

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

4th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6), Wednesday 6
March 2024

PE2009: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

Petitioner	Caroline Gordon
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure fair access to Scottish universities for residents in Scotland and the UK by reviewing university business models and Scottish Government funding arrangements.
Webpage	http://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2009

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [17 May 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to Universities Scotland, individual universities in Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Commissioner for Fair Access.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new responses from Glasgow Caledonian University, Edinburgh Napier University, the Open University, the Commissioner for Fair Access, Universities Scotland, Robert Gordon University, the University of Edinburgh, and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.

6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 4,569 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE2009: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

Petitioner

Caroline Gordon

Date Lodged

28 March 2023

Petition Summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure fair access to Scottish universities for residents in Scotland and the UK by reviewing university business models and Scottish Government funding arrangements.

Previous Action

I have written to my MSP, Michael Marra who raised a question at FMQs. I was not satisfied with the answer.

Background information

Information published by Edinburgh University showed that 9 courses including Scots Law did not admit any students in Scotland from backgrounds that were not classified as “deprived”. A poor business model and a lack of funding has meant that a large swathe of the Scottish population have been shut out of Higher Education. The Scottish Government should ensure that funding constraints or other factors do not result in discrimination against any group or demographic. I would like the Scottish Government to properly consider this and how it could be addressed.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2009 on 17 May 2023

The Convener: Item 3 on our agenda is consideration of new petitions. Before I introduce each new petition, as I always do for those who might be following our proceedings elsewhere, I indicate that, as a matter of practice, we invite the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament’s independent policy advice resource—the Scottish Parliament information centre—to offer comment on petitions. We do that because, historically, if we did not do that, that was usually what happened at the first meeting at which we considered the new petition. Therefore, we bypass that and we are therefore already considering the position with a degree of information having been obtained.

We are joined by Michael Marra, who has been sitting quite contentedly through some of our deliberations. In order to facilitate his day, we will move first to petition PE2009, which was lodged by Caroline Gordon, and which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure fair access to Scottish universities for residents in Scotland and the UK by reviewing university business models and Scottish Government funding arrangements.

The Scottish Government’s response to the petition states that “Scottish universities are autonomous institutions and as such are responsible for their own admission policies and selection criteria. The Scottish Government and Scottish Ministers are unable to intervene in universities’ business models.”

The submission emphasises Universities and Colleges Admissions Service data, published in January 2023, which shows that a near-record number of Scottish students secured a place at the University of Edinburgh. The Scottish Government aims to have 20 per cent of students entering university from Scotland’s 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds by 2030. The submission highlights that 9.1 per cent of the University of Edinburgh’s full-time first degree entrants in 2020-21 came from Scotland’s most deprived areas.

The petitioner has responded to the Scottish Government’s submission, stating that “many capable young Scots” are unable to attend due to “chronic underfunding and poor government policy.”

She notes that freedom of information requests have shown an 84 per cent increase in the number of Scottish domiciled applicants being refused entry to Scottish universities since 2006. The petitioner concludes with a call for the Scottish Government to conduct a review of its funding arrangements for Scottish universities and remove the cap on places to provide equal opportunities for all young people, regardless of their background.

As I said a moment ago, we are joined by Michael Marra. I invite him to speak to the committee before we consider how we might proceed.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I pay tribute to my constituent Caroline Gordon, who joins us in the public gallery, for lodging the petition, which is now supported by many thousands of people, and for her continued determination to seek answers on this area from the Scottish Government. I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak to you today.

For more than 600 years, our universities have educated some of Scotland's best and brightest, from scientists and inventors to philosophers, authors and poets—the great people of Scotland who have lent so much to our history and progress as a nation. However, for many of our young people in Scotland today, the basic promise of a Scottish education has been broken. You work hard, you get the grades, you get in: that is the way that it should be for every Scot.

At First Minister's question time on 12 January, I raised my constituent's case, which is about a young man with outstanding grades to whom the doors of the University of Edinburgh were firmly shut. There were no grades that he could have achieved from five As to 50 As that could have prised those doors open. The policy of the Scottish Government has locked him out. Since then, my office has been inundated with emails and phone calls from parents and young people across the country sharing similar testimony, so I am clear that this is not a case of one university or one subject area. The sense of injustice is palpable.

