A BLUEPRINT FOR FAIRNESS

THE FINAL REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON WIDENING ACCESS
MARCH 2016

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Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland,
26 November 2014

CHAIR'S FOREWORD

'A Blueprint for Fairness', is the final report of the Commission on Widening Access. The task set to us by government was to advise on the steps necessary to achieve the First Minister's ambition that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of entering university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities.

CHAIR'S FOREWORD

This is a challenging objective. The latest figures from UCAS show that 18 year-olds from Scotland's 20% *least* deprived communities are more than four times as likely to enter university as those from the 20% *most* deprived communities. For those who wish to enter the most selective institutions, the position is considerably worse.

Fundamentally, access is an issue of fairness and it is our firm belief that Scotland has a moral, social and economic duty to tackle this inequality. Scotland has a truly world-class higher education system, perhaps the most powerful weapon there is to combat socioeconomic inequality. Yet this predominantly publicly funded asset disproportionately benefits those in our most affluent communities, meaning that, through accident of birth, those in our most disadvantaged communities have nothing like an equal chance to realise their potential.

Fair access is also much more than an altruistic endeavour: avoiding this lost potential is firmly in Scotland's social and economic interests. Graduates are healthier, live longer and enjoy better employment outcomes. We know too that the social, cultural and financial benefits of higher education can be transmitted between generations, breaking cycles of deprivation and contributing to a fairer, more prosperous and inclusive Scotland.

There is an economic imperative here. We are living through a global shift towards increasingly knowledge based economies, placing a premium on innovation and high end skills. In this context, the key economic asset of any nation is the talent and skills of its people. Yet, by failing to fairly distribute the opportunities necessary for all of our people to flourish, Scotland is missing out on the economic potential of some of our finest talents.

There is no doubt that achieving fair access is both the right and most strategic thing to do. Yet the public debate on fair access is often unhelpfully simplistic: some argue that it is a straightforward matter of closing the school attainment gap, others that it is simply down to what they perceive as the elitism of universities.

In reality, it could hardly be a more sophisticated, subtle problem. It is rooted in family homes and local communities, in the complex mix of factors that shape aspiration and in the cultural differences between socioeconomic groups. It is exacerbated by the systemic unfairness evident in the admissions and selection processes of institutions, in the school attainment gap and in the efficiency of transitions between education sectors.

Chair's Foreword

Access is a whole system problem and it will require system wide change to solve it.

In this report we identify clear and tangible actions that can be taken by all parts of the system to drive progress. The present generation of work on access is reaching a natural end and the time is ripe for a more coordinated, collaborative and comprehensive approach. There is a genuine commitment and determination in Scotland to embrace this challenge. Throughout our extensive engagement activities the Commission has consistently been presented with proposals for bold and creative action. Through this process of engagement the Commission has become confident that there is an appetite for radical but realistic change.

There are more reasons for optimism. We have been struck by how conducive the current policy landscape is to achieving the necessary step change. *A Blueprint for Fairness* stands shoulder to shoulder with a whole series of educational and social justice reforms: the recent recommendations of the Independent Poverty Adviser; the plans to enhance the volume and quality of early years provision; and the work to close the school attainment gap.

To be clear, our position is not that every child should go to university or that this option should be held above all others, but we do believe that they should have the chance to do so. Fair access is entirely complementary to the work of the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) programme. Together they will ensure that all young people will be able to select from a range of fairly distributed, high quality post-school opportunities that best match their aptitude and ambition.

I close by thanking the large number of colleagues and friends who have supported the Commission's work and who shared with us, with such generosity, their expertise and hopes for change. I have learned so much and have enjoyed immensely participating in the literally hundreds of discussions and debates that have informed this work. I trust that you will recognise your voice in the thinking reflected on these pages.

Thanks go also to my fellow Commissioners, who throughout our work have displayed great ambition, determination and judgement, feeding in insights from across education and business.

Chair's Foreword

Finally, on behalf of the whole Commission, let me express deep gratitude to our secretariat: to Lynn Graham and Stephen O'Neill for their constant determination and diligence, particularly in the drafting of our Interim and Final Reports. They were excellently assisted by: Ryan Scott, Carina MacRitchie, Fiona Burns and John Kemp with their tireless service. Finally, thanks to Rebekah Widdowfield for ably supporting us all from design to delivery.

We pass this report to the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in the strong belief that implementing these recommendations will make a significant dent in entrenched disadvantage; improving life chances and social mobility in Scotland.

