The independent sector

SCIS represents approximately 31,400 pupils, 3,500 teachers and 3,000 support staff in over 70 member schools in Scotland\(^1\). Our schools are independent, including day and boarding, junior, senior and 'all through', mainstream, special needs and specialist. All are registered with the Scottish Government’s Registrar of Independent Schools, Education Scotland and, where appropriate, the Care Inspectorate and Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator.

Independent schools in Scotland form an important part of the educational framework – both in terms of mainstream schools and special needs provision. This is particularly evident in the post-16 phase where personal choices on access to qualifications, careful guidance on post-school options and preparation for the rigour and independence of tertiary education, the workplace and adult life are paramount.

We would be happy to discuss with the Committee any of the issues raised and identify appropriate witnesses from the sector.

Leaver destinations

Scottish Government figures no longer include the leaver destinations of independent school pupils (SCIS has recently started its own accumulation of this data). However, the most recent figures, from 2008-9, showed:

- 95% of independent school leavers entered recognised destinations
- 90% of independent school leavers entered full time further or higher education
  - of which 83% entered higher education and 7% further education
- 3% of independent school leavers immediately entered employment
- 2% of independent school leavers were undertaking voluntary work or gap years.

University governance

It is not our place to suggest any form of governance for independent academic institutions such as universities. They, like independent schools, are autonomous bodies with similar obligations as registered charities – although they rely heavily on central government funding. As such, and given the independent school sector’s experience of governance, we would be wary of any further Ministerial control or

direction in relation to imposing conditions on universities beyond their current obligations.

**Widening access to post-16 learning**

For many years, independent schools have been committed to widening access to their own provision of education, a process with its roots in the founding purposes of many of the schools and which has been supplemented since 2005 by the specific requirements of the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act directed towards charities that levy fees or charges\(^2\).

**Access for under-represented socio-economic groups**

When considering conditions to be placed upon higher education institutions in relation to widening access, consideration should be given to similar moves that have already taken place at school age. Independent schools have been working for years on moving from a traditional academic scholarship model to the provision of means-tested bursaries to off-set fees\(^3\). Given that this move is also a condition of the Act as passed by the Scottish Parliament, it would be an unforeseen and counter-productive measure if any decisions on widened access were at the expense of independent school pupils who may have been from more disadvantaged backgrounds and were in receipt of such financial assistance.

As such, while contextual data should be used to widen the access to higher education institutions of under-represented groups, this should be in the form of additionally funded places – as has been suggested, rather than by depriving other Scottish-educated school pupils who meet admission requirements.

**Equality of access to information**

An important issue in widening access is ensuring that young people have access to up to date and relevant information. In the lead up to university applications, personal statement workshops and interview skills workshops are standard procedure in independent schools, to ensure that pupils are as well prepared and well informed as possible about the application process. Provision should be made so that all schools or colleges are able to provide an equal standard of pre-application preparation for their pupils, or for universities to send out staff to all secondary schools and colleges to provide these sorts of workshops. Summer schools and study days, which allow school pupils from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds to visit universities and receive this sort of information, can also meet this need.

**Demystification**

Demystification of higher education is important in encouraging young people from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds to apply, and to stay on their course once they get a place. This can be achieved through offering students the chance to experience what university is like before they apply. Opportunities such as mentoring


schemes between university students and school pupils, meetings with students and academics, summer schools and study days can all help.

**Attainment levels**

Young people need to know as soon as possible what their post-16 education options are, and what they need to do to achieve these. Pupils taking their Standard Grades (or National 5) should know that these grades will be looked at when they are applying for University, or for college courses, work or training. Pupils who do not begin considering university until after they have taken their Standard Grade exams will not have the opportunity to maximise their success at this level.

It is important that exams taken at this level are not just seen as necessary to get on to Highers and Advanced Highers (or A-levels or equivalent), but as important in their own right. Pupils also need to be encouraged to think reasonably early about what they actually want to do at post-16 level, so that they do not get to that point and then realise they have not taken the right subjects, or have not achieved the grades they need. Lack of information and understanding of these things are all barriers which prevent people from under-represented backgrounds from getting into higher education. School staff have a role to play in fostering and supporting pupils’ aspirations (Plewis, 1997).

**Post-16 education and training for more vulnerable young people**

There is much that can be learned from the experience of independent special needs schools in Scotland. Dealing with a wide range of behavioural, social and emotional needs, as well as physical, there are many examples of small schools which succeed in working with pupils from a substantially disadvantaged background. Often cases where serious and applied early intervention could have made a profound difference, small focused centres of excellence are able to bring pupils back to the mainstream of education and working life – often leaving with impressive results on the SCQF scale.

The work of the Doran Review into Additional Support Needs in Scotland should be factored into the results of this Bill to ensure that learning journeys for all of Scotland’s children are as open and as fruitful as possible.

**John Edward**

**Director**