My constituent and I are the strongest supporters of widening access to university in Scotland. The Parliament has seen marked progress in that area in recent years, but we have come from a very low base, whereby young Scottish people from the poorest backgrounds were far less likely to reach university than those from any other part of the UK. We should be clear that we are still well behind the rest of the UK in that, and that much progress still requires to be made.

The real issue of concern that is raised in the petition is the dysfunction of the business model that the Scottish Government imposes on our universities, which includes the cap on Scottish university students. It is combined with 14 years of no increase in the amount of money that is paid per student to our universities. The alternative route that is being taken by many young Scots is to seek a place at a university in England. Many will make a life outside Scotland, will marry and will flourish, and my constituent and many other families will be hundreds of miles from their grandchildren, which is a human element of the issue that we must consider. We can all identify with that.

More broadly, for our economy and the betterment of our society in Scotland, these are losses that Scotland can ill afford. At best, this is a case of the unintended consequences of policy, which I recognise. The issue deserves better scrutiny in Parliament in terms of what might be happening as a result of policy and that is not the Government's stated intent. The committee could seek further information on that.

Perhaps I could be so bold as to suggest a couple of areas that might be of use to the committee in that regard. You might want to seek evidence from Universities Scotland and individual universities to ascertain the scale of the issue and find out

whether certain universities or courses are particularly affected. That would perhaps allow the committee to develop a better understanding of the impact of the current policy on the number of young Scottish people who are being forced to leave Scotland to access higher education elsewhere and of the impact that that has on the country. Perhaps the committee might ask the Scottish Government what analysis it has undertaken of the consequences of the current policy for Scottish applicants in general. Importantly, I would hope that it would give an opportunity for the people who are impacted to have their voices heard in the Parliament.

Thank you for your time, convener, and for the consideration of the committee.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Marra. I know that you have been raising the issues in Parliament with the First Minister. I am content with the proposals that you have made. Would members of the committee like to add any further suggestions?

David Torrance: I wonder whether we could write to the Commissioner for Fair Access to seek his views on the actions that are called for in the petition.

The Convener: That makes sense. Are we content to pursue the suggestions that Mr Marra has made, as well as the one from Mr Torrance?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That will give us further information, and we will consider the petition again in due course. Thank you, Mr Marra, for joining us for your first appearance at the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee.

Annexe C

Glasgow Caledonian University submission of 17 August 2023

PE2009/C: Ensure Fair Access to Scottish Universities for all Scottish and UK Citizens

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure fair access to Scottish universities for residents in Scotland and the UK by reviewing university business models and Scottish Government funding arrangements.

The number of places available to Scottish domiciled students is determined by the number of funded places the University is allocated by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

Glasgow Caledonian is the largest modern university in Scotland, with an intake of approximately 4,500 Scottish students to our undergraduate programmes for the 2023-24 academic year. We are committed to fair access, and take an inclusive approach to recruitment. The teaching unit of resource, which covers all elements of teaching and student support, continues to decrease over time, and many of our students require additional support to succeed, especially during and post-pandemic, but this has not led to any change to our recruitment practice which is always to fill our SFC funded places. Our aim in the medium term is to be allocated a growing number of funded places with growth focused on increasing widening participation in Scotland. The University has an undergraduate population that is in vast majority Scottish-domiciled, with a range of entry points and a strong representation of mature students, and therefore a range of entry qualifications on entry, and from a wide range of backgrounds.

As a leading university for widening participation, over 22% of our entrants are from the most disadvantaged backgrounds compared to the sector average of 16.5% (as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation). Glasgow Caledonian has a contextualised admissions policy, and minimum entry requirements (MERs) for those entering with Highers, which aims to recognise the strong disadvantages that some applicants will have faced that will have an impact on their educational

attainment. Offers are made that recognise that in these circumstances the attainment of the contextual offer/MERs demonstrates an ability and potential equal to that of the majority of applicants. We also welcome 1,000 college entrants through direct articulation on to Levels 2 and 3 of degree courses every year, having developed strong partnerships with colleges and ensuring appropriate transition support is in place for students.

Our outreach programmes support recruitment of students from a range of access courses and we promote access through our flexible and inclusive approaches to recognition of prior learning. We have a high proportion of entrants from care-experienced backgrounds within the sector, and we were the first University in the UK to achieve autism accreditation.

