EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

AGENDA

6th Meeting, 2018 (Session 5)

Wednesday 21 February 2018

The Committee will meet at 10.00 am in the Robert Burns Room (CR1).

1. **Decision to take items in private:** The Committee will decide whether to take agenda items 3 and 4 in private.

2. **Commissioner for Fair Access:** The Committee will take evidence from:

    Sir Professor Peter Scott, Commissioner for Fair Access;

    Lynn MacMillan, Strategic Lead Access to Higher Education, Scottish Government.

3. **Review of evidence:** The Committee will consider the evidence it heard earlier.

4. **Work programme:** The Committee will consider its work programme.

The papers for this meeting are as follows—

<u>Agenda Item 2</u>

SPICe Briefing paper   ES/S5/18/6/1

Submission pack   ES/S5/18/6/2

<u>Agenda Item 4</u>

PRIVATE PAPER   ES/S5/18/6/3 (P)

Education and Skills Committee

6th Meeting, 2018 (Session 5), Wednesday 21 February 2018

Commissioner for Fair Access

INTRODUCTION

At this meeting, the Committee will hear from Professor Sir Peter Scott, the Commissioner for Fair Access. He was appointed to this role by the Scottish Government on 16 December 2016. This paper outlines the intention in establishing this position and how this has developed since the Commissioner took up this appointment. It then considers the targets for widening access that have been established and the key areas of work that the Commissioner has been focusing on since taking up post.

BACKGROUND

The Scottish Government in the [Programme for Government 2014-15](#) set out a renewed commitment to widening access to university. In the [statement](#) accompanying it, the First Minister set out the following policy commitment:

> "…a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should by the time she or he leaves school have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities".

The Scottish Government established the Commission on Widening Access ("the Commission") in 2015 to advise the Scottish Ministers on what is required to meet this ambition. The Commission's work was recognised as operating in a wider Scottish policy context, that it should be mindful of, which includes:

- Free tuition for eligible full time students at Scottish HEIs
- Curriculum for Excellence
- Improving school attainment
- Reform to the post-16 education system
- The Developing the Young Workforce programme

The Commission's final report [*A Blueprint for Fairness*](#) ("the Blueprint") was published on 14 March 2016. It laid out the importance of working to achieve equal access to higher education as both a social and economic good for Scottish society. Both the [interim report](#), published in November 2015, and the final report highlight the need for systemic change to ensure fair access to HEIs.

The Blueprint report included 34 recommendations (copied at Annexe A) which were framed around four overarching themes:

1. A whole system approach – including someone having oversight of the whole education sector and developing and improving access activity.

2. Embracing new talent – through flexible transitions, bridging programmes, articulation and admissions.

3. Supporting our learners – looking across: early years; school attainment; information/advice/guidance; access to key subjects; student finance; retention; support for people with care experience; and supporting professionals.

4. The architecture to support fair access – funding, regulation, better use of data, measures to identify access learners and targets to measure progress

The Scottish Government has charted which recommendations were for which body. This indicates that: four were for the Commissioner (discussed further below); 11 were for the Scottish Government, either alone or with others; 14 were for the SFC (along or in partnership); and 10 were for universities.

Given the timing of the publication of the Blueprint report (March 2016), the Scottish Government did not produce a document at the time that set out its planned activity and formal response to the Blueprints recommendations. However, formal support for the recommendations was made through a Scottish Government motion heard in the Chamber on 16 June 2016 where the Scottish Parliament was asked to agree that the Scottish Government should implement the Commission's recommendations.

The Remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access

The Commission on Widening Access in both its interim and final reports reflected that socio-economic inequality in higher education is an issue that spans the whole education system and beyond. In recognition of this being a "whole system" issue, the first recommendation in the Blueprint report was that there should be a Commissioner for Fair Access ("the Commissioner").

The Blueprint report noted that: "debate on equal access often centres on what more universities can do" and primary strategic responsibility for access rests with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC):

"We believe that these arrangements are insufficient. The SFC has jurisdiction only for post-16 education bodies, with no locus over the other parts of the system with vital roles to play. This makes it difficult to ensure that the responsibility for driving progress is shared right across the education system. Moreover as one of the key contributors to access policy and principal funders of access programmes, we believe that the SFC, as well as the Scottish Government, should themselves be held to account for progress."

The Blueprint report also noted a lack of coherence and coordination between activities being pursued in different settings. The view was that, if the recommendations made by the Commission are to be achieved, it is vital that there is someone who can take on this strategic overview of the whole system:

> "For these reasons we believe it is important that this strategic void be filled by an individual, reporting to Scottish Ministers, with the authority to hold all parts of the system, including policymakers, to account for progress. We would also expect such an individual to take a leadership role in advancing equal access, for example through working with others to provide impartial, evidence based policy advice and to support the development of a stronger evidence base through the commissioning and publication of independent research."

Below are the recommendations from the Blueprint report that are relevant to the role of the Commissioner for Fair Access. How the role has evolved in practice will be reviewed when considering [activities in year one](#) and [delivering the Blueprint recommendations](#).

Recommendation 1 – the Commissioner should: be an advocate for access; hold to account those with a role to play in achieving equal access; coordinate and prioritise a more substantial evidence base on relevant issues; and publish an annual report to Ministers outlining their view on progress made toward equal access.

Recommendation 2 – by 2018, work with experts to publish a Scottish Framework for Fair Access that identifies the most impactful forms of access activity at each stage of the learner journey, from early learning through to higher education and provide best practice guidelines on its delivery and evaluation.

Recommendation 13 – engage with those compiling key university rankings to ensure greater priority is given to socioeconomic diversity within the rankings and to ensure that institutions who take the actions necessary to achieve fair access are not penalised.

Recommendation 19 – the Commissioner should commission research, within three months of appointment, to assess how student finance impacts on the participation of disadvantaged learners in higher education. The research should consider the extent to which student finance and the balance of student loans and bursary funding impacts on access, retention and choice of institution; and also international practice on student finance and its impact on access and retention.

Recommendation 33 – the Commissioner should consider what further work is required to support equal access for other groups of learners and within specific degree subjects and what is required to support equal outcomes after study for those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with a care experience.

THEME 1: APPOINTMENT OF THE COMMISSIONER FOR FAIR ACCESS

The announcement of the first Commissioner for Fair Access was made by the Scottish Government on 16 December 2016. Professor Sir Peter Scott took up this appointment from January 2017. When giving evidence for the first time to this Committee on 25 January 2017, Peter Scott explained that he was only contracted to perform this role between three-to-five days each month. However, he suggested that in practice the work would take up more time than that. His view was that he would spend "at least five days a month physically in Scotland" while "I might spend as much time again thinking, reading and communicating with people."

In terms of the role he expected to play, the Commissioner suggested that he would play a lead role in coordinating and reporting on progress towards equal access "to inform development of effective policy at national, regional and institutional level". He clarified that he would be building on the work done by the Commission on Widening Access, "which has provided a clear road-map to achieve the Scottish Government's ambition of equality of access." He went on to say:

> "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."

Interestingly, the Scottish Government has stressed that his role is independent of government. However, he holds no statutory powers, so he is not empowered to work as a regulator or ombudsman. The suggestion laid out in the Blueprint report was that the role would operate in a similar way to the statutory Commissioner for Children and Young People, although it was recognised that there were other ways to establish the role.