By now, the children referred to by the First Minister in November 2014 are already sixteen months old. They will soon embark on their life defining journey through the system described on these pages. For them and for all our futures, their path to success must be a fair one. It is therefore our singular hope that *A Blueprint for Fairness* will be received positively by all: it has been designed to be deliverable.

Dame Ruth Silver
March 2016

Background

In the 2014-15 Programme for Government the Scottish Government set out its ambition that every child, irrespective of socioeconomic background, should have an equal chance of accessing higher education. This Commission on Widening Access was established to advise Ministers on the steps necessary to achieve this.

Our Philosophy

In our interim report, we observed that the consensus that equal access is an important objective can mask the reality that access is a divisive issue on which there exists a range of tensions and opposing viewpoints. We believe that this has hindered progress. Through this report the Commission has set out a clear national strategy for how the First Minister's vision of equal access can be achieved. We repeat again our beliefs on access:

• Equal access is fundamentally about fairness
• Equal access is a social good
• Equal access is compatible with academic excellence
• Equal access is an economic good

The inequality in higher education is unfair, damaging and unsustainable. There is therefore an undeniable case for change: Scotland has a moral, social and economic duty to achieve equal access. This philosophy is the lens through which the Commission has viewed its task.

Approach to the Task

In developing our recommendations the Commission gathered evidence from a wide range of sources. To inform our interim report we issued a Call for Evidence in June 2015, reviewed existing evidence and commissioned a literature review on barriers to fair access. We also held a series of consultation events and meetings across Scotland and took presentations from key stakeholders at Commission meetings including: students, care leavers, experts and practitioners. In the second half of our work, we held a series of expert groups, bringing together practitioners and professionals from a range of sectors and specialisms, to test and enrich our thinking as we began to shape our recommendations.

Placing Development in the Hands of the Experts

We have engaged with many practitioners from across all parts of the education system and have consistently been impressed with their expertise and dedication to fair access. They have engaged with, and enthusiastically supported, the Commission's work throughout and have shared with us their vision and ideas for bold and creative solutions to achieve equal access. Many of these ideas are reflected in our recommendations. For other areas we look with confidence to further engagement with the professionals to inform the shape of the solutions required.

The Final Report

The Commission's [interim report](#) took stock of where Scotland is on access to higher education. It identified and examined the main barriers and systemic issues that may be obstructing equal access and highlighted some of the models of best practice encountered by the Commission. Much of the evidence presented in the interim report forms the foundations for the recommendations in *A Blueprint for Fairness.* The two reports should therefore be read in conjunction as two parts of the same story. In this, our final report, we propose 34 recommendations which we believe will support Scotland to achieve the goal of equal access for those from deprived backgrounds or with a care experience. All of these are important and are discussed below; however, in the text below, we highlight a small number of foundational recommendations which reflect the bold action that we believe is necessary to deliver a step change in progress.

A System Wide Effort

In our interim report we concluded that socioeconomic inequality in higher education is a problem which spans the whole education system and beyond into wider social policy. Yet this Commission is the first body to have undertaken a holistic, strategic review of the problem and the contributions that can be made by each part of the system to bring about its resolution. It is also time to rebalance the focus from the perceived deficit in the individual to what more the system can do to support disadvantaged learners to succeed.

A systemic approach is therefore critical to drive progress. The report identifies a number of areas where early learning providers, schools, colleges and universities[1] need to work more closely together to deliver the best provision for learners (Recommendations 4, 10, 15, 16 and 18). However, at present, responsibility for delivering change and improvement on access rests with a number of different bodies across a range of sectors – we believe something more is needed. Our first recommendation is therefore for the appointment of a Commissioner for Fair Access to provide leadership, a voice for our most disadvantaged learners and a challenge – to all parts of the education system and Government – to do more and to push harder:

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1   The term university in this report refers to universities and other higher education institutions in Scotland.

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.

Focusing on What Works

We have been clear from the outset that this Commission would build on the good practice that already exists. We have seen the success of bridging programmes, which provide a stepping stone from one part of the system to another, and recommend that these programmes are scaled up nationally to ensure they meet demand (Recommendation 7). We also recognise the advances that have taken place with articulation pathways in Scotland and explore how this route can be expanded and developed going forward (Recommendations 8 and 9). It is extremely important that the admissions processes of post-16 institutions recognise such alternative pathways to higher education and do not unnecessarily disadvantage those who choose them (Recommendation 5).