The University recruits more Graduate Apprenticeship (GA) students than any other Scottish university, and we are engaging with business partners to expand opportunities for GA recruitment to provide alternative routes to higher education.

Most funded places at the University, and in the sector overall, are available in non-controlled subject areas, with universities determining provision in response to a range of factors, and student demand is a key factor. There is therefore flexibility in the system. However, there are constraints in specific subject areas. For example, we have high demand for some allied health subjects given our excellence in education and research in this area, but the availability of places is constrained by the availability of clinical placements for students.

Edinburgh Napier University submission of 18 August 2023

PE2009/D: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

We would like to express our thanks to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for giving us the opportunity to provide our views on Petition PE2009.

Our response is based on the following understanding of the petition:

- We understand that the key concern of the petitioner relates to the funding model of Scottish higher education and how this may be affecting questions of fair access. We assumed that the focus of this petition relates to undergraduate education and have responded accordingly.
- The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to encourage the Scottish Government to ensure fair access to Scottish institutions for Scottish and Rest of UK residents by reviewing business models and Scottish Government funding arrangements.

In the first instance, we believe it is important to clarify the following:

- **A note regarding the current allocation of places and intake targets:** The overall number of Scottish domiciled students we take in each year is set by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) which provides universities with yearly intake targets that they have to meet.¹ Universities receive funding for each place they are allocated and, with the exception of “controlled subjects” – such as medicine, nursing – are responsible for the allocation of places to courses as they see fit. In addition, the Scottish Government has a target that by 2030, 20% of full-time first-degree Scottish domiciled entrants to universities in Scotland should come from the 20% most deprived communities in Scotland as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD 20). Alongside all universities in Scotland, Edinburgh Napier University has targets in place as outlined in our [Outcome Agreement](#) to contribute towards this target. We also recognise a wider basket on measures as part of our strategy to widen access to the University to students from a widening participation background².
- **Regarding the review of business models and funding arrangements:** The Scottish Government is in the process of undertaking reforms of the tertiary education system, through the review of purpose and principles for post-school education, research and skills.³ This includes considerations of how higher education qualifications will be funded in the future. In this respect,

¹ See this [link](#) for the 2023/4 Scottish Funding Council final university allocations and funded places.

² More information on widening participation backgrounds is accessible on our website [here](#).

³ Scottish Government (2023), Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills – Initial Priorities. [Link](#).

the Scottish Government is already in the process of looking into the future funding models of higher education. The level of public funding invested in teaching and research in Scotland's universities has been eroded over many years and the Scottish Government has acknowledged that "despite the financial sustainability of individual components or institutions, that much of the ecosystem as currently configured is no longer financially sustainable."⁴

- **It is important to define what fair access means in the context of this petition:** questions of fair access in higher education typically refer to ensuring that applicants from more deprived backgrounds have the ability to access higher education, for instance through the use of contextual entry criteria. In the case of this petition however, the background note indicates that concerns may relate to students in Scotland who were not from a deprived background and who may have been prevented from accessing higher education. The call of the petition aims to ensure fair access to Scottish universities for residents from Scotland and the rest of the UK. However, it is not clear what "fair access" refers to in this instance. The Scottish Government has made a longstanding commitment to fund Scottish undergraduate degrees for Scotland-based students. Students based in the Rest of the UK studying in Scotland are required to pay tuition fees directly or through the take-up of a loan. Therefore, under the current system, residency plays an important criterion in admissions decisions, including the number of places that are available on a given course. A decision to potentially change this system would rest within the Scottish Government's competence.

In response to the petition:

- All of our Scotland-based undergraduate courses are open to Scottish-based students to apply, whether they are from a deprived background or not. The intake targets universities have to meet mean that the total number of funded places that universities can allocate is finite and dependent on Scottish Government

⁴ Scottish Government (2023), Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills: interim purpose and principles. [Link](#).

budget decisions and policy priorities. In that respect, it can be described as an upper cap on the overall number of higher education places. Students from the rest of the UK and international are not subject to Scottish Government intake targets, except for controlled subjects where different rules may apply.