Without formal regulatory powers, it is not clear how the Commission can hold the Scottish Government, the SFC and other education stakeholders to account. On this issue, Peter Scott suggested in evidence to this Committee last year that not holding any regulatory powers is: "…a strength, rather than a weakness, because it enables me to act as a facilitator and 'honest broker'"

Members may wish to consider asking the Commissioner:

- **How, he can effectively perform his given the limited time he is able to be in Scotland meeting with relevant stakeholders.**

- **How the Commissioner can ensure that his focus remains external to and impartial in relation to the Scottish Government, SFC and other relevant education stakeholders.**

THEME 2: TARGETS ON WIDENING ACCESS

An important context in which the Commissioner is working is the targets that were established through the Blueprint report (at recommendation 32):

> By 2030, students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent 20 per cent of entrants to higher education. Equality of access should be seen in both the college sector and the university sector
>
> To drive progress toward this goal:
>
> - By 2021, students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 16 per cent of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities as a whole.
>
> - By 2021, students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10 per cent of full-time first degree entrants to every individual Scottish university.
>
> - By 2026, students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 18 per cent of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities as a whole.
>
> - In 2022, the target of 10 per cent for individual Scottish universities should be reviewed and a higher level target should be considered for the subsequent years.

To date, one statistical report has been produced, by the Scottish Funding Council, with data on these specific targets. These data were for academic year 2015-16, which is before the Commission for Widening Access produced its report and the Commissioner for Fair Access was appointed. The information offered is not, therefore, helpful in allowing us to track what progress has been made since the policy commitment to widening access was established. What it does potentially offer is a baseline measure that can be returned to in future years to measure progress.

What the report shows is:

- In 2015-16, 14 per cent of Scottish domiciled full time first degree entrants to study at Scottish universities were from the 20 per cent most deprived areas. An increase of two percentage points is required to meet the interim target of 16 per cent by 2021.

- For entrants to all undergraduate higher education (not just full time first degree programmes) the proportion who were from the 20 per cent most deprived areas was 17.7 per cent in 2015-16.

Members may wish to discuss with the Commissioner his views on:

- **The relevance and usefulness of the targets that are being pursued**
- **Whether the higher education sector has appropriate resources (budgets and staffing) in place to deliver the above targets**

Data Issues

Data on the proportion of entrants from the most deprived areas to study for a full time first degree at each individual Scottish university is provided at Annexe B. This shows where each individual university was in academic year 2015-16, so can show how much each individual university has to achieve to meet the 2021 target of 10 per cent of entrants being from the 20 per cent most deprived areas.

The Committee heard from members of the Commission on Widening Access at its meeting on 25 January 2017. At that meeting it was noted that there are limits to the current available data and concern about the significant focus given to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). As Professor Petra Wend explained:

> "We [the Commission] realised that SIMD is not the right way to measure deprivation, given that two out of three deprived children live in non-SIMD 20 areas. One of our recommendations is that a unique learner number should be allocated to every child, whereby we could follow the child's progression through life and measure the success of our interventions in the long term. We are not there yet; we have not even started, so in the absence of that approach our targets were about SIMD."

The Committee heard similar concerns about the currently available data and limits of relying solely on SIMD as the main measure of deprivation when visiting informally with higher education institutions in Glasgow on 15 January 2018. In this regard, the Commissioner has a role under Blueprint recommendation 1 to "coordinate and prioritise a more substantial evidence base on relevant issues".

Members may wish to discuss with the Commissioner:

- **What work he may be doing to coordinate and prioritise a more substantial evidence base, including the development of other indicators and measures, to support his work on fair access**
- **The strengths and limitations of the focus on those in the most deprived areas of Scotland (SIMD)**

THEME 3: ACTIVITIES IN YEAR ONE

The Scottish Government holds information on the activities of the Commissioner. It provides links to a number of speeches and talks as well as discussion papers. All seem to focus on the post-16 education setting and the website itself links his work to two related policy areas: colleges and universities.

Looking briefly at the four discussion papers, these have focused on:

- League tables – Recommendation 13 in the Blueprint report proposed that the Commissioner engage with those compiling university rankings to ensure greater priority was given to socioeconomic diversity and that those institutions that prioritise widening access are not penalised. His commentary suggests the need for more effort to measure fair access in current league tables. He also suggests that there is the potential to develop a specific league table focusing on 'fair access'.
- Contextual admissions – Recommendations 11 and 12 in the Blueprint report relate directly to contextual admissions, and are for universities to prioritise. The Commissioner's commentary notes the importance of accessibility and transparency in how contextual admissions operate and also greater clarity on the rationale for their use.
- UCAS applications, offers and acceptances – Recommendation 32 sets out a range of targets on widening access to be achieved both nationally and by individual university. This paper looks at trends in UCAS applications, offers and acceptances. The commentary from the Commissioner reflects on the value of the UCAS data and the implications for different universities that are more or less successful at 'widening access'.
- Retention, outcomes and destinations – the Blueprint report incorporated retention into several of its recommendations (8, 19, 24, 26, 30), while recommendation 33 included a proposal that the Commissioner look at inequalities in outcome and destinations. This paper presents data on retention, outcomes and destinations. The commentary focuses on different approaches that could be taken to address current failures in outcomes. These are: investing further in supporting students; cherry pick entrants; or make the culture of higher education more class-inclusive.

In addition to these discussion documents, the first annual report from the Commissioner: *Laying the Foundations for Fair Access* was published in December 2017. The foreword by the Commissioner points out that this is his first report as "Commissioner for Fair Access to higher education". It recognises other policy activity taking place alongside his appointment e.g. the Scottish Government's work on the 15-24 year old Learner Journey, work pursued by the SFC Access and Inclusion Committee and the work being done by colleges and universities to implement the recommendations from the Blueprint.

Chapters in the annual report are given over to: the funding of higher education, stimulating demand for higher education; the role of colleges; articulation and flexible pathways; contextual admissions; measures of under-representation; and building practitioner and research communities. The annual report also includes 23 recommendations (presented at Annexe C) for further consideration by the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council and universities. These are in addition to the 34 recommendations laid out in the Blueprint report.

Members may wish to discuss with the Commissioner:

- **Why he brought forward so many additional new recommendations, in addition to those in the Blueprint report and what the status is of these recommmendations**
- **The rationale for focusing his discussion papers and the recommendations in his first annual report on post-16 education; and whether in future he will be turning attention to other aspects of education.**
- **The steps that he intends to take to keep track of progress in relation both to suggestions made in discussion papers and recommendations laid out in his annual report.**

THEME 4: DELIVERING THE BLUEPRINT RECOMMENDATIONS

To explore where the Commissioner's work to date has matched up with the relevant recommendations laid out in the Blueprint report, the table below indicates in brief for each recommendation the action that has been taken (and reported on) to date.

	Recommendation	Action
1	Advocate for access	Includes speeches, discussion papers and annual report
1	Hold to account those with a role to play in achieving equal access	Production of 23 recommendations in the annual report for SG, SFC and universities
1	Coordinate and prioritise a more substantial evidence base on relevant issues	Not clear
1	Publish an annual report on progress towards equal access	Published December 2017
2	Publish Scottish Framework for Fair Access by 2018	Work to develop the framework is being led by the Commissioner for Fair Access via a [Framework for Fair Access Development Group](#), which will produce a first version (no date given).
13	Engage with those compiling key university rankings to ensure a focus on fair access is not penalised	See discussion paper [league tables](#)
19	Commission research, within three months of appointment, to assess how student finance impacts on	Commissioner did not wish to pursue research without a clear purpose. The [independent review of student support](#) was published in November

	participation of disadvantaged learners in higher education	2017. To date there has been no official response to this from the Commissioner or SG.
33	Consider what further work is required to support equal access for other groups of learners and within specific degree subjects	Not clear
33	Consider what is required to support equal outcomes after study for those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with a care experience	See discussion paper retention, outcomes and destinations

The widening access targets (discussed above) play an important part in the context within which the Commissioner is working. This perhaps explains why the activity to date has focused so much on what is happening right now in higher education, and with this making changes to how colleges (to some extent) and universities (in the main) operate.

