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## Scottish Affairs Committee

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

Wednesday 25 November 2020

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Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Mhairi Black; Deidre Brock; Wendy Chamberlain; Jon Cruddas; Sally-Ann Hart; John Lamont; Douglas Ross.

Questions 94 - 133

### Witnesses

**I:** Professor Katherine Smith, Professor of Public Health Policy, University of Strathclyde; Professor Chris Pearce, Vice Principal for Research, Dean of Research and Deputy Head of the College of Science & Engineering, University of Glasgow; and Professor Rebecca Lunn MBE, Head of the Centre for Ground Engineering and Energy Geosciences, University of Strathclyde.



## Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Katherine Smith, Professor Chris Pearce and Professor Rebecca Lunn.

Q94 **Chair:** Welcome to the Scottish Affairs Committee and our ongoing inquiry into universities and Scotland. Today we will be hearing from people from the research sector to find out the research profile of Scottish universities and the impact of Scottish research, nationally and internationally. I will let all our guests introduce themselves, starting with you, Professor Smith.

**Professor Smith:** I am Kat Smith, professor of public health policy at the University of Strathclyde, although I fairly recently moved over from the University of Edinburgh, so I have some experience of the diversity of institutions in Scotland, which I know you have been discussing.

**Chair:** There is also an opportunity for an introductory statement, if you want to say anything.

**Professor Smith:** I will say a little about the perspectives I bring. Compared with the people you have heard from already, I am a frontline academic, involved in a range of research collaborations. I have sat on research funding panels. I also have a lot of experience of working with PhD students—I am the current director for PhD students in our school—and working with early-career academics. I have undertaken a lot of research on the relationship between academic research and external actors, including policymakers. I have a strong commitment to reducing socioeconomic inequalities, including widening participation agendas.

**Chair:** Professor Pearce, over to you for anything by way of a short introductory statement.

**Professor Pearce:** My name is Chris Pearce. I am a professor at the University of Glasgow, where I am the vice principal for research. I have strategic leadership of research across the institution. I am also a professor of engineering in the James Watt school of engineering, where I have an active research group.

I will start by making a very clear statement that Scotland's universities punch well above their weight internationally in research and it is essential that we continue to support them and invest in them.

By way of demonstrating this, with less than 0.1% of the global population, Scotland has 2% of the world's most highly cited research outputs and 1% of the world's most highly cited authors. Relative to the size of our population, this is better than the rest of the UK and better than high-performing countries such as Germany and the Netherlands. This pattern is also seen in the number of papers that we publish with international co-authors, demonstrating that Scotland has an internationally connected and collaborative research community. To give you an idea of the scale of research activity in Scotland, we attract



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something like 14% of UK research funding, compared with having 8% of the population.

Despite this high-performing research environment in Scotland, the global research landscape is extremely competitive. A number of other countries, such as Singapore, are recognising the importance of research to their economies and societies and are, therefore, growing rapidly and investing in their capacity and capability. My main message to you is that we must preserve and capitalise on our research excellence, given its importance to Scotland and to Scotland's global reputation.

**Chair:** Last, we have Professor Lunn.

**Professor Lunn:** I am Professor Becky Lunn. I am a Royal Academy of Engineering professor at the University of Strathclyde, but I am here representing the Royal Society of Edinburgh rather than Strathclyde University.

I have a particular interest in equality and diversity, and I have done a lot of work in this area, with the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the research councils more recently, and with the Royal Academy of Engineering. I have acted as a Government adviser on quite a large range of Committees, for the Westminster and the Scottish Governments, largely in the area of energy but also in equality and diversity.

Funnily enough, I was also going to say some stats about Scotland, but Chris has already said most of them so I will leave that where it stands. The only thing I will add is that Scotland has a lower rate of fees per undergraduate and a higher reliance on overseas students, as well as our higher rate of international collaboration. We also have a particularly high number of European academics, so I think we are quite vulnerable from the Brexit perspective and I add that to the introductory remarks.

Q95 **Chair:** Thank you all very much for those very concise views. We will indeed come into some of the issues you mentioned, Professor Lunn, in the course of our proceedings this afternoon.

Professor Pearce answered my first question, so I will come to our other two guests and ask you to give us an overview of where Scotland's university research profile is and why Scottish universities have such an important role in UK research. I will come to you first, Professor Smith. I am looking at all my different professors here; I doubt we have had a trio of professors before.

**Professor Smith:** Scotland clearly is performing very well in research terms, and that is across a diverse number of areas. Scotland is outward looking and there is a lot of collaborative research projects going on. I am personally involved in three different collaborative research projects that stretch across the UK and also have international collaborations.

That is one aspect. Scotland has a longstanding tradition of being research active and having strong universities. Scotland also has really good relationships between its universities and external beneficiaries, and that is across a wide range, from the private sector to policy and



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charities. I think that has been important in the current research-funding climate, where there has been an increasingly strong emphasis on research impact and things like that. They are some of the reasons.

**Professor Lunn:** I will add a little more data. We are 63% ahead of the UK average in academic citations, which is a very significant statistic. As Chris mentioned, we have more publications in the top 1% than any other UK nation or comparative EU nation, and that includes the very top European nations. Around 10% of the UK research population produces 12% of the UK's research output. If 10% to 12% does not sound too large, 2% as an addition to 10% is a very significant amount per person.

We have the largest number by far of transitory researchers in the UK, in the sense that the percentage of academics that have published from addresses outside Scotland is 89% so the vast majority of our researchers are international in one way or another. They may be Scottish researchers who go out to work elsewhere and come back. There are English researchers and international researchers who are incoming. Clearly that says something about the regard in which Scotland is held for its academic prowess, and not only about our reliance on being internationalised for quality. Also, people do not come somewhere to work in academia unless it is seen as being a top place to come, so I think that says quite a lot about quality.

It is also worth noting that we have more funding per head from Europe than any other bit of the UK, particularly from Horizon 2020. We have already lost half a billion euros of European funding across the UK over a fairly short period since the Brexit uncertainty started, and a very significant portion of that is in Scotland. We already had some threats prior to this pandemic and, with the other issues that are appearing, there are already some significant threats.

The other thing that is worth noting is that that performance comes with R&D investment that is a lower percentage of GDP than anywhere else.

Q96 **Chair:** Professor Pearce, we have heard a couple of comments and references to where we are with Scotland's international standing. Could you talk a bit about how we compare to other countries? Are we in a position, as far as you can observe, for Scotland to maintain its position, given the competitive international environment that you mentioned in your introductory comments?

**Professor Pearce:** Yes, let me make that point again. We are internationally high performing and collaborative, but it is an extremely competitive environment out there. Other countries are investing significantly in their research and development capability to build their capacity. The very impressive statistics we have given you about the high-performing nature of research in Scotland are ultimately in danger of declining because we are not investing in R&D at the same levels as other countries. The investment in R&D made by the UK Government compared to many of our competitor countries is significantly lower. One



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of the commitments that has been made in the R&D roadmap is to increase investment to 2.4% of GDP.

On the impact that universities make—and I am sure we will come on to it—the recent crisis of Covid-19 has demonstrated the value and importance of not just universities but the research they do and has shown how they work together. They have worked collaboratively. They have worked with industry and with the health service to fight Covid-19 and I am absolutely confident that they will help in the recovery from the pandemic, but that comes only through investment.

