

Education and Culture Committee
Scrutiny of the 2013-14 Draft Budget

Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning

In light of recent media reports, I felt it would be helpful to update you and the Committee on our actions in relation to access to college.

It has become clear there is a real lack of understanding of the processes used by colleges in handling applications for college places. This has been most clearly exhibited in repeated attempts, most recently by Scotland's Colleges, to use course-specific waiting lists, maintained by colleges for administrative purposes, as a measure of overall demand for college places.

I have particular concerns over the quality of the data deployed in support of the claim that many thousands of young people have been turned away from colleges and left without any place in learning. Waiting lists relate to places on specific courses, not places at college generally, and lists may contain people who have taken up alternative places, have found employment or have otherwise actively chosen not to go to college. Moreover, overall demand cannot be accurately measured by aggregating diverse lists that are compiled without reference to a uniform methodology.

It is clearly in everyone's interests, not least those of prospective learners, to better understand the facts and associated issues. With that in mind, I am writing to inform you that I intend to undertake an audit of individual college waiting lists, including a detailed examination of Scotland's Colleges' data and methodology. This will seek to clarify the extent - if any - of unmet need. I will, of course, share the findings with the Committee as appropriate.

MICHAEL RUSSELL