However, the intention set out in the Blueprint report of there being a Commissioner for Fair Access was that they would look at what is happening, what needs to change, and what ways to make connections across the whole education setting, not just at what is happening within post-16 education.

It looks, however, as though that whole systems focus is being driven instead by the Scottish Government. In its report on progress toward implementing the Blueprint report recommendations, it notes:

> "It is right and proper that different parts of the education system, the Scottish Government, its agencies and the Commissioner have all had space to establish their thinking on how best to implement the recommendations. That said, the Commission made clear that a system wide effort is needed to deliver progress and that duplication and lack of coordination are genuine issues that need to be tackled as part of the implementation effort.

> The Government is therefore bringing together a Delivery Group to coordinate and monitor progress with implementation across all parts of the system… In recognition of the importance that the Scottish Government places on this work, the Delivery Group will be chaired by the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science."

A similar shift seems to be happening in relation to the final recommendation in the Blueprint report (recommendation 34), which was that the Scottish Government should produce a report after a year on progress against those recommendations that have been accepted. Thereafter annual reporting on progress should fall to the Commissioner for Fair Access.

In May 2017, the Scottish Government produced a report: *Implementing a 'Blueprint for Fairness'* which set out measures being taken to implement the recommendations made in the Blueprint report, as well as those that were to be pursued next. Following that, in December 2017, the Commissioner for Fair Access produced his first annual report within which he explains how annual reporting is to be delivered in future years:

> "One of the proposals made by the Commission on Widening Access was that the Commissioner's annual report should report on progress against its recommendations. A separate mechanism has been established to oversee this detailed monitoring; the Access Delivery Group chaired by the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science. I think it is appropriate that the Scottish Government, rather than the Commissioner, should monitor the delivery of the Commission's recommendations. This has allowed me to take a broader, and more open, view of progress and also to introduce new themes to the access debate in Scotland"

Members may wish to discuss with the Commissioner:

- **Progress against the Blueprint recommendations, where the action being taken is not clear**
- **Whether there are specific activities, not yet published, that will be priorities for action in 2018**
- **What progress has been made on the development of the Framework for Fair Access**

Suzi Macpherson
SPICe Research
15 February 2018

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

ANNEXE A: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE BLUEPRINT FOR FAIRNESS

NB: recommendations for the Commissioner are highlighted in green.

Recommendation 1: The Scottish Government should appoint a Commissioner for Fair Access by the end of 2016 to:

- Lead cohesive and system wide efforts to drive fair access in Scotland; acting as an advocate for access for disadvantaged learners and holding to account those with a role to play in achieving equal access.

- Coordinate and prioritise the development of a more substantial evidence base on the issues most pertinent to fair access, including the commissioning and publication of independent research. The Scottish Government should ensure an appropriate annual budget is made available to support this work.

- Publish, annually, a report to Ministers outlining the Commissioner's views on progress towards equal access in Scotland to inform development of effective policy at national, regional and institutional level.

Recommendation 2: By 2018, the Commissioner for Fair Access, working with experts, should publish a Scottish Framework for Fair Access. This authoritative, evidence based framework should identify the most impactful forms of access activity at each stage of the learner journey, from early learning through to higher education and provide best practice guidelines on its delivery and evaluation.

Recommendation 3: Public funding for access programmes - either through specific external funding or funding from core budgets - should focus on programmes that are consistent with the Scottish Framework for Fair Access.

Recommendation 4: Universities, colleges, local authorities, schools, the SFC funded access programmes and early years providers should work together to deliver a coordinated approach to access which removes duplication and provides a coherent and comprehensive offer to learners. This should include:

- The development of mechanisms by which access programmes undertaken at one institution, or in one part of the country, can be recognised by other institutions, while also serving institutional and local needs. Credit rating programmes on the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) should be considered where appropriate.

Recommendation 5: Universities should ensure their admissions processes and entry requirements are based on a strong educational rationale and are not unnecessarily prescriptive, to the detriment of learners who take advantage of the availability of a more flexible range of pathways. This should be monitored by the SFC through the outcome agreement process.

Recommendation 6: The Scottish Government, working with key stakeholders, should ensure the key transitions phases around SCQF levels 6 to 8 are better used to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with the qualifications and experiences required to support fair access.

Recommendation 7: The Scottish Funding Council, working with professionals, should develop a model of how bridging programmes can be expanded nationally to match need.

- Given the clear benefits to the learner, the model should ensure that academic credit awarded through the completion of such programmes is transferrable between universities.

- Successful completion of such programmes may form one of the conditions of the access thresholds to be developed in line with Recommendation 11.

- This model should have particular regard to the evidence that bridging programmes are especially beneficial when delivered earlier in the education journey.

Recommendation 8: The SFC should seek more demanding articulation targets from those universities that have not traditionally been significant players in articulation.

- These targets should have a clear focus on the benefits, both to learners and the public purse, of awarding full credit for prior study.

- In establishing new articulation pathways, colleges and HEIs should build upon best practice models already in place to secure the curricular alignment necessary to ensure that learners are equipped with the necessary prior learning and academic skills to enable them to succeed in degree level study.

- For the purposes of more effective IAG, the SFC should develop, or commission, an articulation 'map', setting out all of the available pathways across Scotland.

Recommendation 9: Universities, colleges and the SFC should closely monitor the expansion of articulation to ensure it continues to support disadvantaged learners to progress to degree level study. Should this not be the case a proportion of articulation places should be prioritised for disadvantaged learners.

Recommendation 10: The Scottish Funding Council, working with HEIs and colleges, should explore more efficient, flexible and learner centred models of articulation which provide learners with the choice of a broader range of institutions and courses.

Recommendation 11: By 2019 all universities should set access thresholds for all degree programmes against which learners from the most deprived backgrounds should be assessed. These access thresholds should be separate to standard entrance requirements and set as ambitiously as possible, at a level which accurately reflects the minimum academic standard and subject knowledge necessary to successfully complete a degree programme.

- The impact of access thresholds and wider contextual admissions policies should be monitored and evaluated by the SFC as part of the outcome agreement process. In particular, the SFC should monitor the extent to which access thresholds differ from standard requirements, the number of applicants receiving adjusted offers and whether the introduction of access thresholds leads to any unintended consequences.

- Should the access threshold fail to deliver the intended outcomes by the end of 2022, Ministers should consider options for providing disadvantaged learners who meet a certain level of attainment with an entitlement to the offer of a place in a university.

- The implementation of access thresholds and more robust arrangements for monitoring and evaluation of impact will make an important contribution to the emerging evidence base in this area. Universities should therefore continually refine their contextual admissions policies and, where necessary, access thresholds in line with this evidence.