Elsewhere there is very little evidence of the relative effectiveness of different access initiatives. This lack of robust evidence has presented the Commission with challenges in identifying the interventions that deliver most impact. Considerable sums of public money are invested in access initiatives both by the Scottish Funding Council and institutions themselves and it is vital that this is spent to best effect. A Framework for Fair Access will provide Scotland with an authoritative, evidence based framework to guide future access work and set the benchmark for access interventions going forward:

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.

Improving Admissions

We are acutely aware of the potential impact of early years and school attainment on access, and there is a role for universities and colleges to play in supporting disadvantaged learners in the earlier stages of their learning (Recommendations 15 and 16). We have recognised the importance of ensuring that learners can access key Highers (Recommendation 18) and have access to personalised information, advice and guidance throughout their education journey (Recommendations 17 and 20).

All of this, however, will have little impact on fair access unless we ensure that admissions systems do not perpetuate the disadvantages learners have faced earlier in life but instead provide those who have the potential with the opportunity to succeed. We know that in many cases entry requirements have risen well beyond what is required to succeed in degree level study and that there is compelling evidence that the school attainment of disadvantaged learners often does not reflect their full potential. The introduction of access thresholds for all degree courses in Scotland will expand the pool of applicants from deprived backgrounds and more importantly will provide talented young people with the opportunity to realise their full potential:

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.

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.

Grades are not the only factor which impacts on the fairness of admissions processes: more work is needed to understand the use of non-academic factors in admissions and their impact on disadvantaged learners (Recommendation 14). Entry grades are also a factor in university rankings, which impact significantly on the reputation of institutions and their ability to generate income. Engagement with those compiling rankings should be undertaken to ensure greater priority is given to socioeconomic diversity when assessing universities (Recommendation 13).

Care Experience

The Commission is conscious that the particular challenges faced by those with a care experience, both by their nature and magnitude, set this group of learners apart. Scotland must therefore be much bolder in its ambition for, and commitment to, those with care experience if we are to deliver fairness for this group of learners. We believe that an entitlement system should be introduced for care experienced learners, along with enhanced bursary and a more flexible package of student support:

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 against minimum entry level in 2017 and the access threshold thereafter.

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.

We have set an immediate priority for the Commissioner for Fair Access to develop better evidence on the impact of student finance on access and retention for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to inform future policy in this area (Recommendation 19).

Driving Progress

It is essential that Scotland makes the best use of the public funds available to support access (Recommendations 24 and 25). The Commission has discussed more innovative approaches to funding that could better target funds to support fair access – such options should be explored going forward (Recommendation 26). Regulation will also play a key role in driving progress. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) should make more extensive use of their existing regulatory powers, where appropriate (Recommendation 27) and the Scottish Government should ensure that objectives relating to fair access are embedded in the regulatory frameworks of other agencies with a role to play in advancing equal access (Recommendation 28).

The use of data and analysis is fundamental to supporting fair access. We must make best use of the data we already have as well as developing new systems and analyses (Recommendation 30). The use of a unique learner number

across all education will be key in our ability to track learners and share data to support fair access going forward (Recommendation 29). The Commission recognises the value of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as a marker for deprivation and it is our view that it should continue to be used for tracking, monitoring and targets relating to fair access in the coming years. But we also recognise that a more individualised approach to identify those from disadvantaged backgrounds is essential when providing support or making decisions about individual learners. We have recommended the development of a robust and consistent approach to this across institutions (Recommendation 31).

Pace and focus must be maintained. We have therefore proposed a set of targets which make clear our expectation of the progress that is necessary, and achievable, by different sectors and institutions, in the intervening years if the ambition of equal access is to be achieved:

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:

- By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds 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.

A Blueprint for Fairness

This is our *Blueprint for Fairness* – a system-wide plan for fair access in Scotland. The recommendations within this report are achievable and can deliver equal access within a generation. It is Scotland's moral, social and economic duty to make this a reality for today's children.

Commissioner for Fair Access

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.

Identifying and Sharing Good Practice

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.

Coordinating the Delivery of What Works

Recommendation 4: Universities, colleges, local authorities, schools, 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.

Flexible Transitions

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.

Bridging Programmes

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

Articulation

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

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 universities 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.

Access Thresholds for Admissions

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.

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.

University Rankings

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.

Non-Academic Factors in Admissions

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.

