

COMMISSION ON WIDENING ACCESS

SUBMISSION FROM PROFESSOR PETER SCOTT

Introduction

1. It is an honour to be appointed Scotland's first Commissioner for Fair Access following the recommendation made in the final report of the Commission on Widening Access and accepted by the Scottish Government. It is also a challenge. Fair access to higher education is an issue that all education systems struggle to address - here in Scotland, across the UK, throughout Europe and across the world. There are no simple solutions. Yet ensuring fair access is a key task - both in terms of ensuring everyone, regardless of social background, is able to fulfil their potential and realise their ambitions and for all citizens to be able to participate in our democratic society (so it is not an exaggeration to regard fair access as a 'human right' in the 21st century); and also in terms of using the skills of the whole population, not simply a section of that population, to develop a dynamic and prosperous economy (because universities and colleges are key players in building the 'knowledge economy').
2. The work of the Commissioner will build on the work of the Commission which has provided a clear road-map to achieve the Scottish Government's ambition of equality of access. The Commission made a large number of recommendations, many of which require action by the Commissioner. That action will predominantly take the form of persuasion - stimulating public debate about 'fair access'; encouraging research into best practice; assisting with the coordination of the policies adopted, and decisions taken, by the Scottish Government and public agencies; offering a strategic lead to institutions; and, crucially, supporting the work of the very many dedicated professionals already engaged in a wide variety of activities designed to promote fair access. The Commissioner has no regulatory powers, which is a strength rather than a weakness because it enables me to act as a facilitator and 'honest broker'.

General comments

3. The role of the Commissioner is to promote fair access - for all students regardless of their social backgrounds and other characteristics. It is not to encourage experiments in social engineering. The goal is to produce a 'level playing field' not to favour one group of potential students at the expense of other groups. However, the evidence is clear. In Scotland, as in nearly every country with a developed system of higher and further education, young people from more socially advantaged backgrounds are much more likely to participate than those from less advantaged backgrounds. Therefore it is right for the Scottish Government to focus its efforts on increasing participation by those from these less advantaged groups, although it is also important to recognise that there may be other, less obvious, forms of disadvantage (for example, older students, those with a disability or those who can only study part-time).
4. This access gap exists regardless of the overall level of participation (the size of the system) and of the funding arrangements (free, low or high tuition). It would be premature for me to comment in any detail on the debates that are currently taking place about how fair access can be best achieved in the particular circumstances that

apply in Scotland, although I am aware of these debates. At this stage I would offer only four comments.

5. The first is that a vigorous debate on these issues should be encouraged. Only through vigorous debate can a consensus be arrived at on the best ways forward, and general support for that consensus strengthened; and, where consensus cannot be achieved, at any rate there will be clearer understanding of the differences that remain.
6. The second is that care needs to be taken with comparisons across the UK that seem to suggest that one nation is doing 'better' than another. For example, if the access gap between the most advantaged and least advantaged students in universities is compared, it appears that the 4:1 gap in Scotland is wider than the gap in England (2.4:1). But this is largely explained by the fact that the colleges play a much smaller role in higher education in England, and universities a correspondingly larger role. In England post-1992 universities enrol a higher proportion of students and also continue to offer Higher Nationals (and the two-year equivalent, Foundation degrees). So it is not a like-for-like comparison. Overall Scotland has the highest level of higher education participation in the UK.
7. The third is that some of the issues that are being debated are neither new nor unique to Scotland.
 - The most lively debate is about 'displacement' - whether, as a result of efforts to recruit more students from socially disadvantaged groups and the overall cap on student numbers other potential students are being denied places. There are two issues - the question of 'fairness' given the historically much lower levels of participation by students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the extent to which action can reasonably be taken to address that access gap; and the particular effect of the cap. Even when there is no formal cap (as is now the case in England), there will always be limits on the capacity of institutions to admit students - for example, space limitations especially in equipment intensive subjects but also some subjects subject to professional accreditation. In other words there will always be capacity constraints. This means that, if efforts to recruit more students from disadvantaged groups are successful, places for other students will potentially be reduced - which raises the prospect of the so-called 'squeezed middle'. That potentially happens in all higher education systems, even those that are formally 'open access'. Although an increase in funded places, which is a political decision, may mitigate the dilemma, it cannot make it disappear entirely.
 - A related concern may be that, while the number of Scots domiciled students and also students from the European Union, apart from the rest of the UK, (who enjoy free tuition) is capped, the number of students from the rest of the UK (who pay fees) is not. Although rUK students fill additional places and, therefore, are not displacing Scots domiciled students (unlike other-EU students, potentially), it is possible that levels of attainment required by the former will be different from the levels required by the latter. But this has been true in the case of students from outside the EU for more than half a century, and generally the concern has been that the fees paid by international students have subsidised 'home' students. The fact that in aggregate the ratio between applications and places, the offer rate, is lower for Scots students than rUK students is not necessarily conclusive proof that

attainment levels are diverging on a significant scale, without more detailed analysis of the subject choices and qualification status of both groups.