Recommendation 12: All Universities should be as open and transparent as possible over their use of access thresholds and wider contextual admissions policies. In particular, they should seek to maximise applications from disadvantaged learners by proactively promoting the access thresholds to the relevant schools, pupils, parents, local authorities and teachers.

Recommendation 13: The Commissioner for Fair Access should engage with those compiling key university rankings to ensure greater priority is given to socioeconomic diversity within the rankings and to ensure that institutions who take the actions necessary to achieve fair access are not penalised.

Recommendation 14: The SFC should undertake an independent review of the processes - such as personal statements and interviews - that are used to evaluate non-academic factors in applications, with the aim of assessing whether, and to what extent, they unfairly disadvantage access applicants.

- This review should also consider whether there are other processes or assessment techniques that would increase fairness and more accurately evaluate the potential of applicants. The outcome of the review should be reported to the Commissioner for Fair Access.

Recommendation 15: Universities and colleges should increase engagement with our youngest children and their families as part of the provision of a coordinated package of support for those in our most deprived communities in line with Recommendation 4.

Recommendation 16: Universities, working with schools, should take greater responsibility for the development of the pool of applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds by delivering academically based programmes to support highly able learners, who are at risk of not fulfilling their academic potential.

Recommendation 17: SDS and schools should work together to provide a more coordinated, tailored offer of information, advice and guidance to disadvantaged learners at key transition phases throughout their education. Specifically:

- SDS should ensure that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are provided with one-to-one personal interviews, not just when making subject choices, but also at all key transition stages including P7 / S1.

Schools should:

- Identify a lead person to coordinate links with fair access programmes and to provide direction to key sources of information on student support and the higher education admissions process. Keep parents informed of key decisions and transition phases throughout the learner journey, to ensure that they are equipped with the information necessary to support learners to make informed decisions

- Consider the role that universities, SFC funded access programmes and mentoring schemes can play in providing IAG.

Recommendation 18: Universities, colleges and local authorities should work together to provide access to a range of Higher and Advanced Higher subjects, which ensures that those from disadvantaged backgrounds or living in rural areas are not restricted in their ability to access higher education by the subject choices available to them.

Recommendation 19: The Commissioner for Fair Access should commission research, within three months of appointment, to assess how student finance impacts on the participation of disadvantaged learners in higher education. This research should consider in particular:

- Whether, and to what extent, levels of student finance impact upon access, retention and choice of institution.

- Whether, and to what extent, the balance between loan and bursary impacts upon access, retention and choice of institution.

- International practice on student finance and the impact this has on access and retention.

Recommendation 20: Disadvantaged learners and their parents should be provided with clear, accurate information on both the availability of student finance and the conditions for repayment. This should be taken forward by the bodies identified in Recommendation 17 and the Student Awards Agency Scotland.

Recommendation 21: By 2017, those with a care experience, who meet the access threshold, should be entitled to the offer of a place at a Scottish university. Entitlement should also apply to those with a care experience who have had to take a break from higher education and wish to return. Learners should be assessed at the minimum entry levels in 2017 and 2018 and the access thresholds thereafter.

A guaranteed offer of a place in itself is insufficient and we must also support those with care experience to access and sustain this opportunity through improved financial support and more flexibility within the system.

Recommendation 22: The Scottish Government should replace student living costs loans with a non-repayable bursary and provide a more flexible package of student support for learners with a care experience from academic year 2017/18. This should include:

- Amending the previous study rules to allow those with a care experience more than one extra year of full funding where circumstances require this.

- Options for those with a care experience to extend a year of their course to complete it part-time over two years with full funding, similar to the arrangements already in place for those with disabilities and elite athletes.

Recommendation 23: The Scottish Government should develop an approach to allow those with a care experience to be identified from early years to post-school and on to employment to enable additional support, for example, a marker or flag. Young people with care experience must be included in the development of how this would be used and shared.

Recommendation 24: The SFC should review the best use of its funds, specifically the Access and Retention Fund, to deliver the implementation of the Commission's recommendations.

Recommendation 25: The SFC should monitor how institution spend, from core funding, is being used to support access through the Outcome Agreement process.

Recommendation 26: By 2021, the SFC, in consultation with the Scottish Government, should explore options for more targeted funding models to better support the recruitment and retention of greater numbers of access students.

Recommendation 27: The SFC should make more extensive use of their existing regulatory powers, where appropriate, to drive greater progress. The Scottish Government should ensure that it provides the SFC with the necessary mandate to take this action.

Recommendation 28: The Scottish Government should ensure that objectives relating to fair access are embedded in the regulatory frameworks of other agencies/public bodies with a role to play in advancing equal access.

Recommendation 29: The Scottish Government should improve mechanisms to track learners and share data to support fair access. Specifically, the Government should:

- Lead the work necessary to develop and implement the use of a unique learner number to be used to track learners' progress from early learning, throughout education and onwards into employment.

- Review data access arrangements to provide a national process for the provision of information to practitioners and policy makers working on fair access. This review should consider access to and sharing of data held by local authorities, schools, UCAS and SAAS.

Recommendation 30: The Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Government should enhance the analyses and publication of data on fair access. This should include:

- Enhanced monitoring of fair access at key stages of the learner journey including analyses by socioeconomic background of: early learning and school attainment; UCAS applications, offers and acceptances; entrants to higher education; qualifiers from higher education and their destinations.

- Publication of a coherent and consistent set of statistics to show progress on fair access, either through development of the SFC's Learning for All publication or a successor publication.

- Working with UK producers of statistics, including HESA and UCAS, to develop an agreed method of comparing progress on fair access over time and across UK nations.

- Exploring with The Data Lab the feasibility of a project to develop a data science solution to support fair access e.g. a schools based data solution to identify those from a disadvantaged background with the potential to succeed in higher education and who could most benefit from additional support.

Recommendation 31: The Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council, working with key stakeholders, should develop a consistent and robust set of measures to identify access students by 2018.

- In addition to SIMD, this should include a measure for school environment, a marker for income and a marker for care experience.

- The development of these measures should take account of the findings from SFC funded research on the use of contextual data in undergraduate university admissions being undertaken by Durham University and due to report in 2016

- The SFC should review the measures it uses within outcome agreements and the access work it funds in light of the outcome of this work.

Recommendation 32: The Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council should implement the following targets to drive forward the delivery of equal access in Scotland:

To realise the First Minister's ambition of equality of access to higher education in Scotland:

1. By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds[1] should represent 20% of entrants to higher education. Equality of access should be seen in both the college sector and the university sector.

To drive progress toward this goal:

*   By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 16% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities as a whole.

*   By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10% of full-time first degree entrants to every individual Scottish university.

*   By 2026, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 18% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities as a whole.

*   In 2022, the target of 10% for individual Scottish universities should be reviewed and a higher level target should be considered for the subsequent years.

Recommendation 33: The Commissioner for Fair Access should:

*   Consider what further work is required to support equal access for other groups of learners and within specific degree subjects.

*   Consider what further work is required to support equal outcomes after study for those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with a care experience.

Recommendation 34: The Scottish Government should report on progress against the recommendations it accepts from this report, 12 months after issuing its response. Thereafter, progress towards equal access should be reported on annually by the Commissioner for Fair Access.

---

[1] For the purpose of these targets, students from the most deprived backgrounds are defined as those from SIMD20 areas. We recognise, however, the particular challenge that the use of SIMD as a marker for deprivation presents to institutions in the north east of Scotland. SFC should therefore consider additional measure(s) to SIMD when monitoring the progress of Robert Gordon University and the University of Aberdeen towards the above targets, which better reflects the link between deprivation and access in the local population.