Early Years

Recommendation 15: Univesities 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.

School Attainment

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.

Information, Advice and Guidance

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.

Access to Key Subjects

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.

Financial Support for Learners

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.

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.

Supporting those with Care Experience

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 against minimum entry level in 2017 and 2018 and the access threshold thereafter.

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.

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 a flag. Young people with care experience must be included in the development of how this would be used and shared.

Funding

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.

Regulation

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.

Better Use of Data to Support Fair 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.

Measures to Identify Access Learners

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.

Targets

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:

- By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds 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 HEIs 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.

Agenda for the Future

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.

Final Recommendation

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.

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In our interim report we concluded that socioeconomic inequality in higher education is an issue which spans the whole education system and beyond into wider social policy. Yet this Commission is the first body to have undertaken a holistic, strategic review of the issue and the contribution that can be made by each part of the system to its resolution.

This systemic approach should be evident throughout our report. In Chapter 2 we discuss how the joins between different parts of the system can be enhanced to provide better access pathways into higher education. In Chapter 3 we take a system wide view of how best to support and develop learners from the early years through to graduation and in Chapter 4 we discuss better sharing and use of data across all education sectors.

In this opening Chapter we discuss how the system can come together to deliver a better, more coordinated and effective package of programmes for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. But first we make the case for someone to lead and maintain this systemic approach in the coming years to drive this agenda on fairness forward at the pace we desire.

A Commissioner for Fair Access

Despite our conclusion that access is a whole system problem, the debate on equal access often centres on what more universities can do, with the primary strategic responsibilities for access resting with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

We believe these arrangements are insufficient. The SFC has jurisdiction only over post-16 education bodies, with no locus over the many 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.

This lack of strategic overview is also at the root of several of the most important themes identified in our interim report, including the lack of conclusive research evidence in a number of key areas and the lack of coherence and coordination of access activity within and across sectors.

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.

We want to avoid any duplication or additional layers of bureaucracy which place pressure on already scarce resources. This role is about advocacy and the strategic leadership necessary to bring together all parts of the system to support fair access. We envisage that this could be achieved by a single Commissioner for Fair Access supported by a small number of staff. The position could perhaps be established through a process similar to that of the appointment of the Children and Young People's Commissioner. However there are various models of how this might be achieved and we see no need to be overly prescriptive. We believe that a Commissioner for Fair Access is critical to drive progress in the initial years, at the very least, of this programme of work.

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.

Developing and Improving Access Activity

The commitment of universities to widening access is strong. Every institution in Scotland has developed its own bespoke portfolio of programmes and initiatives, in which they invest considerable energy and resource.

There is therefore no shortage of provision for learners. Instead, the problems identified in our previous report are the need for a more coordinated delivery of programmes across the entire education system and robust, quantitative evidence on what works.

Identifying and sharing good practice

The lack of robust, quantitative, research based evidence on the success of access programmes is a particularly frustrating problem. It is presently almost impossible to judge with precision which programmes deliver meaningful impact, and consequently, where best to target the substantial public and institutional resource that is invested in access.

Yet the solution is straightforward. At the heart of all access programmes should be rigorous arrangements for monitoring and evaluation, based on sound research methodology. Over time, sharing the robust data yielded from these processes across the whole education system will contribute to the development of a more substantial and reliable national evidence base.

As this evidence base takes shape, the Commissioner for Fair Access should take the lead in the development and publication of a Scottish Framework for Fair Access – a good practice guide for Scotland. This Framework should draw upon the emerging evidence to define the specific interventions and learning components which deliver most impact at each stage of the educational journey. The Framework should develop and evolve as we acquire a more sophisticated understanding of the interventions that have most impact. Our recommendations to improve data and processes to track and monitor individuals will also support this understanding. We propose that the first iteration of this framework should be published in 2018.

The Framework should come to be regarded as an authoritative, evidence based guide to best practice. In line with this, public funding for access should increasingly be focussed on programmes which are consistent with the Framework.

We are clear that the Framework should not inhibit innovation. Experimentation and creativity are to be encouraged and will play a crucial role in identifying new, more effective delivery models. However, where new approaches are being introduced, we would expect that they first be tested on a pilot basis, with programmes being rigorously evaluated before being rolled out on a larger scale.

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.