- Edinburgh Napier University does not recognise the scenario presented in the background note, where all places for a particular degree programme for Scottish-domiciled students in a given academic year were filled by students from a widening participation background. It may be the case specifically during the Clearing period⁵ that, for certain courses which have either met their target for Scottish-domiciled students, or are very close to meeting target, the University remains open for Scottish-domiciled widening participation students only. Edinburgh Napier University believes that it is right that students from more deprived backgrounds can benefit from contextual admissions policies that facilitates their access to higher education to mitigate additional difficulties or factors they may have faced.
- As we have highlighted in our submissions to the Scottish Government as part of reform consultations, we do believe that the current funding allocations for teaching in Scottish higher education is unsustainable and has been eroded over many years. However, the primary issue relates to the funding allocated per student, rather than the total amount of places being funded. We remain hopeful that the trajectory of the reforms proposed will lead to more sustainability in the funding of Scottish higher education.

I hope that this response will be helpful to the committee, and we remain available for any questions or follow-up that may be required.

⁵ More information about UCAS and Clearing is accessible [here](#).

Open University submission of 18 August 2023

PE2009/E: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

About the Open University in Scotland

The Open University in Scotland supports people across Scotland to develop their knowledge, acquire new skills and achieve life-changing qualifications. With over 21,000 students, we are the fourth largest university in Scotland and the largest provider of flexible, part-time study. We teach more Scottish students than anyone else in the sector. We offer high-quality distance learning to students, lifelong learners, communities, employees and businesses. We have formal partnerships with 16 regional colleges and collaborate with local authorities, the NHS, social care, the third sector and employers across Scotland. Our innovative national schools programme, Young Applicants in Schools Scheme, helps S6 pupils access a broader curriculum and bridge school to university level study.

We are committed to widening access to higher education building on our founding principle of being open to everyone, regardless of age, income, geography and background. More than 20% of our undergraduates in Scotland join with qualifications below standard university entrance level, almost 19% are resident in the most deprived areas of Scotland, 26% declare a disability and 23% live in remote or rural areas. The majority of our students in Scotland are eligible for a part-time fee grant to help towards their tuition fees.

Flexible study is core to our offer with 74% of our students working either full-time or part-time fitting study around their professional or personal life at a pace and level that works for them. Most of our graduates (85%) remain in the location where their study is undertaken, which means their talent and skills benefit local communities.

Our free platform, OpenLearn, reaches over 300,000 learners in Scotland.

Student Financial Support

The system is currently not designed to enable different kinds of learner journey. We believe there should be a move away from the current default position of viewing higher education as the transition of 17-and-18-year-olds from school into full-time university and adopt a wider view of the diversity of learners and their needs in Scotland. The reality is that many students do not follow a single linear journey. Immediately after school is not always the right time in a person's life to choose to pursue higher education. Many students will go on to college first or choose to come back to education later in life.

The Open University has been designated as a part-time provider since its funding was transferred from HEFCE to SHEFC in 2000 – as a result, OU students are classified as part-time even if they are studying 120 credits i.e., full-time intensity. 22,000 students studied with The Open University across Scotland in academic year 2020-21 and of the 8,094 new undergraduate entrants, 21% were registered for 120 credits. This proportion has grown considerably over the past five years, from 12% in 2016/17. 27% of all higher education enrolments in Scotland are part-time students with 69% of part-time students studying with The Open University.

These students, despite studying at full-time intensity, **have no access to free tuition fees, student loans, bursaries and do not qualify for exemption from council tax.** They can access the Part-time Fee Grant from the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) to help towards their tuition fees but only if they have an income of less £25,000 per annum. Neither the grant nor the income threshold has not changed since its introduction in 2013 despite inflation.

In addition, if you are care experienced and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students. If you are a lone parent and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not for** part-time students. If you have dependents and are a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students. If you are estranged from your family and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students.

In 2017, the Independent Review into Student Support recommended action to implement equitable support measures for part-time students and those currently receiving Education Maintenance Allowance

(EMA)”.⁶ That recommendation has not been implemented yet. **This means that part-time students still do not have access to the same range of financial support compared to full-time students.** This is not the case in other UK nations where for instance part-time students have access to maintenance grants in Wales and to part-time loans in Northern Ireland.

Part Time Fee Grant

The Part-time Fee Grant from SAAS is available to students who have an income less than £25,000 gross per annum. 71% of Open University in Scotland undergraduate students are in receipt of the Part-time Fee Grant but neither the level of grant or the threshold has changed for a decade and the gap between the grant and the OU fee was over £290 in 2021/22. To ensure that our students are not disadvantaged in comparison to their full-time counterparts, who receive free tuition, The Open University absorbs the cost of the difference between the grant and the fee at a total cost of £3 million in 2021/22.