ANNEXE B: SCOTTISH DOMICILED ENTRANTS FROM SIMD20 TO FULL TIME FIRST DEGREE STUDY AT A SCOTTISH UNIVERSITY, ACADEMIC YEAR 2015-16

Aberdeen, The University of	4.8%
Abertay Dundee, University of	17.0%
Dundee, The University of	14.1%
Edinburgh Napier University	10.4%
Edinburgh, The University of	5.6%
Glasgow Caledonian University	21.2%
Glasgow School of Art	13.6%
Glasgow, The University of	12.3%
Heriot-Watt University	9.9%
Highlands and Islands, the University of	7.8%
Open University, The	14.1%
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	8.9%
Robert Gordon University, The	6.7%
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, The	13.1%
Scottish Agricultural College	11.3%
St Andrews, The University of	4.5%
Stirling, The University of	11.7%
Strathclyde, The University of	14.0%
The West of Scotland, The University of	25.4%
Total HE at HEIs	**13.6%**

**ANNEXE C: RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE COMMISSIONER FOR FAIR ACCESS'
FIRST ANNUAL REPORT**

Recommendation 1: The Scottish Government should take every opportunity to clarify
the different agendas arising from the wider goal of fair access to higher education as a
whole and the narrower goal of fair access to universities. It should make clear its view
on their relative priority for the next four years in the lead up to delivery of the first
CoWA targets.

Recommendation 2: In advance of reviewing institutional targets in 2022, as
recommended by the Commission on Widening Access, the Scottish Government
should encourage the widest possible national debate on this issue, in partnership with
colleges and universities and other stakeholders.

Recommendation 3: The SFC and Scottish Government should work with the Higher
Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to ensure the data required to report on the
proportion of SIMD20 entrants (i.e. entrant domicile and home postcode) is prioritised
within the HESA 'Data Futures' project, so that more timely data can be made available
to measure progress towards meeting fair access targets.

Recommendation 4: The Scottish Government should consider whether the total
number of funded places in Scottish higher education needs to be increased in order to
ensure that overall demand, from applicants from all social backgrounds, is met while
maintaining the momentum towards fair access.

Recommendation 5: It should undertake to retain within the higher education budget
any savings produced by any overall reduction in demand as a result of demography;
the removal of other-EU students from the total of funded places after the UK leaves
the EU (however undesirable Brexit may be); and any increase in efficiency produced
by 'smarter' articulation (between HNs and degrees but also between S6 and first-year
higher education).

Recommendation 6: If additional funded places are made available by the Scottish
Government, only a proportion of them should be ring-fenced to support fair access.
Institutions should be free to use a proportion in ways they determine, in the hope that
this will ease fears of displacement and also in the hope that fair access will be
accepted as a mainstream goal by all. If no additional places are provided, there will be
no alternative to setting new targets beyond the existing access places.

Recommendation 7: Progress towards fair access targets should continue to be
monitored by the SFC, not only with regard to the use of the proportion of any
additional places ring-fenced but with regard to all the student places it funds.

Recommendation 8: In taking the Review of the 15-24 Learner Journey forward, the
Scottish Government should make clear how implementation will support fair access to
higher education, as well as the range of education, training and employment
opportunities available to young people. In particular it should focus on the
development of flexible pathways between these various routes into higher education.

Recommendation 9: The SFC should aim to encourage seamless progression from further to higher education in colleges, and also work towards removing unnecessary differences in its funding and accountability systems for colleges and universities with regard to higher education provision. This need not involve far-reaching governance reforms, nor imply significant shifts in current funding patterns. The goal should be to produce a properly integrated and articulated tertiary education system across Scotland.

Recommendation 10: The SFC should take a stronger lead and have a clearer voice in debates about the future of higher (and further) education in Scotland. It should consider making more, and smarter, use of the powers it has been granted, acting as a bridge between high-level priorities established by the Government and the strategic goals of individual institutions. Fair access is a key area in which national coordination of institutional strategies and activities would be beneficial, below the level at which it is reasonable (or appropriate) to expect the Government to operate.

Recommendation 11: The SFC should review its use of outcome agreements - ensuring that it offers a robust challenge to institutions in negotiating agreed goals and that outcome agreement and more detailed agreements and action plans (in areas such as fair access) are better integrated; and also that there is greater clarity about what sanctions it would be appropriate to impose when targets are not met. Consideration should be given to imposing penalties for non-delivery, not simply in relation to ring-fenced funding initiatives but to funding allocations more generally.

Recommendation 12: Universities should consider the designation of a common core for all summer schools and other bridging programmes across Scotland, based on identifying those elements that already appear in all or most programmes. Some of these elements clearly would need to be subject specific, and there should also be scope for institutions to customise some elements based on their particular needs. Greater commonality would produce greater consistency, making the content of these programmes more transparent to learners (and their advisers) and also making them more transferable. It would also make it easier to increase the scale of provision, which is clearly necessary.

Recommendation 13: Universities and Universities Scotland should work with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the Framework Development Group to develop an authoritative typology of bridging and outreach programmes and an easily accessible web-based database of courses. This should align to the evidence and best practice published in the Scottish Toolkit for Fair Access.

Recommendation 14: Universities should consider developing a new 'social covenant' that brings together all activities that reflect their wider social responsibilities – within their local communities, wider regions and Scotland as a whole (and, indeed, on European and international levels). Fair access initiatives should be firmly embedded within these new covenants.

Recommendation 15: Universities should commit to substantially increasing the proportion of transferring HN students admitted with full credit (to at least the 75 per cent benchmark identified by the SFC), and all HND students, without exception, should be allowed to transfer into Year 2. If individual students are not given, or specific courses do not grant, full credit, the reasons should be specified, and fully justified, along with an action plan to remedy these perceived deficits in preparation.

Recommendation 16: Universities should commit to substantially increasing the number of transferring HN students they admit, and offering necessary support. In the case of universities with insufficient HN applicants to support such an expansion, active measures should be taken by establishing stronger links with local colleges to increase the supply. If voluntary action by universities is inadequate, the SFC should consider introducing institutional targets for articulation, enforced through outcome agreements.

Recommendation 17: Universities should make more imaginative use of the first year of undergraduate education, by paying more explicit attention to the learning needs arising from transition from school to university. This would benefit all students (even those with excellent entry grades).

More explicit use of the first year as a foundation year, a common practice in the United States, could also have a number of other advantages:
- Some of the curriculum that is currently offered in summer schools could be incorporated;
- The perceived educational deficits of some HN students could also be addressed by incorporating 'enhancement' elements that are currently included in some HNs;
- The choice of Highers made during secondary education, which is generally regarded as an important reason why disadvantaged students with more limited access to sound advice have more limited access to universities, would become less crucial.

Recommendation 18: Universities should substantially increase the proportion of well qualified S6 leavers with Advanced Highers admitted into Year 2 - to reduce any possibility of 'coasting' and to reduce repetition of the curriculum; and also to increase efficiency and generate more funded places within the existing budget.

Recommendation 19: Universities, as recommended in the recent US report, should agree a common language to describe contextual admissions, and identify a set of common indicators to be used by all universities. The use of institution specific indicators should be the exception, not the norm.