**Q97 Chair:** We will come on to Covid—we have a lot of questions that you can help us with—but you make a very good point. We, on this Committee particularly, acknowledge the work of the University of Oxford, with its partner AstraZeneca, in being able to come up with its vaccine in such a short time. When you talk about the collaborative relationships and engagements, is the type of partnership that we have seen from Oxford University this week as good as it gets?

**Professor Pearce:** Yes, and of course the University of Glasgow was part of the phase 3 trials. In looking at the phase 3 trials for healthcare workers in Scotland, the University of Glasgow partnered with Oxford and with the NHS in Glasgow. We are proud of the small part we played in supporting that work. That exactly demonstrates the nature of collaboration and, maybe even more importantly, the need for investment in the fundamental research that underpins it.

**Q98 Chair:** Do any of the other professors want to take part credit for what has happened this week?

**Professor Lunn:** I am aware of a number of Covid grants that have come to universities, but it is most important to know about the role that academia has played in the current crisis, and not just academia itself but the training that it provides for industries that have provided similar roles. We are marketing new types of ventilators, and some other very significant innovations in engineering have happened extremely rapidly, as well as on the medical side, to cope with the current pandemic. I am sure there will be others from areas like operational research on how to distribute vaccines rapidly, how we cope with global supply chains changing after this and many other aspects that are very important for the UK. Across the board, academia has pulled together and supported the Government in their response.

**Q99 Chair:** Maybe with all your hard work and endeavours, the Scottish Affairs Committee might be able to meet physically in the next little while. There is that prospect.

**Professor Lunn:** Maybe.

**Q100 John Lamont:** Good afternoon, witnesses. You have touched on this already, but what particular challenges have researchers faced as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic?



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**Professor Pearce:** It is complicated in that we went into lockdown in March and went into phase 2 in July, so we restarted non-essential research in July. The key point here is that the productivity of our researchers has been significantly impacted, because we could not operate our labs at full capacity, we had limited access to our archival material and we could not do any fieldwork, or it was very restricted. The return to normal activity has not really happened, and that has had a significant effect on researchers and the research.

Most universities have significantly paused recruitment. We paused major infrastructure projects and investment in major facilities. Not only have we not got back into the labs and we are not back up to the level of productivity we had before, Glasgow has recently entered protection level 4 and that has further hindered our recovery.

We also recognise that, when we went into lockdown, we thought it was an emergency situation that we were going to be in for maybe three months. Of course, we now realise this is a long-term effect. The long-term restrictions placed on us mean that our productivity has been significantly impacted in lots of very different ways. I will give you one example that I think is important. We redirected a lot of our resources to fight Covid-19 but, as a consequence, a lot of our non-Covid research was severely impacted. That is the sort of research on chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes. The long-term impact on the key research that we are doing is significant. I can expand on that, but I will let the others speak.

**Professor Smith:** I agree with all that. I am based in the humanities and social sciences, so the situation is a little different in that much research has been able to continue but has shifted to online. There has been a huge amount of innovation in online research methods and engaging with people outside of academia via online platforms and so on.

Academics have been really stretched because they have been trying to deal with their own home situations—childcare and so on—alongside trying to shift all their teaching online and keeping research going or contributing to new research efforts to help tackle the pandemic. It has been a very stressful time for academics, sometimes not helped when people have referred to universities shutting down, because they very definitely have not shut down; they have increased in activity across many areas.

I want to emphasise some of the positive shifts we have seen. We have seen the shift towards being able to collaborate much more effectively via online platforms. That will be really useful for international collaboration going forward and some aspects of teaching, for example part-time teaching when people are learning alongside doing a job.

We have seen creativity around research methods, which I think we will take forward with us, but we have also seen the ability of UK academia, including the universities in Scotland, to be really responsive to societal needs when they need to be. I think that is partly a reflection of the



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longer-term impact agenda that has happened in the UK, where we have these strong relationships between academics and external partners.

I want to stress, though—and Professor Pearce made this point—that we should not assume on the basis of that that what we need to do is move evermore in that direction. We are really good at it, and that is great, but some of the advances we have been able to make depend on this kind of longer-term, more fundamental knowledge. It is really hard to predict which of the various research going on will be needed for future crises because we do not know what those future crises will look like, so we want to protect that as well.

My final point is that we have seen that the bureaucratic processes for applying for and getting research funding can be massively slimmed down and made much more time effective. We should take some learning from that as we go forward.

**Professor Lunn:** The impacts on academia have been very uneven. For example, if you have caring responsibilities, you will have struggled to work at all and will have been fitting work around daily care of children. That is more common for women than for men, and there is quite a lot of data that shows that. That is an issue.

The impact on what you do has also been very uneven. If you are a laboratory-based researcher, you have probably been unable to produce new research for the best part of nine months now. As Chris said, although the labs are open, they are not normally operational; they are on a kind of reduced operational basis to enable distancing, to reduce the numbers of people in them. That all means the impacts on individuals are very uneven across the sector.

It has been particularly tough on young researchers, for two reasons. One is for researchers with young families, of which there tend to be more, although not entirely, at the younger academic end. It has also been particularly tough on PhD students and researchers on fixed-term contracts, because they are relying on their output from those fixed-term contracts to get their next positions and they have been in a position where they cannot produce outputs. If you are, for example, on a fixed-term contract for two years and you have just spent your first nine months out of the lab, you have no data to work on or write up.

The impacts are very heterogeneous across the sector. Finding some way of levelling that up and recognising that as we move forward—and not just offering opportunities to rebuild post Covid-19 in a way that allows everybody to bid for those opportunities, regardless of whether this impacted them or not—might serve to do the opposite, because many of those problems are still there. If you were struggling to find time to work, to write research grants because you had young children, you still are and you are still not in the lab, and you probably will not have the time to bid for the extra funding whereas the people whose time has been relieved are in completely the opposite situation. The impact across the



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sector is uneven, and the impact on individuals and how you balance it needs to be thought about in how all pull out of this.

Q101 **John Lamont:** That is very helpful. My next question is about your funding. Professor Pearce described very well that Scotland attracts 14% of the research funding, which is more than its expected share. Thinking not about Government funding but about the donations, endowments and support you get by having students from around the world, do you think the impact of the pandemic on people's ability to donate or the ability of international students to come to Scotland will affect the income you get to fund your work?

**Professor Lunn:** The Scottish sector is more reliant on international fees as a percentage of its income, so I think that will have a particularly adverse impact in Scotland. That is because undergraduate tuition fees are lower in Scotland because they come via the Scottish Government rather than via individual household payments. We have a different fee structure here, which means that we are doing more cross-subsidy of teaching from international fees. That leaves us in rather a vulnerable position.

Strathclyde attracts a very significant proportion of industrial funding. We have a very well-known and well-regarded model of taking innovation right through from fundamental research to impact in our innovation centres, and many of the companies that we work with have been quite adversely affected. Rolls-Royce is a good example of a company that we have a significant partnership with that has been very adversely impacted through the aerospace industry and other things that have ground to a halt over the last year. However, I think some of this will be very sector dependent.

From the international fees, and across the board, Scotland has a very significant challenge.