Our autumn 2022 intake saw a significant growth in 18–20year-olds choosing to study with the Open University and work at the same time as an alternative to the traditional four-year degree campus university model. This age group increased in size by 14% in headcount terms, while full-time equivalent (FTE) numbers increased by 22%.

Commissioner for Fair Access submission of 21 August 2023

PE2009/F: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

Thank you for affording me opportunity to reflect on Petition PE2009 (Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK). I note that: this petition was published on February 28th, 2023; has (at the time of writing) 4551 signatories; was the subject of a SPICe briefing; was considered by the Scottish Government on March

⁶ Scottish Government. (2017) A New Social Contract for Students; Fairness, Parity and Clarity. Independent Report for Scotland. Edinburgh: Government Publications

29th, to which in turn the petitioner responded on April 19th; and was considered at the Committee meeting of May 17th.

First and foremost, I welcome the interest shown by the petitioner (and the signatories) in fair access to Scottish universities for residents in Scotland. I firmly believe in the importance of widening access to higher education for individual students, the families and communities from which students are drawn, all institutions that deliver higher education in Scotland (including colleges), and wider society.

The petition refers to the particular circumstances of entry to nine courses at the University of Edinburgh in 2022/23 (in which no student without a deprivation 'flag' was permitted entry), asserting that this situation has arisen as a result of a "poor business model" and "lack of funding", with the consequence that a "large swathe of the Scottish population" has been "shut out of Higher Education" (in Scotland).

The concerns raised by the petitioner (and championed by Michael Marra MSP) are not unreasonable. I note that both concur that widening access is laudable, but express concern at unintended consequences of pursuing this goal within the current funding model for higher education in Scotland. I will be encouraging higher education in Scotland to make further progress in widening access, and therefore it is important that the concerns raised by the petitioner are acknowledged.

Although it may not be sufficient to fully address the concerns of the petitioner and signatories, I note three actions that, in my opinion, partly address their concerns.

First, it is my understanding that the University of Edinburgh has adjusted the way in which it utilises 'access data' in reaching decisions on admissions, which would mean that it is less likely that every successful Scottish domiciled applicant to the courses which were a cause of the petitioner's concern in 2022/23 will have a widening access background.

Second, as noted in SPICe briefing, the Scottish Government has convened a working group of stakeholders and experts to review the criteria that are used to measure 'deprivation'. This group is due to report before the end of 2023.

Third, I intend to review the ways in which Scottish HEIs are using access measures in my annual report (which will be published later this year).

None of the above directly addresses the most substantial concern raised by the petitioner, i.e., the funding of universities and possible unintended consequences as a result of pursuing fair access. I intend to review funding arrangements in greater detail in my second year in post, not least as this will enable me to draw on insight from the Student Income and Expenditure Survey that the Scottish Government has commissioned the National Centre for Social Research to undertake.

I would make a few final observations. I do not find evidence that a “large swathe of the Scottish population” has been “shut out of higher education”, or that the current funding arrangements have led to many Scottish domiciled students having to pursue higher education, at personal financial cost, elsewhere in the UK. It is most unfortunate when applicants are unable to secure a place on a course at an institution of their choosing: it is important to acknowledge that for many years in many courses in many institutions, some applicants have been unable to realise their preferences. In promoting fair access to higher education, I am mindful of supply and demand, and will make recommendations where I consider the current system falls short of what is optimal.

Universities Scotland submission of 21 August 2023

PE2009/G: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

Universities Scotland believe that in aggregate across the sector, there are sufficient university places available to meet the aspirations of suitably qualified Scots-domiciled undergraduate learners. However, we recognise the acute pressures on some high-demand courses in some institutions which are especially popular with applicants, and we understand the disappointment when applicants are not successful in being accepted to their chosen course.

In Scottish policy terms “fair access” is most commonly associated with the widening access agenda. Universities Scotland proudly believes in

and supports the fair access agenda, with significant progress made towards the 2030 target of 20% of entrants coming from the 20% most deprived communities as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). This submission will expand on these and related points.