Recommendation 20: Universities should publish a detailed guide to their contextual admissions processes and practices in as accessible a form as possible to ensure full transparency. This should include a list of indicators, common and specific, and an explanation of what the presence of each indicator means for applicants in terms of the actual offer they will receive.

Recommendation 21: Universities should make much bolder use of adjusted offers, by explicitly identifying acceptable risks of non-progression and failure to achieve good

degree outcomes rather than merely tolerating limited variations from historical patterns.

Recommendation 22: The Scottish Government should encourage a wide debate about definitions of 'standards' and 'success' (as measured by the continuation rates and degree outcomes typical of traditional students) without fear of ill-informed accusations of ''dumbing down'. In the case of formal indicators an acceptable degree of risk should be defined to identify minimum thresholds for success. It should work with institutions to ensure that - as far as possible - students who 'stop out' are not forced to 'drop out' by over-rigid definitions of progression.

Recommendation 23: The Scottish Government should make it clear that the Government's targets are for all first-degree entrants, regardless of age, despite the focus on breaking the cycle of deprivation for young adults. It should ensure that the needs of adult students from similar backgrounds are given the same priority as school-leavers.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

6th meeting, 2018 (Session 5), Wednesday, 21 February 2018

This paper has the submission from the Commissioner for Fair Access in Annexe A and a submission from Universities Scotland in Annexe B.

There are links below to the notes from the Committee's fact-finding visit to the Royal Conservatoire on Widening Access and to the SPICe briefing that informed the visit.

- Focus group notes from RCS
- SPICe briefing on Widening Access January 2018

In addition, Abertay University has submitted a briefing paper on their approach to widening access.

- Abertay University

Written statement from the Commissioner for Fair Access

Introduction

1. I first gave evidence to the Committee on January 25, 2017 shortly after I had been appointed Commissioner for Fair Access. On that occasion I was only able to talk in very general terms about how I planned to approach this new role. So, after my first year as Commissioner, I welcome this opportunity to give further evidence to the Committee and answer Members' questions. This written statement is mainly based on my first Annual Report published on December 13, 2017 (https://beta.gov.scot/publications/laying-foundations-fair-access-annual-report-2017-commissioner-fair-access/) and the four discussion documents on important themes relating to fair access which have also been published. Copies of talks I have given are also available on the Commissioner website (https://beta.gov.scot/about/how-government-is-run/directorates/advanced-learning-and-science/commissioner-fair-access/).

Progress towards fair access

2. During my first year as Commissioner I have visited a number of colleges and universities, including 'ancient' universities, other chartered universities, 'post-1992' universities and colleges, as well as meeting with representative bodies and other agencies. On every occasion the people I met were welcoming and supportive of the role of Commissioner. I have found no evidence of any lack of commitment in principle to fair access, or to meeting the targets set by the Government, although I have been made aware of the practical difficulties that some institutions have experienced. Overall I have been impressed by the openness of the debate about fair access.

3. The two most significant reservations expressed have been:

A. The danger that fair access targets will produce a 'squeezed middle' - in other words, that the drive to recruit more students from SIMD20 areas will lead to a reduction of opportunities for applicants who are neither deprived nor privileged (because well qualified applicants, whatever their social background, will continue to secure places). This is normally referred to as 'displacement'. My impression is that these fears, although completely genuine, may be exaggerated. But one of the recommendations I make in my Annual Report addressed to the Scottish Government is designed to address these fears;

B. The need to expand the number of SIMD20 applicants. The latest UCAS figures which showed an overall increase in SIMD20 applicants, also showed a small decline in 18 year old SIMD20 applicants that may serve as a wake-up call to those who believe that progress towards meeting fair access targets can be taken for granted. Of course, this slight decline should not prevent a continuing increase in the proportion of SIMD20 students admitted (and it is important to remember that a third of entrants to higher education in Scotland are not dealt with through UCAS). However, it does highlight the need to redouble outreach activities to encourage more young SIMD20 applicants - and also the need to minimise competitive cherry-picking by institutions by promoting greater collaboration.

4. Measuring progress is inevitably difficult. The 2030 target, that SIMD20 students should make up 20 per cent of the total student population in higher education, looks reasonably secure. There may be greater difficulty in meeting that target in the case of universities (i.e. without the contribution made by colleges) and also meeting the 10 per cent target for every individual institution by 2021. Of course, many universities already exceed the 10 per cent target but a few high-demand universities may struggle. I have been impressed, however, by the progress made by universities such as Stirling and Dundee.

5. The major challenges are:

    A. To work towards a more equal spread of opportunities for SIMD20 applicants across Scotland's colleges and universities;

    B. To ensure that SIMD20 students have an equal chance of succeeding - in terms of continuation rates, proportion with 'good' degrees (i.e. Firsts and 2:1s) and access to 'graduate' jobs.

Annual Report

6. As the post of Commissioner is new, there were no precedents for the format and content of the Commissioner's Annual Report. I decided that my first report should be comprehensive in its scope and address most (but not all) the major topics relevant to fair access. Future Annual Reports are likely to be more focused and selective. The two areas the report does not cover are (i) student financial support; and (ii) the role played by schools in fair access to higher education. The first was not covered because a separate review of student financial support was already under way (and its final report was published shortly before my Annual Report). The role of schools I intend to cover in subsequent Annual Reports. In my first year my efforts have been focused on meetings with colleges and universities. Over the next 12 months I hope to engage in greater detail with schools, and hope to be able to make more substantive comments about their key role in fair access.

7. The key messages in the report are grouped here under six headings - (i) participation rates and targets; (ii) the responsibilities of college and universities, and the SFC; (iii) admissions, progression and outcomes; (iv) articulation, and the scope for developing a joined-up tertiary education system; (v) the use of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as the metric for measuring progress; and (vi) the need to review the total number of funded places. Based on my experience as Commissioner these six headings cover the major issues in the debate about fair access

8. *Participation and target*s

    •   Scotland has the highest rate of participation in higher education in the United Kingdom and one of the highest in Europe. But young people from the most privileged homes are still three times more likely to go to higher education than those from the most disadvantaged - and over three times as likely to go to university.

- The Scottish Government's target that by the end of the next decade 20 per cent of new entrants to higher education will come from the 20 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland - a truly level playing eld in terms of access - is among the most ambitious in the world. But, although challenging, it is achievable.

- Progress towards meeting that target, and individual targets for colleges and universities, has been steady. But the current forward momentum may not be sufficient. Bolder steps will be required - by the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council and (most) institutions.

9. Institutions and the SFC

- All institutions must make a contribution to meeting the 2030 target. It is crucial that the ancient universities, which currently have the most privileged student intakes, play a full part - and a leadership role. But it is equally important that the key role played by colleges, which enrol a much higher proportion of students from more deprived backgrounds, is respected and reinforced.

- The Scottish Funding Council should make fuller use of its powers to promote fair access, and ensure that outcome agreements become effective instruments not just for monitoring but also rewarding performance in line with the Government's desire to see their use 'intensified'.

10. Admissions and progression

- Making lower offers to applicants from deprived backgrounds is not 'dumbing down' entry standards. Not all applicants have the same advantages, in terms of family support or school experience. Making the same offer to everyone is not only unfair; it fails to identify students with the greatest potential. Universities need to make much bolder use of contextual admissions.

- Admitting more students from deprived backgrounds is only the first stage. They must receive the support - academic, financial and pastoral - they need to succeed. But, just as the use of contextual admissions opens up a debate about how entry 'standards' should be defined, there needs to be an equivalent debate about how 'success' is defined.