**Professor Pearce:** In addition to what Professor Lunn has just said, I will pick up on the charity funding. We all know that the medical research charities are having to scale back because of loss of donations, and this will have an impact on the research and infrastructure that they fund. Not only are we going to be impacted by a significant drop in charity funding for our research, there is also a chance that the funding will not be evenly spread across the UK. To give you an example, of all the funding we have as a university, 23% comes from charity funding and the majority of that is for biomedical research, which is doing critical research into areas such as chronic diseases. Given the prevalence of that in Scotland, this is a real worry for the sector, for Scotland and for the UK.

The estimates of the shortfall over the next year are staggering, hundreds of millions of pounds, all of which is typically going into critical biomedical research. What we need is a long-term and stable solution for funding biomedical research that is not wholly reliant or largely dependent on the charity funding that we have at the moment. As you know, there is a strong call for a life sciences partnership fund, which is



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where charities and Government will come together to provide a more sustainable solution. That is a key thing we should concern ourselves with.

**John Lamont:** Professor Smith, do you have anything to add?

**Professor Smith:** No, I think the main points have been covered.

Q102 **Chair:** It is a quite staggering figure that you mentioned there, Professor Pearce, that 23% of biomedical research is coming from charity funding. Is that right?

**Professor Pearce:** Yes, 23% of all my university's research funding is charity funded, and the majority of that will be biomedical.

Q103 **Chair:** To give us a sense, for our understanding, about the types of research that you are conducting, what proportion of all the research of the university as a whole would be biomedical research? Is that something you could tell us, briefly?

**Professor Pearce:** Biomedical research is probably the largest part of the research that we do, followed by engineering and the physical sciences.

**Professor Lunn:** Charitable research does not command any overheads at the moment—almost entirely not—and charitable research is also cross-underpinned by the international student fee income. It is being quite significantly subsidised by the money we make from outside to allow that to happen, which makes it doubly vulnerable.

**Chair:** We have quite a number of papers about the portfolio of funding for research across Scottish universities. You mentioned them in your evidence, so I just wanted to pick up and see whether I had heard that properly.

Q104 **Deidre Brock:** Yesterday a leaked Cabinet Office document admitted that the UK is facing a likely systemic economic crisis as the Brexit transition period ends and a perfect storm with the coronavirus pandemic, among other things. What additional issues does that twin threat throw up for research projects?

**Professor Smith:** It throws up a huge number of issues. A key one is uncertainty. There is uncertainty around all income streams, so it makes it hard to undertake planning at university level but also at individual academic level. With that uncertainty and the perceived threat to key funding streams, particularly European funding streams, and uncertainty around the replacement of them, we are seeing academics who would otherwise have settled in the UK being attracted elsewhere or choosing not to come to the UK. Some of the debate that is taking place around Brexit, combining with the fees issue, is likely to impact on the numbers of international students that we are able to attract to our universities. As Professor Lunn has mentioned, the cross-subsidisation impacts on the research that we are able to do.



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There is a range of threats coming at universities at the moment. We are always going to say it is important to invest in universities. Look at the role that we play in society, and that is really clear now and I would add to that case, but in addition we need to think about status. If you lose sight of investing in universities, you can quickly drop off the international stage or drop down those league tables and you quickly start to become less attractive to both students and staff. There is a very strong case for continuing to invest in universities wherever we can.

Finally, certainty is really useful and we are really lacking in certainty. I know the business sector is also saying that at the moment, but uncertainty makes it incredibly difficult to plan.

Q105 **Deidre Brock:** When you say the debate around Brexit is having some impact, perhaps on international students and, I guess, academics as well, do you mean the perception that the UK is unwelcoming to folk from the EU, for example? Is that the sort of thing you mean?

**Professor Smith:** Yes, that is the sort of thing I mean. Scotland is faring slightly better than other parts of the UK in that regard and is seen as more welcoming. I have several colleagues who have moved up from England to Scotland with that in mind, but that is just anecdotal evidence. It is hard to gather that kind of data, but I am really clear from conversations with colleagues working in Scotland, who were born in other European countries, that they are concerned and are feeling less welcome here. Almost all of them have started to explore whether they could move elsewhere in Europe.

**Professor Pearce:** Yes, uncertainty is a big problem. If you really want to plan long-term R&D, it takes time and long-term thinking. Working on unknown budgets year on year is a challenge for us as a sector.

Being part of EU funding makes us part of some of the largest networks and collaborations in the world and the worry is that, if we do not associate with Horizon Europe, we lose access to them. That is why we are concerned about the impact, not just on funding, not just on the opportunities for collaboration, but we are worried about how that will scare off the most talented researchers. They want to be part of those big collaborations and the big collaborative R&D projects, so they will go to the places where they can be part of them.

To put some balance to that, I have been pleased by the recent discussions we have had with BEIS about the potential future of funding as an alternative to EU funding, if we do not associate. If we do not associate, the plans around alternative funding sources are pretty well advanced, if the spending review puts that funding in place. Maybe that has been announced already, I don't know. We are quite confident that if we do not associate with Horizon Europe, the funding will be in place but we are then going to have to work very hard to make sure we are part of these big, collaborative, international R&D projects, and that takes planning and funding.



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**Deidre Brock:** Yes, and time, presumably.

**Professor Lunn:** Yes, I agree with all those points. I will add that I see not only the funding risk but a significant reputational risk for the UK. It is not just that we get access to big international facilities or groups, it is also that we are there at the table in these big, world-leading projects. You just have to look at the gravity wave work to see how important it is that you are in these big international projects and you are at the table.

There is another thing that we have not talked about with international students. I am particularly concerned about European students at PhD level. We have some very talented European PhD-level researchers, many of whom pull through to post-doctoral research in the university and then through to academics. We have a large number coming through that route into university who then work with collaborators in the country they originate from, or with other networks, and all of that supports internationalisation in what we do. If we pull that infrastructure apart, we lose the feedstock that is part of the very high-quality academic research that we have here. It is about more than just money, to be perfectly honest, quite significantly more. In many ways I am more concerned about that aspect than some of the more financial aspects about whether things go up or down by a small percentage. These are important things

I back up Professor Smith's comment about people leaving. A number of eastern European academics, who are very talented, have decided to go back, and a number of people have pulled out of interviews because of the current situation. When you think about it from their perspective, they have built up track records and partnerships in Europe and then they apply for jobs here. They have built that track record around European funding—they may be applying for a chair here, for example—but if they come here and they no longer have access to European funding schemes, they are starting from scratch. They work very differently; I am sure you have never seen a bid for a European Horizon call in comparison to a UKRI one, but they are completely different, the emphasis on them is completely different. They effectively lose all the knowledge, the skillset and the collaborative network they have built up when they come here. They lose that advantage, so it is not appealing to them.

Q106 **Deidre Brock:** I am very interested that you raised UKRI. You have already outlined that Scotland punches way above its weight in attracting research funding. How confident are you about whatever might replace Horizon 2020? Have you been given any indications that that could continue to be the case if it is a solely UK-led organisation? I remember that there were some issues around UKRI and about the possibility of Scotland's voice being a bit drowned out by other parts of the UK. Do you share those concerns, or is this something that you feel confident about?