Numbers of Scots-domiciled undergraduates accepted into Scottish universities remains high and stable

UCAS data from SQA Results Day 2023 (with additional context in their media release) provides the latest snapshot of the current cycle of admissions but does not reflect the clearing process underway at the point of writing. These data show:

- 29,220 Scottish applicants had been accepted, compared to 29,630 at the same stage in the cycle in 2022 (-1.4%) and up from 27,880 in 2019 (+4.8%). Increased acceptances through clearing are expected to increase this number. UCAS advises that like-for-like comparisons are made with 2019 because of anomalies during the COVID years.
- 72% of Scottish applicants to UK universities, aged 19 and under, (18,780) have gained a place at their first-choice university, up from 69% last year (18,680) and 65% in 2019 (15,670)
- This is against a backdrop of a lower number of total Scottish applicants (all ages) compared to last year: 43,270 down from 46,970 (-7.8%) last year and 46,330 in 2019 (-6.6%).

Applicant trends

The "Report on Widening Access 2021-22" from SFC (Background table 1B) shows consistent year-on-year growth of Scots-domiciled students entering their first degree, with data sources assessing Scots-domiciled applicants and entrants to Scottish institutions showing a downward trend on total numbers. Combined, these lower numbers applying for a stable number of places has resulted in an increase in the percentage of applicants enrolling.

It is of critical importance that applicants and entrants are set up to succeed in their education journey. There will always be courses with such high demand for places that applicants who meet or exceed the entry requirements are not able to be recruited to their first-choice

course. However, the data would indicate that Scots-domiciled applicants are not missing out on accessing Scottish universities.

Skills Development Scotland data shows that in 2022, the percentage of young adults (16-19) participating in education, training or employment was 92.4%. This indicates that within the post-school system, most young adults can access opportunities in the right place at the right time to meet their needs.

A number of actions taken to ameliorate the impact of the pandemic, made the data for academic years 2020-2022 exceptional. These include:

- Teacher-awarded grades meaning more learners were awarded high grades, so met or exceeded their conditions;
- Scottish Government funded additional places to ensure learners were able to progress;
- Some short-term fluctuations in demand and eligibility, concentrated in higher-tariff institutions.

While it is anticipated that this will rebalance now that Scotland has returned to pre-pandemic models of assessment, care should be taken when drawing conclusions from data reviewing these two years' admissions cycles.

Commitment to Fair Access

Universities Scotland welcomed and embraced the vision and ambition set out in the Commission on Widening Access's 2016 report "A blueprint for fairness". This report was accepted in full as a policy priority by the Scottish Government and has been used as the education system's guide to ensure that access to higher education is predicated on potential, recognising that education is arguably the most powerful tool to tackle socioeconomic inequality.

Figures published by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) show that 16.5% of university entrants in 21/22 were from the 20% most deprived communities in Scotland as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). While progress is being made on fair access, entrance to university continues to be strongest from applicants living in areas classed as least deprived according to SIMD, with 26.3% from the 20% least deprived postcodes.

However, it is Universities Scotland's position that a more nuanced measure is now required to identify deprivation and we have outlined some potential solutions. A measure that identifies an individual's socioeconomic circumstances would allow institutions a greater focus and greater accuracy in the targeting of additional support and contextual markers ensuring that support reaches the individuals who should benefit from this, rather than the current broad catch-all metric that covers everyone in a neighbourhood.

Funding Model

Universities Scotland have been clear that there are substantive and chronic issues within the funding model of HE. However, in our view, if the funding model for Scottish higher education were to be reviewed, the priority should be to look at the unit of teaching resource per student, so that we can meet the increased post-pandemic needs that students have for educational and welfare support. Teaching funding supports the direct teaching and assessment of students, and also a wide range of learning support services, learning technology, welfare support and careers advice. Between 2014 and now, the amount of public funding invested in each Scottish undergraduate has fallen by 27% in real terms while students' needs have increased.

The flat-cash budget settlement for academic year 2023/24 – with inflation running to double figures – represents a real-terms cut to the sector and effectively curtails the sector's ambitions.

Compounding that pressure, in May 2023, the Scottish Government announced a £20m cut to additional resource funding. Such significant reduction in funding to the sector has consequences including risking the world class reputation of the sector.

This would present significant challenge at any time, but more so when universities are supporting a cohort with two years of lost learning and social disruption due to the pandemic, students facing acute mental health challenges and strong correlations between those with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and mental health implications.