11. Articulation

- Scotland has a unique opportunity to produce a joined-up tertiary education system, across higher and further education and workplace learning, which is also an objective of the Scottish Government's Learner Journey 15-24 initiative. This would reduce barriers to progression, benefitting all learners but especially those from more deprived backgrounds, and increase the efficiency and capacity of the system.

- College students with Higher Nationals (HNs) who transfer to universities should receive full credit as a matter of routine. Anything less needs rigorous justification.

> Smarter articulation promotes fair access by freeing up more college-university pathways but also by creating more capacity generally.

- There is also scope for improving the transition between school and university - a better fit between S6 and Year 1, more co-delivery of the curriculum, and greater opportunities for S6 learners with Advanced Highers to go straight into Year 2. This would produce the same benefits as smarter articulation between HNs and degrees.

12. SIMD and other measures of disadvantage

- Unfair access is rooted in socioeconomic deprivation, typically located in particular communities and perpetuated across generations. There are other forms of disadvantage - age, disability, immigrant status and so on - which also need to be urgently addressed. But none is as intractable and as deeply entrenched as socio-economic deprivation, which must remain the main focus of fair access.

13. Student numbers

- The Scottish Government should review the number of funded places it provides for Scottish students. It should guarantee that any savings produced by demographic change, Brexit or smarter articulation between HNs and degrees (and schools and universities) will be retained within the higher education budget. This would also help to address fears that some students are being 'displaced' by more deprived applicants.

Discussion documents

14. I believe it is important that the Commissioner has a 'presence', which goes beyond the publication of an Annual Report. I have already mentioned my visits to colleges and universities, and the talks I have given. In addition four discussion documents have been published on the Commissioner website (https://beta.gov.scot/about/how-government-is-run/directorates/advanced-learning-and-science/commissioner-fair-access/). The intention is to focus on key issues / themes by providing the latest data and analysis, accompanied by a commentary by the Commissioner.

15. So far four discussion documents have been published. A number of other discussion documents is planned for 2018:

- *University and College Admissions, Offers and Acceptances* - June 19, 2017 (https://beta.gov.scot/publications/ucas-admissions-offers-acceptances-discussion-paper/.The first discussion paper examined the 'access gap' at various stages - applications, offers, acceptances and admissions. It highlighted the need to increase the number of applicants from SIMD20 areas.

- *Contextual Higher Education Admissions* - June 19, 2017 (https://beta.gov.scot/publications/ucas-admissions-offers-acceptances-discussion-paper/. The second discussion paper demonstrated the commitment of most institutions to taking into account other factors apart from Higher grades in making

offers, but also highlighted the need for more transparent language and consistent practice.

- *League Tables* - November 14, 2017 (https://beta.gov.scot/publications/commissioner-fair-access-discussion-paper-league-tables/). The third discussion paper highlighted the potential dangers to fair access posed by one-size-fits-all league tables that rank all institutions according to the same criteria and fail to take into account different missions.

- *Retention, Outcomes and Destinations* - January 23, 2018 (https://beta.gov.scot/publications/commissioner-fair-access-discussion-paper-retention-outcomes-destinations/). The fourth discussion document showed that SIMD20 students were not only less likely to be admitted but also to continue after the first year, to receive honours degrees, to get 'good' degrees (i.e. Firsts or 2.1s) and - even if they got 'good' degrees - to get 'graduate' jobs.

Other issues

16. One of the concerns expressed by Members of this Committee and also more widely was about the independence of the Commissioner for Fair Access. My experience over the last 12 months has been that at no time have I felt my independence was being compromised. The officials in the Scottish Government who support my work have always behaved with complete professionalism. Prior to publication drafts of my Annual Report were only shared with members of the team supporting the Commissioner not more widely in Government.

17. A second concern was that the Commissioner did not have an allocated budget, for research and other purposes. However, I can confirm that funding has been made available to support my work as required. Funding has been made available, via the SFC, for the work to establish a Framework for Fair Access to identify and guide good practice, and funding has also been provided, from within the Scottish Government, for the statistical work that formed the basis of the four discussion documents.

Conclusion

18. I would like to thank everyone for their support of my work as Commissioner for Fair Access. It has been a privilege to be given an opportunity to make a contribution, however small, to advancing a cause to which I am strongly committed and which is so central to the success of higher education in the 21st century, and also to the functioning of an open and democratic society.

Peter Scott
February 12, 2018

Universities Scotland brief for members of the Education and Skills Committee, 21 February 2018

Universities Scotland welcomes the Committee's decision to receive an update on widening access from the Commissioner and the Minister for FE, HE and Science. This brief includes a short update on delivery of the set of 15 actions we are working on and sets out some of the key issues as we see them at this point in time. Our questions for the Commission are highlighted in *bold and italics.*

Universities are committed to delivering on the CoWA 2030 targets.
Since a *Blueprint for Fairness* was published, Universities Scotland and Scotland's 19 higher education institutions published a full and complete response to the university-facing CoWA recommendations in *Working to Widen Access* in November 2017. This includes 15 time-measured commitments for action. The commitments on admissions, articulation from college and bridging programmes from schools were developed with stakeholder input.

Since November 2017, universities have:
- Agreed the remit for the new National Articulation Forum (NAF) with key stakeholders and appointed the Co-Conveners. The NAF will meet for the first time in March. This was action #8.
- Created a practitioner sub-group to deliver on clear and consistent language for contextualised admissions so that it becomes far more accessible and user-friendly. This is action #1. Led by Rebecca Gaukroger, Director of Recruitment and Admissions at the University of Edinburgh, the membership of that group will give a voice to young people, through the Scottish Youth Parliament, adult returners via the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP); to parents through the National Parents Forum, to schools through School Leaders Scotland as well as UCAS, the Funding Council, the Plain English Campaign, universities and others.
- Working with all 19 HEIs to monitor their individual progress to set minimum entry requirements by 2019. This is action #3.

Our hopes and expectations of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access
The next big deliverable in the *Blueprint* is the publication of a 'Scottish Framework for Fair Access' in 2018.[1] Universities would like a Framework that sets out a clear summary of what's proven to work well to widen access, so that institutions are taking this forward with tools that are known to work. There's been a long-standing problem that many well-intentioned widening access initiatives (across the UK) are not robustly evaluated so partners working on access are not starting from a shared understanding of what's effective.

A tender for the development of the Framework went out in December 2017, and has subsequently been re-tendered by SFC in the absence of a satisfactory bid. *It would be helpful to have further details on the Commissioner's expectations and timetable for delivery of the Framework and to understand the nature of the Commissioner's role in delivering that Framework.*

---

[1] Commission (2016) *Blueprint*. Recommendation 2, p14.

Continuing the commitment to a holistic approach

One of the most exciting things about the creation, initially, of a Commission on Widening Access and then a permanent post of a Commissioner for Fair Access, was the holistic, or whole-system, approach that it was tasked with. The Commissioner's first year has focused on post-16 education but we understand that the next stage will focus on schools. If so, this will be a really positive reinforcement of a whole-system approach. The attainment agenda in schools and access agenda in universities are inextricably linked. Good partnerships already exist between schools and universities but we would be supportive of a role for the Commissioner in ensuring connectivity between all parts of the system. We think that evolving the Commissioner's role in this way could add a great deal of additional value to the access agenda.