**Professor Lunn:** Chris, in his position in the university, probably has better data than I have, but Scotland does extremely well in winning R&D funding and hits above its weight in research funding. I have quite a concern about strategic investments, infrastructure investments. As a



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nation, we have done very well out of European research development funding, which contributes significantly to a number of innovation centres, buildings and structural investments around Scotland that the universities—Glasgow and Strathclyde, and I am sure Edinburgh as well—have invested in and have had these kinds of partnerships. It is unclear how that money will be distributed. I know there are discussions that there will be a fund, but I don't think there is any clarity at all about how much of that fund would come to Scotland, how big that fund will be and how it will be allocated. I think that is quite a substantial concern.

**Professor Smith:** I very much endorse what Professor Lunn just said. Even if a similar level of money, which is a big ask anyway, is provided through UKRI, as we were previously getting via European funding initiatives, I have a range of concerns about the consequences. Professor Lunn has raised various things, but UKRI funding is often quite mission driven; it is quite tightly defined in what they are looking for. You can contrast that with a lot of European Research Council funding, which is much more open to innovative, fundamental research. I am really worried that we will lose that with these changes. We don't know what the future challenges and crises are, and we don't know which fundamental research will become important, so it is really important that we protect that. That is the one key thing I would add.

**Professor Pearce:** It is probably important to put some balance. I agree with all the concerns, but the conversations we have had with BEIS and UKRI in recent weeks have been very positive about the fundamental research funding that Professor Smith talked about, which often comes through the European Research Council. There is a scheme being developed in co-ordination with national academies to fund an alternative, which is very much based on the European model of funding fundamental research excellence. We have been very pleased with the discussions we have had so far about the direction of travel. Of course, the funding still needs to be put in place, and I don't know exactly what the situation is with that, but I endorse again the point about money being only one part of the equation. It is about the collaborations, the skills, the talent, and these are the other concerns that just putting money into things will not fix.

Q107 **Deidre Brock:** What kind of a gap are you expecting? As you say, we are very close to the transition period being over, and we still don't have any clarity about what will replace the RDF funding, for example. What kind of gap are we expecting before the funding from the UK Government kicks in, or is it all going to be seamless?

**Professor Pearce:** We have been told that, if we do not associate, a new fund called the discovery fund will be launched in January to align with what we would have been able to apply for from the European Research Council. But we also want to be able to associate as a third-party country with future European projects. That is another aspect. Those are the main concerns.



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**Professor Lunn:** I want to ask Chris a question. I thought he might know whether that funding in January also includes the European Research Development Fund, which is different from the European Research Council funding, because that is the strategic infrastructure funding.

**Professor Pearce:** What I was referring to is focused on the European Research Council alternative.

**Professor Lunn:** Yes. I think there is not a plan to immediately launch an equivalent to that in January.

**Deidre Brock:** No indication yet?

**Professor Lunn:** Not as far as I know.

**Chair:** We don't usually get a situation where witnesses are asking questions of each other.

**Professor Lunn:** No, sorry.

Q108 **Mhairi Black:** I want to return to what was said earlier about how the restrictions are affecting different faculties in different ways. Speaking to your own faculty, can you give us a bit more of an insight into what impact the restrictions will have on the timescales and the quality of research projects?

**Professor Smith:** Social sciences and humanities vary by the topic. Fortunately for me, the research that I am involved in is working closely with policy partners and they all have access to the kind of material you need to have online engagement, and we have been able to move forward with that research, just adapting our methods and so on. However, a lot of my colleagues are working with frontline social workers, the Scottish prison sector, frontline healthcare workers, and that research has been impacted because those people have had to focus all their efforts on Covid, Covid containment and so on. That has had to pause, and I am worried about that. We have a lot of concerns about people experiencing gender-based violence, childhood abuse, neglect and so on, that we don't have enough of a research spotlight on that, because people have had to refocus their efforts, so there is that issue.

Then there is an issue around digital inclusion and exclusion, another area I am worried about. A lot of social science research is trying to focus on bringing in voices that are not usually heard as much, voices that might be marginalised in various ways, and it is much harder to do that kind of research via online platforms. People in those groups may not have the hardware they need to engage, and so on. I am concerned that research that helps increase the voice of those communities will be lacking as we go forward.

Q109 **Mhairi Black:** Do you think that, in the post-Covid world, there will be an attempt to keep some of the techniques we have developed throughout this pandemic, such as things being online?



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**Professor Smith:** Yes, I think there will be and I hope there will be. In many ways, when you are in large collaborations, it is much more time effective and reduces costs to have these kinds of online collaborations. It reduces the environmental costs associated with travelling, especially with lots of academics flying halfway round the world for an academic conference and so on. There was reticence before, because people were not familiar with it, but we have all had to become familiar with it. Some of these approaches will persist and I think there are some quite positive effects, but we should not lose sight of the fact that there are communities that become increasingly less engaged and further away from our focus because they are not digitally included at the moment.

**Professor Lunn:** In engineering it very much depends what you work in and what career stage you are at. Everybody with young children and caring responsibilities, everybody with children of school age and below, has been very significantly affected, no matter what they do. That is my observation.

After that, it really depends on what you do. Laboratory-based research is very significantly affected; numerical modellers could largely operate from home and have probably been much less affected. Interestingly, that does not mean that whole projects have not been very significantly affected. I am part of a big prosperity partnership—EPSRC prosperity partnership—with the nuclear sector, which is 50% industry funded and 50% research council funded. You have numerical modellers and experimentalists on that, and some of the modellers are using the experimental data. The whole project is no longer in sync because half your workforce cannot work and produce anything for nine months and the other half can continue. That is a bit of an issue.

Something that has been quite interesting and is worth mentioning on the positive side is the improvement in working with Government. Things like the Royal Academy of Engineering, all of the more strategic advisory roles at a senior level from my perspective have been significantly eased by Covid because of things like this, where you appear on Zoom. Meetings, as long as they do not involve interviews, have largely been extremely effective. The same with the research councils.

That has been a huge improvement for the levelling-up agenda and the equality and diversity agenda, and it gives Scottish academics much better access to strategic roles. There is no doubt that when you listen to Government announcements it is invariably UCL or Imperial. It is always the same universities that pop up as academics talking on the radio or talking to Government, because they are nearby and they develop relationships easily. It is understandable. If you are young and female, you do not want to travel all the time. This is a much better way of doing things in getting a more senior input to policy that is a better representation of the UK and pulls on the real expertise where it exists in the UK.

Q110 **Mhairi Black:** Excellent. Do you think the guidance or best practice has been fairly consistent throughout the period for people in research?



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**Professor Lunn:** No, it has been a disaster.

**Mhairi Black:** Tell us more about that.

**Professor Lunn:** It has been a total disaster. Each university has taken a different line on whether we were or were not allowed to furlough staff because the information coming out of different Government Departments and UKRI was completely different for months. Nobody knew whether they were taking a huge risk by furloughing and that nothing would come back. The research councils were saying that, if you furloughed staff, you would not be eligible to bid for more funding and that things may come online to tackle the issues later, extension of grants. We were left in a complete lottery of trying to make a risk-based judgment on which was the better thing to do as universities, and each university has done something different. Glasgow University furloughed everybody very quickly. Strathclyde did not and hardly furloughed anybody and saw it as a risk-based—well, they were advised by the research councils not to do it and they took that advice, which I think was probably to their detriment. The communication was unbelievably unclear.