Coordinating the delivery of what works

If we are to achieve the step change necessary to secure fair access then a better understanding and recognition of what works is essential. But so too is coherent delivery of the most impactful interventions to ensure that disadvantaged learners receive the right support at the right time. Better coordination in the delivery of access programmes is also essential if we are to remove duplication, make best use of resources and simplify the somewhat cluttered, confusing landscape that exists at present.

We have heard of instances where 12 separate initiatives, delivered by multiple providers but each with similar objectives, were being offered to a single secondary school. This illustrates the clutter – from the school's perspective – but also the duplication that can make it hard for learners, and their advisers, to navigate their way through the system.

We have seen a number of good examples of coordinated activity across sectors, for example between a single university, a college and local schools but fewer examples of coordination within sectors, where, for example, a group of universities have come together to deliver a coherent offer across a region.

It is therefore crucial that those planning and delivering programmes, especially those operating primarily within the same region, work together and across the education system to provide a package of support that is clear, coordinated and comprehensive, providing access to the most impactful forms of activity at each stage of the learner journey. To maximise effectiveness, schools must play a central role in planning provision, articulating the specific needs of their young people rather than simply acting, or being seen, purely as the recipients of access activity.

At the same time, a more regional approach to coordination and delivery of programmes should not preclude learners accessing higher education anywhere in Scotland and it is therefore essential that institutions across Scotland recognise and give due weight to participation in programmes, like summer schools, delivered in other parts of the country.

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.

The contribution of other funders

In addition to the resources being invested in access by the SFC, Scottish Government and institutions, Scotland is also in the fortunate position of benefitting from a number of charitable and private funders, such as the Robertson Trust, Sutton Trust and MCR Pathways who have a passionate commitment to supporting social mobility through fair access to higher education.

Charitable, private and philanthropic funders contribute in a range of ways: for example by funding scholarships and bursaries, facilitating work experience and internship opportunities, and supporting graduates to successfully enter the labour market. We have consistently been impressed not just with their generosity of commitment but particularly with the significant expertise they have accumulated through working directly and often in new ways with people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is therefore important that the wider system harnesses this expertise and that the distinctive and powerful contribution of these funders is recognised in progressing fair access.

We are also keen that these funders, like all sectors and organisations with key roles to play, should seek both to maximise the impact of their existing interventions and to contribute to our shared understanding of the activities and programmes that deliver most benefit. There is no doubt that these funders can inform the Scottish Framework for Fair Access (Recommendation 2) and make a valuable contribution to a coherent offer for learners (Recommendation 4).

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Much of the work to advance fair access is Scotland is presently focussed on supporting and developing individuals to realise their potential. As we shall explore in detail in Chapter 3, this is a legitimate and important strand of work that can maximise the pool of talent from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education.

We must challenge any perception, however, that fair access is purely a matter of overcoming the perceived deficits in individuals. If Scotland is serious about securing the scale of progress required, then we must also consider more fundamental, systemic change.

In this chapter we return to the key systemic issues flagged in our interim report, such as fairer admissions and more flexible, joined up transitions between sectors, which we believe can be adapted to ensure that Scotland has a higher education system which is as open as possible to embracing this new talent.

Flexible Transitions

Scottish education has evolved significantly over the last decade or so. Through Curriculum for Excellence and the introduction of the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Programme, young people now have access to a far more flexible range of pathways that can be tailored to suit their personal ambitions, abilities and aptitudes.

The full impact of these changes is still unfolding. But it is likely this greater flexibility will result in many young people opting for a more blended approach to learning in the senior phase[2], for example by undertaking Open University courses in schools or vocational modules delivered in college, moving beyond the traditional model of studying five Highers in fifth year, which continues to form the basis of admissions to many universities.

This shifting landscape makes it all the more critical that systems are joined up: young people who take advantage of wider choices in the senior phase should not be unnecessarily penalised with restricted opportunities to enter university. This will require universities to be more responsive to change and to exhibit greater flexibility in terms of the qualifications and routes that are fully accredited in the admissions process.

There is also clear duplication of provision between schools, colleges and universities in the key transition phases between SCQF levels six and eight. For example, it is possible for learners to operate at SCQF level seven for a full three years

2   S4 to S6 in school

before progressing to a higher level of study[3]. Another anomaly is that entry to university is often based on Highers obtained in S5, despite the fact that 98% of 2013/14 school leavers who entered university did so following S6.

It is a strength of the Scottish system, especially in the context of fair access, that learners who need it have the flexibility to benefit from additional time and support to realise their academic potential. However, the above observations raise the question of whether this time and resource is always being used to best effect and whether there are opportunities to use it in a more creative and impactful way to support fairer access.