We believe that greater levels of public investment are required into Scottish HE to address these growing challenges, but any such investment should be prioritised in the unit of teaching resource per student, rather than an increase in funded places (given the data do not indicate a systemic problem in demand versus availability).

Student places and “displacement”

Universities Scotland remain concerned that discussion on places is still a source of much confusion. Students from outside of Scotland, who pay fees to access their education, do not displace Scots-domiciled students. The number of places available for Scots-domiciled students is ring-fenced by SFC and SG, and institutions face strict penalties for under or over recruitment.

Reviewing the data, Universities Scotland is satisfied that pressure on places at a sector level is stable.

However, it is important to be clear that the recruitment of fee-paying rUK and international students effectively subsidises the education of Scots-domiciled students due to the declining unit of resource allocated to teaching. Without their fee contribution, the university sector would be unable to effectively support all students.

Robert Gordon University submission of 21 August 2023

PE2009/H: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

Funded Places for Scottish-Domiciled Students

Scotland’s universities are diverse, fulfilling a range of missions in support of the needs of the learners and communities which they serve. Our universities make a critical contribution to regional and national economic prosperity, including through developing the skilled workforce that Scotland requires now, and into the future.

The number of funded places for Scottish-domiciled students is ring-fenced by the cap on total funded numbers available. SFC funded places are protected for Scottish-domiciled students. Scottish-domiciled students are not in competition with rUK or international students for places at Scottish universities. Additionally, since AY2021-22, funded places that EU students would have previously been eligible for were ‘freed-up’ by the SFC to increase the number of places for Scottish-domiciled students.

Universities have the flexibility to deploy their non-controlled SFC funded places across their courses. As an important part of their obligations, universities will consider the regional and national labour market in order to match as best as they can, the supply of places for particular courses with labour market needs. Admission to some courses within institutions can, therefore, be highly competitive, where demand for places may far outstrip the availability of places.

The issues raised in the petition relate to the admissions' practice within the University of Edinburgh. UCAS figures released on 8th August 2023 show 72% of young Scottish applicants, aged 19 and under, gained a place at their first choice university, up from 69% last year. The SPICe briefing accompanying the petition shows that a total of ten universities in Scotland, including RGU offer the LLB programme. In RGU's case, entrants to our LLB programme span SIMD demographics, and entry is not restricted to learners from MD20 or MD40 postcodes.

The present funding system provides institutions with budgetary certainty within which they are able to plan course provision and allocate staff resource in line with expected demand while ensuring a high-quality student experience. There is not an issue of too few funded places. The SFC made available across the sector more than four thousand additional non-controlled funded places during AY2021-22 in part as a response to meet the increased demand arising from the use of teacher-assessed grades to determine SQA awards. Much of this demand was concentrated in higher-tariff institutions as a consequence of the number of A grades awarded increasing, while the number of B and C grades awarded decreased. RGU's enrolment of Scottish-domiciled undergraduates actually decreased as a result of students 'trading-up', and included fewer learners entering the college sector which, in turn, has affected our enrolment of articulating students from college. It is also notable that for AY2023-24, SFC reduced the number of non-controlled funded places by 1,000 FTEs in response to the under-recruitment of students across the sector, which provides further evidence that there is not an issue of there being too few places.

It is also worth noting that between AY2013-14 and 2017-18, SFC made available additional funded places for widening access that were targeted at ten of Scotland's 'most selective' universities. This was the position prior to the additional widening access places being 'mainstreamed' within universities core places from AY2018-19.

Widening Access to University

RGU is committed to widening access to university from among disadvantaged learners. The current measure of assessing universities' performance on widening access, based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation is, however, a crude one. It does not take account of the regional context within which universities operate. RGU has a strong focus on regional recruitment in a region with low numbers of MD20 school students. There are far fewer MD20 postcodes within the North East of Scotland compared to the central belt; less than 8% of Aberdeen City and 1.7% of Aberdeenshire postcodes are categorised as MD20. We are therefore reliant on attracting MD20 school leavers from outside the local area and, in the last five years, we have recruited approximately 75% of our MD20 entrants from beyond the region. It will remain extremely challenging for RGU to meet the institutional target that 10% of all Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants should come from MD20 postcodes as a result of the University's geographical location and the very competitive recruitment environment for MD20 students despite increased offer to study rates.