Q111 **Mhairi Black:** In the future, should there be an overarching body responsible for making those decisions, as opposed to universities individually deciding what they are going to do? Has there been any thought given to that so, if we are ever in this situation again, there isn't chaos?

**Professor Lunn:** It would have been helpful, certainly, if the Treasury and UKRI had had a conversation and come to an agreement about what advice to give to universities. They did eventually, but it took the best part of five months or something to come to it, by which time most people had made decisions one way or another, which have had big impacts on their staff. It certainly would have been helpful.

To be honest, I think the same thing about the return to labs. Universities did it at different paces because they were more or less risk averse. I think they are essentially worried about being sued if they make the wrong decision in a lack of guidance situation. They do not want to be responsible for somebody getting Covid when they allowed people back in, yet other businesses, civil engineering contractors, many manufacturers, are all working. Again, it has been a difficult situation.

Q112 **Mhairi Black:** That is really helpful. Professor Pearce, is there anything you would like to add?

**Professor Pearce:** I will just correct Professor Lunn. We did not furlough everybody. We furloughed about 440 of our research staff. Furloughing research staff was a big issue, and that was a bit of a failure. I agree with that.

I will also put a more positive spin on things. In my experience, Universities Scotland has been working very collaboratively. We have been allowed to, and we have been able to engage with the Scottish



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Government about some of the key issues affecting us as a sector. Universities UK has also been interacting strongly with the Russell Group universities, and we have been acting together to lobby Government and funders. There have been some really good examples of where we have come together as a sector.

On the return to the labs, the position is that these things need local risk assessments. It is very difficult for one organisation to make that call. I think that making local risk-based decisions on whether to return to labs has been the right decision.

We have moved within a matter of months to a blended learning approach for our students, and we have assessed them online. That has been a phenomenal effort and, without the emergency situation we were in, some of these things would have taken us a very long time. We have demonstrated and we have learned how to be more agile as an institution. That has been a great learning curve for all of us.

The areas that have been impacted are pretty much across the board. I flag up engineering, physical life sciences and biomedical life sciences being particularly badly hit because of the access to labs and facilities.

**Mhairi Black:** Excellent. Thank you. That was really helpful.

Q113 **Chair:** I think it was Professor Smith who said this. She was talking about the usual suspects, and she mentioned universities such as Imperial and UCL. The impression was given that there is some sort of hierarchy when it comes to the possible distribution of interest, funds and resources across research. Was I hearing that correctly, Professor Smith, if it was indeed you who said that?

**Professor Smith:** It was actually Professor Lunn, although I have done some research on this topic, so I am happy to speak to it.

I have done a lot of research with academics to try to figure out how they try to influence policy, and with people on the policy side to figure out why they go to certain academics and not others. It is clear from that research that geography plays a role, or at least it did play a role up until moving to this online situation. If you were closer, nearer at hand, you were more likely to have regular conversations and, therefore, more likely to be asked for your advice on matters. It led to a really unhelpful situation in which we were not getting a diversity of views and we were sometimes having academics asked for advice on a particular issue that really was not their area of expertise. It just happened to be that they were local and well known. It would be really good if we could retain some of what has happened by using online platforms to increase the diversity of views we are getting across academia.

Q114 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Thank you, witnesses, for coming along to speak to us today. I want to return to the issue of funding, and we have touched on this during Deidre's questions and your responses so far. My first question is about individual funding. Professor Lunn was talking about the fact that we have a lot of people, particularly PhD students, in



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our research communities who are on fixed-term contracts, so there is always that end point in sight. Professor Smith also said there was an easier move in the humanities space to cope with the pandemic. I am interested to know what your assessment is of the impact from a financial perspective on individual research projects that are in progress.

**Professor Smith:** I don't think I meant to suggest it is necessarily always easier across humanities and social sciences. It is totally variable by the research project. For some research projects, there has been very little impact and, in fact, there have been cost savings. The project I was involved in would have involved a lot of travel across the UK to meet different policy partners, and we are now doing all of that online, whereas for many other research projects the funding is time limited but they are not able to progress with the research.

I particularly flagged the situation of PhD students and post-doctoral researchers, some of whom were just about to go off and do their data collection, or they were in the middle of it, and they have had to redesign their whole project and go back to the starting board. It is unclear whether they will be given the funding they need to be able to rework the whole project and see it through to the end. I am really worried about that earlier-career researcher group.

Q115 **Wendy Chamberlain:** It is not just the funding for research. You are also talking about the employment, the extension of fixed-term contracts?

**Professor Smith:** Exactly, yes. That is often one of the main costs of research on the social sciences side.

**Professor Lunn:** I concur with that. It is very dependent on the individual student. For example, pretty well all of my PhD students have been very heavily impacted because of the lack of laboratory access. The research councils—and many of the universities followed suit—have found an extra three months of stipend for PhD students, but only if they were in their final year. For me, that somewhat misunderstood the problem in many cases because, if you had not started your experimental work or were bang in the middle of it, you have lost probably nine months of time in a three- and-a-half-year project, which is a significant proportion to finish and complete in your funding period.

That has quite significant implications for those individuals, and it is particularly harsh on international students. We were talking about international students earlier. These are people who are paying significant fees and have effectively been unable to work for periods of time. Yes, sometimes they could suspend their studies, but they still have to afford to live during that time. We can suspend the fees, but it does not help with the additional living costs they need to find. That will have a very big impact on individuals.

Q116 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Potentially, a consistent approach across research councils and institutions might be helpful as well. The other thing I am thinking is that, potentially, the quality of the research and its findings



will be impacted.

**Professor Lunn:** That is certainly true. It will be impacted. I think the individuals themselves are largely more concerned about getting publications and their PhD for their future career, rather than the holistic impact on Scottish universities, for example.

The other thing I would point out, which we have not talked about at all, is that some of the hardest mental health issues have been associated with young researchers. I am sure others here would agree with this. In line managing people, even when they could not be in the labs and they were furloughed—once we had young contracted post-docs furloughed, in theory we were not supposed to meet them—we always met to make sure they were basically okay in their situations. Most of these individuals, unlike us, are not in family situations. They are quite often stuck in poor-quality housing, in a single room, sometimes without a desk, trying to work. I had meetings with somebody sat on a bed with a laptop. They have really suffered from a mental health perspective. Many of them have been completely isolated for very long periods. We forget how big an impact that has had. We have had a large number of crises and helpline issues, and it has been quite distressing.

Q117 **Wendy Chamberlain:** It is the culmination of their studies, isn't it? I can imagine that, on its own, would add anxieties. Professor Pearce, is there anything you want to add?

**Professor Pearce:** To pick up on PhD students—putting the numbers into context is important—in my own institution we have about 5,000 researchers and half of them are PhD students. That is just to give you an idea of the size of the PhD student community. It is very significant, and it is fundamental to our research. A lot of the good things I talked about earlier stem from PhD student research.

