwise normally have?

Alastair Sim: That is not necessarily typical of what is coming out of UKRI. That was just one particular call for research projects. Overall, on UK research councils now, of UKRI project funding for research back in sort of 2014-15, Scottish universities typically got about 16% of that funding. It is now hovering just below 14%. I do not think anyone is doing anything structurally intentional, and I think there are other drivers. For instance, Scotland's research infrastructure funding from the Scottish Government has also been eroded in real terms, and that is catalytic funding that enables you to go on and bid competitively for research funding. There are multiple drivers in there, but I think it is an area for continued vigilance.

Q29 Deidre Brock: There was talk of a Scottish representative, or maybe even a representative of the devolved nations, on the board or committee. Did that happen?

Alastair Sim: In setting it up, the decision was to get the best people on the board, rather than have a formal representative from each of the devolved nations. Within that selection of strong people to be on the board, Ian Diamond, principal of the University of Aberdeen, was appointed at the time. I think he has come to an end, or is coming to an end. One of the things we would strongly hope for is that there is another strong Scottish research voice on the board of UKRI in succession to Ian.

Dr Johnson: The UKRI roadmap says, "to inspire and enable people from all backgrounds...to engage and contribute to research" and I think we have to ask them how they are doing that, just to keep attention on



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ensuring there is a diversity of institutions. They also talk about a “healthy ecosystem of institutions”, so I think we need to see the funding going to a whole range of different institutions, and to build research capacities and early-career researchers as well, as well as giving it to already established researchers and institutions.

Chair: I knew this would be a fascinating session, and it has been. I want to thank you all for helping us get started in this inquiry. Wendy has joined us just as we are ending. I am sorry about that.

Wendy Chamberlain: That is fine, Chair. Apologies for the delay getting back.

Chair: We are all very busy. We all understand. I was able to ask your question about international students, probably not as well as you, but you can see in the transcript just how well we did.

I want to thank you all for setting the scene for us on this inquiry. There may be a couple of things we require to follow up, and bits of information and details that we may require, so the Clerk will get in touch with you if there is anything further we require. Thank you for your participation and for helping us today.