



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP
Minister for Further Education, Higher
Education and Science

T3.40
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP
Direct Tel: 0131 348 5222
Fax: 0131 348 5600
es.committee@parliament.scot

6th June 2018

Dear Shirley-Anne

I am writing to request annual progress reports to the Committee on widening access. This request is based on the Committee's recent scrutiny of the implementation of the Scottish Government's widening access policy. This has included:

- an informal meeting with students and staff from six Higher Education Institutions
- formal evidence from the Commissioner for Fair Access;
- formal evidence from you and your officials; and
- formal evidence from a selection of universities alongside Universities Scotland.

Issues explored in questioning by members have included:

- the need for consistent early interventions to support young people to consider applying to university;
- addressing the barriers that can be faced in understanding the application process;
- the availability of subject choices in schools including in deprived areas;
- the criteria widening access policy is based upon, specifically SIMD;
- the cap on the number of funded places for Scottish students seeking to study at Scottish universities; and
- the funding mechanisms supporting the implementation of widening access policy.

The Committee has agreed that, based on the evidence it has heard, it wishes to keep a watching brief on the implementation of this policy. To inform this scrutiny, I am writing to you, coping in Universities Scotland and the Commissioner to request

annual updates on the progress towards the targets and milestones set out by the Scottish Government in response to the Commission for Widening Access report.

The Committee would also appreciate annual updates on other key considerations for the Government, universities and the Commissioner. Specifically the Committee seeks details on the extent to which:

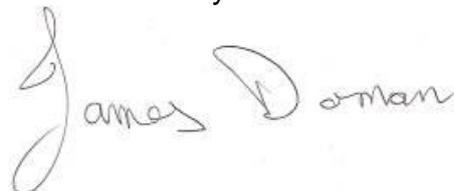
- a whole education sector approach is being taken forward;
- relevant data to support widening access is available to track progress and support implementation of the Commission's recommendations, such as higher achievement levels by the end of S6;
- progress has been made towards the development of a unique learner number or other new measures for assessing deprivation and monitoring attainment;
- adequate funding is available to support the implementation of the Commission's recommendations; and
- the Commissioner's work and the Government's work (including additional recommendations made or working groups chaired etc) are aligned with each other and are focussed on meeting the Commission recommendations.

The Committee would appreciate it if you could indicate when you consider would be the best point in the year to produce these progress reports. The Committee has no desire to increase workloads given the focus should be on widening access. If the Commissioner's annual report or other reporting mechanisms will include some of the information requested by the Committee update reports could be submitted to the Committee at that stage. Alternatively the annual updates could be sent to the Committee close to the date of the publication of figures released by the Scottish Funding Council on student numbers broken down by SIMD. This would enable the Committee to assess progress reports alongside these figures.

For completeness, the Committee will also consider other statistics each year based on a SPICe analysis it has commissioned. This will include looking at Higher Education Statistics Agency statistics on students in relation to non-continuation of study after first year and return after a year away from study. It will also include UCAS statistics on applications to university broken down by SIMD.

I should be grateful if you could discuss the request in this letter with the Commissioner and Universities Scotland and respond to indicate when the Committee can expect the first set of progress reports.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James Dornan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

**JAMES DORNAN MSP
CONVENER**