UKRI responded very quickly. It announced a particular six-month funding for those students in their final year. We recently had additional funding for those in their penultimate year. Although funding is always welcome, in my institution UKRI students are only 25% of the students in the institution, so you are not capturing all the students. You end up with an uneven approach to dealing with this crisis, essentially. As the others have said, it is not just about their ability to finish their PhD. There is a huge mental health issue associated with this.

The Scottish Funding Council has awarded £75 million to the sector in addition. The contrast to UKRI is quite an interesting one, and there are some lessons to be learned there. The Scottish Funding Council gave £75 million to the sector and said, "These are the broad six or seven conditions of that funding," which included supporting careers, supporting your PhD students, enhancing collaboration and fighting Covid. As an institution, that has been extremely welcome because it is not targeting a particular group. It is not being overly prescriptive or onerous. It has essentially given it to the university saying, "We trust you. These are the things we want you to spend the money on, but we trust you to do it."



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That was extremely welcome in the spirit of the emergency we have been in. In contrast, some of the mechanisms that UKRI has put on are quite onerous and restrictive. As I said, the funding is always welcome.

We have taken a slightly different approach in my institution, and maybe part of the problem is that it is different from one institution to another. At the University of Glasgow, we decided to support research students no matter what year they were in and what their funding source was. We said to them, "If you can't change your plans, if you can't mitigate the effect of the pandemic, if you need additional funded cost of living and extension to your study period, we will consider that," and in extenuating circumstances we provided that funding because the SFC funding gave us the flexibility to do that.

**Q118 Wendy Chamberlain:** Having looked at individuals, the second part of my question is more strategic. In some respects, we have been in a perfect storm with the pandemic and the upcoming departure from the EU. I wonder if some of the response has been overly reactive. Do the witnesses think there is a long-term strategic priority for investment in university research at the Scottish Government and UK Government level?

**Professor Pearce:** Absolutely. You will not be surprised that that is my response. There is an imperative need for long-term funding. As I said before, research does not happen quickly; it takes a long time. As others have said, you do not necessarily know what research will be required for the next crisis, so we must continue to invest in the fundamental research excellence that we already do.

Having said all that, the recent R&D roadmap that has been published by the UK Government is very welcome. It has some very positive messages about recognition and the need for investment in R&D, the dual commitment of increasing money in real terms and reaching 2.4% GDP. The other aspect is that it focuses on the place agenda, talent and collaboration. All these are key things that the higher education sector is saying we need to focus on for the long term, and some of the things we have discussed here this afternoon.

**Q119 Wendy Chamberlain:** It all seems to be quite recent.

**Professor Pearce:** Yes, absolutely the point. We saw a void, but things are changing quickly and there have been some positives.

**Wendy Chamberlain:** That is good to hear.

**Professor Smith:** I am heartened to hear the information that Professor Pearce has on this, because it has not made its way down to people working at my level yet. It sounds really positive. It could have come sooner. It is really important that anything replacing EU funding focuses on facilitating international collaboration, so not just collaboration but international collaboration. If you look at what is available in UK funding, it is often quite restricted in the collaborations that it allows you to make internationally.



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I will make an additional point, and it was mentioned in the Stern review on the REF approach to impact, but we have seen this in evidence in the current pandemic. There is a crucial role for academics who are good communicators of research and science to synthesise large bodies of research and to help make them accessible to policy and public audiences. That is something that currently research funding and university performance assessment structures are not particularly good at rewarding. It is encouraging individual academics and individual projects, which might be a collaboration, to try to have impact and to engage externally, and that is great. People such as Devi Sridhar and Linda Bauld at Edinburgh University have stepped up and done more communication roles, which are not currently well supported. If we have this opportunity to create a slightly new approach to research funding in the UK, we should take that into consideration.

**Wendy Chamberlain:** It is also a way of demonstrating the public benefit very visibly, I would suggest.

**Professor Lunn:** I absolutely support that last point. The only other thing I would add is that, like the others, I am very encouraged by the planned investment, the R&D roadmap and the fact that the commitment to that, despite the pandemic this year, does not appear to have wavered on GDP, so that is great. It is even more important that that happens as we pull out of the current economic crisis. It is very clear that we need to do that in a net-zero carbon way and roll that into the way we pull out of the current crisis and the areas that we have been funding. Society needs to look more sustainable as it moves forward and hits the levelling-up agenda.

We need to be a little bit careful about the balance between applied and fundamental R&D. Much of the additional investment that is going into R&D is very strategically targeted. I understand the Government's reasons for wanting to do that, but there is always a balance. In maintaining your international position in innovation and the feedstock of research and academia coming through that is the nexus of technologies in 15 or 20 years' time, it is not just about investing in what we can do now. It is about investing in the position we will be in in 15 to 20 years. We need to maintain the balance between fundamental work and research where Government can see immediate applications and immediate economic and societal gains. I hope to see that moving forward. I know the research councils have committed to doing that, but some of the other investment is going in other places.

The other thing I would like to see is a real, significant commitment to diversity. Women, in particular, are extremely poorly represented in STEM and it is a uniquely UK position. It is not good anywhere, but we are the worst. There are some countries where it is not true at all. There are countries where there are as many female engineers as there are men.

**Chair:** Professor Lunn, thank you. I want to let you get away by 3.30, and I know somebody else wants to come in, if you will forgive us.



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Professor Pearce, you said one thing that was good news and we might come back to you for some detail about the things you just told us on the funding-related issues.

Q120 **Jon Cruddas:** Good afternoon, everybody. I am sorry about being slightly late at the beginning of the meeting. I was at a European Scrutiny Committee meeting, and they did not have a clue what was going on in the next week, so it is good to hear Professor Pearce's confidence about the future funding regimes. That is genuinely good to hear.

We have covered a lot of ground this afternoon, but one question—and I may have missed it—is about UK Government support through the last year of the pandemic period. What I take from what has been talked about so far is the uncertainties around the fee structure, charitable funding, Brexit and the need for a long-term solution. The coherence and sustainability report talked about collaborative potential, health and wellbeing, climate, marine sciences and the blue economy. I have seen the £280 million Government funding that was made available, but I have not quite grasped—and again this might be because I missed it—your assessments of the economic support provided by UK Government for researchers and research projects in Scotland throughout the pandemic period we have just gone through.

**Professor Pearce:** That money did come to us. It was focused on projects that were ending within something like a 12-month period, so it was only projects that were coming to the very end. A lot of long-term projects would not have seen any additional funding from UKRI through that scheme. As I said before, a more flexible approach would have been welcome at that point.

The whole funding issue is critical here, and we need to recognise that the real cost of doing the research is not covered by the funding we get. We typically recover only something like 80% of the full economic cost of doing the funding, and that leads to the cross-subsidy we heard of earlier from things like international fees. That is very important.

One of the things that we have demonstrated during the pandemic is our ability to be agile but also to be strategic. If we put funding into projects only, that funding is then tied to those projects. We have a dual support mechanism where we have quality-related funding and project funding. What we need to be seeing is at least maintaining or increasing that quality-related funding to allow us to be agile, as we have demonstrated we can be, but also to be strategic, which is not project specific.

Q121 **Jon Cruddas:** Professor Smith or Professor Lunn, would you like to say any more about UK support through the last period?