For example, for some learners it may be possible to make better use of S6 through the delivery of accredited bridging programmes (see next section) to raise aspirations, support improved attainment and facilitate smoother transitions into higher education. We have also seen examples of good practice which suggest that the first year of degree programmes can also be adapted to better support the recruitment and retention of access students, for example through the targeted provision of more intensive academic support and pastoral care.

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.

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3   Advanced Higher in S6, HNC in college then year one of a degree programme

Bridging Programmes

In Chapter 1 we highlighted the challenges presented by the lack of robust evidence on which kinds of access programmes are most effective. However there is one exception to this: there is good evidence of the positive impact made by academically based programmes which enable disadvantaged learners to supplement their attainment by engaging with university curricula. Examples include academically rigorous summer schools, gateway programmes and top-up schemes. For clarity we will refer to programmes of this kind as 'bridging programmes'.

The reason these programmes have such a powerful impact is that they simultaneously address a range of barriers, whilst also providing participants with a clear and realistic pathway to admission. Prospective applicants can familiarise themselves with a university campus and tutors, meet potential classmates and sample the teaching style and academic standards they will be expected to meet. Here, the positive impact on aspiration and the dismantling of cultural barriers is clear. Crucially, participants are also able to showcase their academic ability, in the knowledge that successful completion will result in an offer that is fair and achievable. For their part, institutions, by observing first-hand how participants cope with the academic rigour of the programme can more accurately judge ability, allowing them to more confidently make adjusted offers.

We have also heard evidence from educational professionals that young people who undertake these programmes during their school career return to school significantly more engaged and motivated to achieve the grades necessary to gain admission. This means bridging programmes have the potential to go beyond acting simply as an academic top-up, to facilitate improved school attainment in the first place.

The difficulty is that there are relatively few of these programmes and places are limited on those which do exist. Given the power of bridging programmes to advance fair access, we must ensure there is enough of this provision to make a significant impact at national level and that sufficient places are made available to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners across Scotland. We also see no compelling reason why the academic credit earned through the completion of a bridging programme at one university should not be recognised by institutions across the sector.

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.

Articulation

Articulation pathways, defined as progression from college to university where full credit is awarded for prior learning, is a distinctive and much admired feature of Scottish post-16 education. In our interim report we identified the expansion of articulation pathways as a real success story of Scottish higher education and a powerful means of advancing fair access.

To recap, disadvantaged learners are much more likely than their more affluent peers to begin their higher education in college rather than university. In 2013/14 nearly 29% of all college students and 22% of HE college students were from Scotland's 20% most deprived communities (SIMD20). In the same year, 4,515 students from SIMD20 communities successfully achieved a Higher National[4] qualification. These figures show that colleges provide a crucial alternative route into higher education and can play a powerful role in expanding the limited applicant pool resulting from the school attainment gap. It is clear that this potential can be most effectively exploited through reliable, well-designed articulation pathways.

However, we also identified a number of areas in which the impact of articulation on fair access could be improved. While much progress has been made in recent years, there is currently significant variance across the university sector in terms of the extent to which different institutions engage with articulation: in 2013/14 around 84% of total articulation was delivered by five institutions.

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4   HNC or HND

There is also significant variance in terms of the level of credit that is awarded for prior learning. For example, in 2013/14 43% of learners from SIMD20 communities progressing from college to university did not articulate at all in that they were awarded no credit for prior learning. Moreover, there is a clear tendency for more selective institutions to award less credit for prior learning than other parts of the sector, most notably the post-92 institutions. In 2013/14 only around 1% of SIMD20 learners who progressed from college to university with full credit for prior learning entered one of Scotland's four ancient institutions.

Engaging with the sector

In our interim report we committed to working with the sector to understand whether there are legitimate reasons for this variance in approaches. Several of those consulted offered the opinion that the successful expansion of articulation in the post-92 institutions has taken time and was to an extent supported by the SFC's investment of strategic funding. It was suggested that extending this approach to other institutions could support an expansion of articulation across the wider sector.

However, the SFC has advised that this investment was a response, rather than a driver of this expansion and that while this funding was made available to all institutions, it was the post-92s who took most advantage. Moreover, in recent years the SFC has invested in additional places for articulation. While this has increased the number of universities offering articulation pathways, it has not necessarily led to all institutions viewing articulation as a core activity.