It would be helpful to get the Commissioner's view of the importance of his role in ensuring Scotland continues a holistic approach to access. It would be helpful to understand more about the Commissioner's planned work as it relates to schools.

The need for data to drive action and evidence ambition

Universities are very keen to access a data set on Higher achievement levels by the end of S6[2] that would allow three very important things to happen:

1. Establish and agree the current baseline of the school-leaving SIMD20 population that is qualified for university entry. This is not available at the level of detail that universities need.
2. The Scottish Government could then project the growth in this group of eligible school-leavers as a result of work in schools to close the poverty-related attainment gap. This would give everyone working towards the 2030 targets full confidence that the collective efforts of schools, college and universities will meet the CoWA targets in full.
3. Universities could then set minimum entry requirements for SIMD20 applicants using the data to model the impact of those adjusted entry levels. The data would give universities knowledge of how many additional SIMD20 school-leavers would be eligible for application at different entry levels.

This data is not currently available. We have asked Government for this data and the Minister has committed the Scottish Government to producing it, which we welcome. However, we don't yet have a delivery date confirmed. We were concerned that the Scottish Government's consultation in measuring the attainment gap did not include measurements that would show increase in attainment at levels that would qualify learners for university entry, even with reduced offers through contextual admissions.[3] The sooner universities can work with this data set, the better as 2019 is the target date by which universities are expected to have minimum entry requirements in place. This means that universities are doing this work now and throughout 2018.

---

[2] Boliver, V. et al (2017) *Identifying Minimum Academic Entry Requirements for Contextually Disadvantaged Applicants.* Table 1.1.

[3] Not all university entrants are school-leavers. This is an important point as entrants from college and adult returners will be key to meeting the 2030 CoWA targets. However, more detailed data on school-leaver qualification levels will be very helpful to universities' access work.

Will the Commissioner do everything in his power to accelerate the publication of data in order that universities can set minimum entry requirements that are informed by data and evidence, and deliver the 'pace'[4] of progress that the Minister expects from institutions?

Can the Commissioner share his perspective on the limitations of SIMD as a robust measure for tracking progress on widening access? The authors of the SIMD have been clear that most income-deprived people on Scotland live outside areas of multiple deprivation identified by SIMD.[5]
What role can the Commissioner play in progressing work to produce a 'more balanced package of measures'?[6]

Areas for clarification:

The CoWA targets should include learners of all ages

- The 2016 *Blueprint* report from CoWA, which set out the 2030 access targets, does not clarify what age groups of entrants this target is intended to cover.[7] ***We would find it very helpful if the Scottish Government and Commissioner clarified that the 2030 CoWA targets are inclusive of all groups. Doing so would allow all stakeholders to proceed with the same understanding of the metric that will be used to judge success.***

- Universities feel very strongly that the 2030 CoWA target, specified as 20% of entrants to university should be from SIMD20 areas should relate to entrants of all ages. This is consistent with our belief in lifelong learning and it would recognise that nearly one in five existing first-degree students in higher education are over 25 years of age.[8] Being inclusive of all age groups reflects the fact that many learners have not realised their full educational potential by the time they leave school.

- Mature entrants or adult returners will make a significant contribution to achievement of the 2030 CoWA targets. The most recent UCAS applicant data showed an increase in applicants of all ages from SIMD20 areas by 2% or a total of 110 applicants.[9] The same applicant data showed a 4% decrease in the number of 18 year old applicants from SIMD20 areas. The number of 18 year old applicants fell across all quintiles.

Status of the recommendations in *Laying the Foundations*

---

[4] Minister for FE, HE & Science, Topical Question Time: University Applications, 6 February 2018
[5] Scottish Government (2017) The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2016 p7.
[6] Commissioner, Laying the Foundations, P33
[7] The access 'target' as expressed in the *Blueprint for Fairness* does not make any reference to age group. It reads: "*By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to higher education.*" Pg 13. The *Blueprint* is clear that its objective is to deliver on the First Minister's ambition that: "*a child born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the same time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of entering university..*" The First Minister's language expresses this in terms that could be understood to mean the target relates only to school leavers.
[8] HESA Student FPE 2016/17.
[9] UCAS (2018) January deadline analysis: SIMD quintile. Tables D.13.3 and D.13.4.

- ***It would be helpful to understand the status of the new set of 23 recommendations published in the Commissioner's first annual report, <u>Laying the Foundations,</u>*** which are addressed to the Scottish Government, Scottish Funding Council, universities, colleges and others.

- When combined with the 34 recommendations set out in CoWA's *Blueprint*, a total of 57 recommendations have come forward from the Commission/Commissioner in less than two years.

- The original set of 34 recommendations from the Commission, as published in the Blueprint, has been and continues to be Universities Scotland's reference point for action. It is the framework on which we have based our recent work. Annex A of *Working to Widen Access* maps our set of 15 actions directly onto the CoWA recommendations to show how we intend to deliver on the original recommendations.

The priority given to retention

- Universities Scotland believes that widening access and retention go hand-in-hand. The goal of widening access is not just that students from deprived backgrounds get in, but that they are supported to achieve successful outcomes from higher education.[10]

- The Commission was clear about the importance of retention, the Minister has been so in statements to Parliament and the Commissioner's most recent Discussion Paper[11] is also clear that the goal of access goes beyond entry to completion and employment outcomes on par with other graduates.

- However, not all messages about retention have been as consistent on this point over the last 12-14 months. ***It would be helpful to take this opportunity for clarification on the importance attached to retention, as this is a very important factor in the decision-making and direction taken by institutions and others.*** This is probably most important when it comes to decisions relating to contextualised admissions and adjusted grades.

- The Commissioner's June 2017 Discussion Paper on contextualised admissions appeared to challenge a university rationale which attaches importance to good retention and outcomes when making decisions on contextualised admissions and adjusted grades.[12] Similarly, a research paper on contextualised admissions and minimum entry grades, commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council and published late summer 2017, suggested a retention rate of 80% of access students might be an appropriate level of 'success' for SIMD20/40 students.[13]

- An 80% retention rate for entrants from deprived areas would be a fall of 7 percentage points from current retention rates of 86.7%[14] for SIMD20 students. It would also turn a retention gap into a retention gulf between SIMD20 students and SIMD80+ students, as the rate for the latter group is currently 93.1%. In recent years, there has been positive progress to close the retention gap between most and least deprived students. The gap has gone from 7.5 percentage points to 6.4 percentage points.

---

[10] Universities Scotland (2014) *Action on Access.* We previously expressed this as 'getting in, staying in and getting on'.

[11] Commissioner (2018) *Retention Outcomes and Destinations*

[12] Commissioner (2017) *Discussion Paper: Contextual Admissions p5.*

[13] Boliver, V. et al (2017) *Identifying Minimum Academic Entry Requirements for Contextually Disadvantaged Applicants.* Table 5.1. In this case retention is defined as progress from the first to second year which is a fairly standard measure of retention in HE.

[14] SFC (2017) *Report on Widening Access* Table 9. Data for AY 2015/16.

- We intend to respond positively to the Commissioner's challenge that more should be done to transform the notion of drop-out into 'stop-out'.[15] This would allow students to exit their studies at a given point (for a job opportunity or for personal reasons) with recognition for their academic achievement to that point and without any of the stigma of dropping-out. Ideally, the option to resume studies at a later date would be open to students. There are clear links between this suggestion and the work of the Learner Journey review.

---

[15] Commissioner (2017) *Laying the Foundations* recommendation 22, p45.