The previous Commissioner on Fair Access, Prof Sir Peter Scott advised that institutional targets based on SIMD are no longer fit-for-purpose. The University has repeatedly called upon the Scottish Government to accept and implement the Commissioner's recommendation where institutions would be able to develop a basket of indicators upon which progress on widening access can be assessed. The University is contributing to the short-life working group established by Scottish Government to review and assess the widening access measures used. As no single indicator is entirely satisfactory as a measure of disadvantage, applying a basket of measures would provide a more holistic and inclusive approach. This would have the benefit of enabling a broader range of learners to benefit from universities' support for widening access, while also providing a more comprehensive and agile approach to assessing and recognising institutions' progress towards fair access.

RGU undertakes a wide range of activity throughout Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and beyond to make HE accessible to a broad range of learners. We have introduced a distinct to RGU 'Hub' model of school engagement where University staff are embedded in around 25 regional schools, working directly on a sustained basis with teachers and

learners, including those furthest from higher education, to support a positive journey to university.

RGU works in partnership with colleges from across Scotland to provide guaranteed progression pathways for students. In 2021-22, 346 students joined the University from colleges across Scotland. The University's sector leading partnership with North East Scotland College (NESCol) now has 60 course level agreements across all of our eleven schools. The University has developed a substantial number of Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) progression routes. We continue to enhance our engagement with this programme to promote HE to adult returners to education.

University of Edinburgh submission of 22 August 2023

PE2009/I: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

We write in response to your request for a view from the University of Edinburgh on the issues raised in this petition.

The petition specifically notes information published by University of Edinburgh on admittance of students from Scotland from specific backgrounds, and so we focus on our approach to this in the response below.

We are incredibly proud of our diverse University community and want to ensure that all of our students can flourish at Edinburgh, regardless of their background. Our Undergraduate community is made up of students from Scotland, across the wider UK, and from around the globe. We are regularly in a position where demand from very well qualified applicants exceeds the number of places available. Against this background, our overall Scotland-domiciled undergraduate student population is capped by the Scottish Funding Council, which directly informs the total number of places we can make available to this cohort.

We continue to review our admissions processes to ensure that, where possible, and within the context of the total number of places available, there are students from a range of backgrounds on our respective

degree programmes. Our contextual admissions measures aim to ensure that our approach is as fair and robust as possible and are founded on research, institutional modelling and government policy.

As part of our commitment to widening access, we may make offers based on our minimum entry requirements to eligible applicants. We have been pleased to see an increase in demand from widening access applicants in recent years, which is fully in line with our Widening Participation ambitions, aligning with the Scottish Government's Commission for Fair Access. However, in a small number of subjects, the unforeseen scale of the increased demand in the last two admissions cycles, set against the places available, has impacted our ability to make offers to all widening access applicants. For this reason, we are not always able to guarantee widening access offers to all eligible applicants for our high demand degrees. In these cases, we may have to select between eligible applicants for the offers that are available. Our early view of 2023 entry indicates that we expect to admit Scotland-domiciled students from a range of backgrounds on all programmes.

Further information:

We have published an overview of our approach to the 2023 Admissions Cycle [here](#)

We also publish information in relation to eligibility for widening access offers at Edinburgh [here](#)

Information relating our Admissions Statistics can be found [here](#).

Petitioner submission of 2 October 2023

PE2009/J: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

Petitioner's Additional Questions for universities in relation to the 2023 intake

1. Can you provide a complete list of the courses you run and show how many places were available on each course in 2023?
2. For each course, can you please provide a breakdown showing the following:
 - a. How many places were “ring fenced”* for Scottish domiciled students?
 - b. How many places were available to overseas students?
 - c. How many places were available to students in the rest of the UK?
3. Can you please provide details showing how many applications were received, and can you please break this figure down by course and by origin (i.e. Scottish domiciled, Scottish domiciled and flagged, Overseas, and rest of UK)
4. Can you please show how many applicants were successful, and can you please further break this figure down by course and origin?
5. For each course, can you please provide a breakdown showing the following:
 - a. The number of successful Scottish domiciled applicants
 - b. The number of successful Scottish domiciled applicants with a flag in terms of the widening access regime
 - c. The number of successful overseas applicants
 - d. The number of successful applicants from the rest of the UK

* I use the term “ring fenced” because universities have described there being a set amount predetermined by Scottish government funding