**Professor Smith:** I can talk about it from a frontline academic perspective. We hear about large figures, and then it is unclear how that is filtering down. The communication about how that is to be used could have been a lot better. In particular, if we take the recent UKRI announcement about PhD students, it initially looked like that funding



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could be used in a certain way. Second-year students who were funded by the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science in Scotland year were advised to wait until next year to apply for an extension. Then it was suddenly announced that there was not going to be a second opportunity to apply, so that was completely taken away from them. You can imagine the kind of impact that has had on the affected students. As Professor Pearce noted, obviously only some students have UKRI funding so it is also unclear how those contributions of funding coming from the UK Government get distributed to students who were self-funding or funding via other mechanisms.

The same would apply at a project level. There has been a lot of unclear communication about who can apply or not and when it is best to apply and so on. For me, a key issue has been around communication and apparent shifts in the position of what you can and cannot do.

**Professor Lunn:** I reinforce Chris's point that the Scottish Government support has been much clearer and more flexible in giving the universities choices in how to distribute things in a way they see as being equitable, rather than being prescriptive in how it has been distributed. The problem with prescriptive funding is that there are some very significant losers who have been very badly impacted by the pandemic.

Q122 **Jon Cruddas:** The focus is on the Scottish Government's agility around the £75 million, compared and contrasted to the UK Government's approach. The Chairman was talking about hierarchy. From the September UK Government announcement of projects, including Edinburgh and Strathclyde, is there a danger that smaller research projects are being overlooked for funding, despite playing a strong role in their local communities? Is this something we should be aware of?

**Professor Lunn:** Are you relating that to Covid or in general?

**Jon Cruddas:** No, the general funding of projects in the last few months and whether there is a size and status issue in who is getting the money.

**Professor Lunn:** There is an issue around levelling up in the UK, and reputation enhances an institution's chance of getting awards. There is a far greater need for anonymity in the way we bid for funding, which is largely not done. Yes, there are issues that surround that; you are disadvantaged in your chances of winning research awards at less well-regarded universities. That is not to say that I think the large universities with very strong research reputations would not maintain a higher award level, because they attract good staff and so on, but there is far more to it than that and you are significantly disadvantaged being elsewhere.

**Professor Smith:** Yes, that is also my experience. I sit on funding panels and you are looking at a range of grant applications that have come in. Often a traffic light system is used, either implicitly or explicitly. There are a few that are green and everybody agrees that those should be funded, and a few that are red and everyone agrees there are some fundamental flaws. Most are in the amber zone, and once you are in that



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amber zone a lot of other factors come into play, things like institutional reputation.

I have seen, again and again, a sense of reassurance that funders and some reviewers take when they see that certain institutions or certain high-profile academics are involved, and then much more attention is given to reviewing less well-known institutions. I do not think it is fair that reputation should play out in that way. One key reason is that I often see very high-profile academics spread very thinly across multiple grants. What they say they will contribute to that grant is just impossible with all of the others.

Then there is the issue of wanting to have a spread of institutions with geographical diversity and diversity of expertise, and so on. It also plays into the broader diversity issue that Professor Lunn has mentioned for the kinds of academics who are getting funded. That is a longer-term issue, but we have also seen some of those issues and concerns raised in the context of funding relating to Covid.

**Professor Pearce:** There is a balance to be struck, and I do not think we can do it justice here. I absolutely agree that we should fund high quality wherever it is, and there is a need to diversify the research community. There is more talent out there than we are currently utilising. I absolutely agree with that, but the other side is that we have limited funding. I do not think we can pretend that every university is contributing at the same level to what I started with about the international impact of Scottish universities' research globally.

There is clearly a difference, and how we invest going forward needs some careful consideration. There may be space for a more differentiated model, but on a project-by-project basis we should fund the best science wherever it is.

Q123 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Good afternoon, Professors. I want to explore the student fee situation in Scotland and Scottish universities. I thought one of you or all of you—but it might take just one—could explain the current differentials between Scottish and EU students, students from the rest of the UK and international students in the fee system.

**Professor Pearce:** Maybe I could start, if I understand the question. If you are a Scottish student going to a Scottish university, your fees are paid by the Scottish Government. Previously, if you were a European student coming to a Scottish university, the fees were paid by the Scottish Government. We are capped on the number of students that we can take. We are given a quota, and we will fill that quota with the best students who apply to us.

Following Brexit, European students will become international students. If you are an international student wanting to study in a Scottish university, you pay an international fee. If you are a student from the rest of the UK wanting to study in a Scottish university, you have to pay a fee to do



that. Those fees are typically equivalent to what you would pay in an English university.

**Q124 Sally-Ann Hart:** Looking at the introduction of fees for EU students and what impact that might have on Scottish universities, EU students are about 8.5% of the total number of students in Scottish universities and the international students make up about 22%. Bearing in mind that the pull of Scottish universities is their reputation for very high-class education, very good research and development-type stuff, do you think the introduction of fees for EU students will have an impact on Scottish universities and research programmes?

**Professor Pearce:** The movement of people is fundamental to having diversity on our campuses and to bringing talent to Scotland. A lot of the European students who came to us stayed afterwards, which only enriched our society and the talent we had. Many of them would then stay on and do research as well. When there is now a fee associated with coming, inevitably we are expecting to see a decline in the number of European students. That is a concern. I don't know exactly how it will manifest itself, how it will look and what the impact will be, but are we concerned about it? Yes.

**Professor Smith:** The first part of Professor Pearce's response was focused more on undergraduates. Students have always had to pay fees at postgraduate level but at different levels. European students are moving from paying the home rate to paying the international rate. It varies by course and institution, but it is often four to five times the rate that it was previously set at. That clearly will have a massive impact on who comes, and we will see reduced numbers. They will be paying more, so how that will play out on the income stream is very uncertain. It is very difficult to know, especially in the context of the pandemic.

It is a concern, as my two colleagues have mentioned, that we will have fewer European researchers, early-career researchers, coming into the system and doing research with us and then choosing to stay and helping to facilitate collaborations with people working in other European settings, in other languages and so on.

**Professor Lunn:** The only thing to add to the first remark is that the undergraduate fees we get for home students in Scotland—from SFC rather than the home-paying students—are lower, so they are more cross-subsidised by the international students.

My biggest concern is not so much around the income side, as Professor Smith and Professor Pearce have mentioned. It may end up that you have a bigger fee if we have reduced numbers and we may make some of that money back again. It is not as big as our international income. My largest concern is about the pipeline for research. The European researchers make a very significant contribution, far more in Scotland than they do in the rest of the UK, and they like it here. They come, they stay and they contribute to the Scottish economy, not just in academia either. We have many students who stay and go into engineering and



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start up SMEs here. It will have a very negative impact on immigration of high-quality Europeans into Scotland. Yes, I think it will have a very big impact. I am most alarmed.

Q125 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Do you think the attraction is the existing fee structure rather than the reputation of the universities? Is that what you are saying?

**Professor Lunn:** No, the existing fee structure makes it affordable for Europeans, and I think they come to Scotland for a variety of reasons. Many have international country connections. We have a lot of Italian students who come to Scotland and there is a strong history of that. Their degrees are excellent in engineering; they are very good when they come. We also have a much more open system of academia than most of Europe. In most European universities you have one professor at the top and, until they die or retire, you pretty well cannot get to the top of the pile. Also it is very difficult to get to senior positions unless you are from that country.