8. The final comment - perhaps a footnote - is my personal commitment to maintaining free access to higher education. In my view, in the long term it is impossible to have fair access without free access. There may be superficial attractions in a fee-based system, because resources can then be recycled into programmes to promote wider participation by under-represented groups. But the overall effect of a fee-based system is to strengthen the view that higher education is a private good and to weaken the view that, although conferring substantial advantages on individual students, higher education is also a public good that confers benefits on the whole of society. In the end this shift weakens the case for fair access, except as a politically enforced compensatory strategy, as well as seeping into the priorities and behaviour of institutions:

More detailed proposals

9. The Commission made a large number of recommendations. At this stage I would like to highlight only three - the proposal to establish access thresholds, which I link with contextualised admissions; the importance of articulation; and the use of Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) to set targets.

Access thresholds and contextualised admissions

10. The proposal to establish access thresholds is bold. It will clearly affect universities in different ways. Although all universities have courses that are in high demand, the disparity between access thresholds and what might be called supply-and-demand thresholds is likely to be less in post-1992 than in longer established universities. Potentially this will lead to greater dilemmas for more selective universities because they would be in the position of preferring applicants with formally inferior qualifications. However, if access to high-demand courses is simply rationed by admitting without exception applicants with the best qualifications, the effect will be a continuing strong bias in favour of applicants from more socially advantaged background, who benefit from stronger family, peer and community support and from attending higher-performing schools.
11. Some of the concerns about access thresholds might be mitigated by linking them to the broader idea of contextualised admissions, which are emphasised in the Commission's Final Report but can also be seen as long-standing good practice in universities. The principle is that institutions should establish thresholds for individual courses in terms of formal qualifications - and, more broadly, adequate educational preparation - that are sufficiently demanding to ensure that students can successfully complete these courses and benefit from the experience. There is no point setting students up to fail, although research suggests that students who come through access routes, given the right support, perform as well as those with more conventional entry qualifications. Over-and-above these formal thresholds universities should take into account a range of other factors. The title of Universities Scotland's recent report - 'Futures not Backgrounds' - emphasises that in admitting students universities are not rewarding past success but assessing future potential. Seen in this light access thresholds can be seen as one, although an important, element in contextualised admissions.

Articulation

12. The strength of the colleges is a notable feature of Scottish higher education and is the major reason that Scotland's overall participation rate is the highest in the UK. Policies that had the, maybe unintended, effect of undermining their status and independence by placing them in a more subordinate relationship to universities, as arguably is the case in England, would be retrograde. Similarly HNs are respected vocational qualifications in their own right and strongly supported by employers. Policies that had the effect of treating them more as 'feeder' courses leading to Bachelors' courses in universities would also be retrograde. But both potentially can make articulation more difficult.
13. There is clearly a need to improve articulation arrangements between colleges and universities, in Scotland, as there is everywhere. For many HN students, particularly perhaps those studying more generic subjects such as business, HNs represent one stage in a longer learner journey. The risks is that, if these students are required to prolong their journeys through higher education (without always compelling educational justification on a detailed course-by-course basis), their journeys will be disrupted, leading to a potential erosion of fair access - and also that resources will be wasted through duplication, leading to a loss of valuable funded places. There are no simple answers. It is perhaps a question of striking the right balance.

SIMD

14. The third issue is the use of SIMD to determine fair access targets in outcome agreements between the Scottish Funding Council and institutions, and also to set national targets. Measurable targets are clearly necessary and the overall targets, although challenging, strike me as realistic and achievable. SIMD is also a sophisticated metric. Of course, there are drawbacks to all metrics, and care must be taken to monitor for unintended, and especially perverse, consequences. All metrics based on some version of postcodes will produce 'false positives / negatives', i.e. socially advantaged students living in officially designated deprived areas and, more worryingly, socially disadvantaged students living in other areas (and the Commission recognised this problem with regard to more sparsely populated / rural areas). But there is no way in which this 'postcode lottery' can be avoided entirely.
15. It is argued that tracking individuals rather than targeting deprived areas would be more accurate, although this poses issues in terms of data protection and may also depend to some extent on self-reporting by applicants. However, although meeting SFC outcome agreement and national targets are very important drivers of fair access policies of institutions, they should not entirely determine these policies. Through their use of contextualised admissions, institutions can reach out to all socially disadvantaged students, whether or not they 'count' towards meeting particular targets.

Conclusion

16. I recognise there are several other important issues on which I have not commented at this stage, particularly with regard to student funding and support.

17. I would like to end with two thoughts. The first is that achieving fair access should be a strategic goal for all institutions. Although their individual policies will inevitably differ, fair access should never be a peripheral concern - or seen as a task predominantly for only a sub-set of institutions. The second is, although inequalities in access reflect deeper structural inequalities and can only be fully addressed by longer-term changes in attitudes and aspirations, it is important to maintain a sense of urgency by focusing on challenging but achievable goals (and also to ensure that all policies, across Government, are access-proofed).