That is almost unheard of in the majority of European countries, including France, Italy, Greece and Germany. It is very unusual, whereas here we are far more open. We recognise talent where it is, we promote it and we tend to keep it. That makes a big difference. People see a whole career when they come to Scotland. My concern about the change in fees is that we make that starting point unaffordable. We have a great track record at keeping people. Even when they go, they come back and contribute strongly to Scotland.

Q126 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Would you say that applied to non-EU international students? Do you keep non-EU international students in Scotland? Does the same not apply to them?

**Professor Lunn:** It does not apply as much in academia. We do keep non-EU students and they do go into industry, although it is much less common now that industry needs to pay to take overseas people and to pay for the visas. Europeans stay far more than the international students do. It is not particularly common to see international researchers, perhaps other than from the US. We see some from Asia, so US and Asia come through and will stay in academia here, but still not in the numbers that Europeans do.

Q127 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Professor Pearce, do you think there may be an overreliance on international students' fees if they make up 22%? Do you think there is an argument that the Scottish Government will need to review student fees, per se, if there are issues?

**Professor Pearce:** I am not sure I can give you a definitive answer about whether there is an overreliance. I will go back to the original point. What we need to do, given that we are talking about research here, is fund research properly in the first place and not rely on that cross-subsidy from other activities, whether it is commercial activities or international fees. I think that is the key point. We should be welcoming international students wholeheartedly, not just because they provide an



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income but because they enrich the diversity of our campuses and contribute significantly to our economy. I am not sure it is just about an overreliance.

**Professor Smith:** I agree with that, but the current structure creates something of a pressure to accept international applicants on to courses, which I feel is not always desirable. They bring such a large income compared to home students that there is a pressure or a desire to want to take them even if, looking at their application, they might not be the best fit or they might not have the necessary prior training and so on. I have some slight concerns about the ethics of how it plays out.

Q128 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Is that to the detriment of local students perhaps? Is that to the detriment of Scottish or UK students?

**Professor Smith:** I have never been in a situation where I would say that is to the detriment of local students. It is always great for local students to meet international students, who bring very different perspectives. It is more to the detriment of the international students who are applying. On the whole, universities are pretty good at not falling into that trap, but I feel there is a pressure there and that pressure may be growing, given current financial pressures.

**Professor Lunn:** You asked the question about Scotland revisiting the fee structure. I do not know if you were referring to the smaller home fees and the fact that the Scottish Government pay the home fees, but in my experience students are supportive of that. We have 20% of our students at Strathclyde, and we are now widening access. We hit the Scottish Government-set targets around that 10 years early. That is a great thing in society so, from a levelling-up perspective, the current situation in Scotland is hugely beneficial.

Q129 **Sally-Ann Hart:** It is about EU students as well, because people are obviously concerned about the EU students not coming. I wondered whether there should be a review of the whole fee structure system.

**Professor Lunn:** Perhaps in how we deal with the European students.

**Chair:** We are always fascinated with the principle of levelling up at Westminster, so thanks for that.

Q130 **Wendy Chamberlain:** The responses to Sally-Ann's last question probably covered what I wanted to pick up in question 11, but Professor Lunn previously picked up on mental health and the impact the last year, in particular, has had on the mental health and wellbeing of PhD students. Some of that has been reactive and put in place this year, but to what extent are universities equipped to provide support to researchers suffering poor mental health? Professor Lunn, you touched on the fact that you had direct engagement with some of your students who were undergoing crisis, so I am interested in your thoughts.

**Professor Lunn:** It is extremely difficult for universities. With the pressure that the NHS is under, the mental health services in the NHS have shrunk and become almost non-existent in some areas. We have



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knowledge of people with things like eating disorders where there has been no support whatsoever during this crisis because areas of the NHS have not operated. It has been extremely difficult.

I think universities are doing their best. They have invested in recent years in expanding the amount of professional capability they have on campuses. I am sure Glasgow is the same. We certainly have a 24-hour counselling service now, an emergency drop-in service and a rape crisis centre. We are attempting to fill a gap, but it worries me. It should not be the university's role to be the mental health support for students.

**Q131 Wendy Chamberlain:** It is not just potentially the students themselves, but there is obviously an impact on the degree of support given by line managers, tutors or people who are overseeing projects. Professor Smith, is that your experience?

**Professor Smith:** Yes, very much so. Universities have all stepped up and tried to offer more. They tend to offer some counselling services to staff as well as to students, but those support services are often time limited. Often staff and students in that situation get support for a certain period, and once that ends, as Professor Lunn said, you go into a system in which the waiting times are absolutely huge. Then you have students who are struggling without the kind of support they need and staff who are trying to provide that support, who may themselves be struggling with their own issues and who certainly do not have the training they need to be able to provide students with that support. It is a very difficult situation. I have seen a lot of my colleagues struggling with that. I have similar experiences of trying to support students and feeling like I do not have the qualifications to give the support they need.

**Q132 Chair:** What is the relationship with the research institutes? There is a different funding scheme and arrangement. I have Hutton in my constituency, for example, who are doing some ground-breaking, pioneering work. You may be familiar with it. Do you have any relationship at all with the research institutes, or is that something that exists outside your sphere of influence, relationship and interest?

**Professor Pearce:** We are quite unusual in the UK in that most research is focused in our universities. In a number of European countries you will find many more of these so-called research institutes and they are very successful. It is just not particularly a model that we have had a lot in the UK. There is increasing investment in these types of activities. As you say, the Hutton Institute is a good example, but there are others. The UK Government have invested, for example, in the Royce Institute in Manchester to look at materials. Another example is the Francis Crick Institute in London.

Given my opening remarks about the quality of research in Scotland, I think there is clearly scope to look at investment in these types of institutes and placing them in Scotland, because clearly it is a fantastic place for research.

**Q133 Chair:** I have always found it strange that there seems to be such a



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distinction between research institutes and research in universities. I have never quite understood it, and I have always been a bit mystified by the relationship. Of course it gets very complicated when it comes to the funding arrangements. The number of panicky emails and telephone calls I have done on behalf of Hutton over the last 20 years to try to get funding arrangements is quite difficult and sometimes quite concerning. Anyway, I just wanted to get your views on all of that.

**Professor Lunn:** We have a relationship with the institutes on research funding grants, so they can bid as a partner but obviously they cannot award degrees and things, so you have co-supervision of students with the institutes. In that sense, we collaborate with the institutes.

While the universities over the past nearly 20 years have had a very significant push towards research quality—we are very metrically analysed through the research excellence framework—that is not true of the institutes. If you look at the citations across the universities and compare those to the institutes, the universities are significantly better in research quality. I am not saying that is not true of pockets of the institutes, absolutely not. There are areas where they are very strong, but if you look at them across the board it is largely a lot more applied and a lot less fundamental.

**Chair:** On that maybe controversial note, we have to bring proceedings to a conclusion. That was a fascinating session and I am sure all the members of the Committee—I am looking at them and they are all shaking their heads in agreement—found it stimulating and very interesting. Thank you for that. There might be a couple of other things that we will come back to you about, maybe stuff on which we request a little bit of evidence and things that could help us, but for today, thank you once again.