Perhaps more substantively, several of those consulted suggested that any hesitancy to engage with articulation may be explained by data held by institutions which suggests that learners who progress from college to more selective institutions withdraw at a higher rate than standard entrants, especially if they are awarded advanced entry.

We have paid careful attention to these concerns: it is in nobody's interest, least of all students', to set people up to fail. But we are also conscious that since articulation is not a core activity in these institutions, they are less likely to have in place the core elements regarded as pre-requisites for successful articulation; such as seamless curricular links, entering as part of a familiar cohort, transitional academic support and targeted pastoral care.

We cannot therefore discount the possibility that any evidence of articulating students withdrawing at a higher rate in these institutions is down to the absence of these core elements rather than any fundamental academic issues. This point is supported by the consistent evidence that those entering university through well-established articulation routes perform just as well as the standard cohort.

Our conclusion

Overall, we believe it is important that all institutions engage strongly with articulation. Most standard routes into university depend upon achieving good results at Higher. To an extent this is true even of contextual admissions and the various academic bridging programmes. But there is a significant cohort of disadvantaged learners who leave school with few, if any, formal qualifications. For these learners, articulation is a crucial alternative route into university.

We therefore see no good reason why Scotland should persist with an essentially stratified higher education system where learners who take longer to realise their potential have access only to a restricted number of institutions and courses. We therefore believe that all universities should be required to engage meaningfully with articulation, building on the numerous examples of best practice already in place across the sector.

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.

Monitoring unintended consequences

We are conscious that if selective institutions begin admitting larger volumes of HN students with advanced standing, this may fundamentally alter the profile of applicants, creating much stiffer competition for articulation places. A significant volume of new applicants with higher attainment than one would normally expect could result in disadvantaged learners being squeezed out. Such an outcome is not aligned to the spirit of our recommendation above, and it is plainly undesirable if new articulation routes simply evolve into another mechanism for perpetuating unfairness.

It is therefore important that the expansion of articulation is monitored to ensure it continues to support disadvantaged learners to progress to degree level study.

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.

Encouraging new models

While the present model of articulation has been an undoubted success, it relies upon the development of very close curricular links between specific courses at specific institutions. The consequence for learners is a fairly restricted choice of courses and institutions to which they can progress with their HN qualification. Universities and colleges should therefore be encouraged to explore whether there are more flexible, learner centred models which could facilitate access to a broader range of courses and institutions

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.

Admissions

Over the last decade, a gradual improvement in school attainment has led to increased demand for higher education in the context of a system with a fixed number of places. In order to manage this increased competition, universities have, perhaps understandably, responded by raising entry requirements.

Universities have approached our discussions with them on this issue with candour, acknowledging that this trend has led to a position where many institutions now routinely ask for substantially higher grades than the level of attainment that is necessary to successfully complete degree programmes.

Since disadvantaged learners are much less likely than their more affluent peers to achieve the very high grades often now required to enter university, it is they who have been disadvantaged most by this trend. The increasing use of contextual admissions is in part a mechanism to mitigate this problem.

Contextualising achievement

In our interim report we drew attention to the increasingly compelling evidence that, within a certain range of attainment, disadvantaged learners consistently achieve the same, or even better, degree classifications than their more advantaged peers with higher grades. This suggests that the applicant pool is being unnecessarily, and unfairly, limited by an over reliance on school attainment as the primary measure of academic ability.

Focussing purely on grades, in isolation from the context in which they are achieved, means that universities are often failing to identify and recruit the best talent. As is repeatedly made clear in the academic literature, it also serves to replicate social inequalities manifesting earlier in the educational journey and unfairly discriminates against bright applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The evidence here is compelling: a learner who achieves good grades in a significantly more challenging context, without the advantages of a more affluent background, is likely to be especially bright and well-motivated. It is therefore unsurprising that such individuals flourish when placed in world class learning environments.

Access thresholds

The Scottish university sector is responsive to this emerging evidence: many institutions now routinely take account of contextual factors such as school performance, uptake of free school meals[5] and lack of parental experience of HE. In some, but not all, cases this can lead to a modest lowering of entry tariffs.

While this progress is welcome, we believe there is a compelling, evidence based argument for more radical action. Our proposal is for the formal introduction of separate entry requirements for the most disadvantaged learners for degree programmes right across the university sector. Rather than the market rate, these new access thresholds should be based on the minimum academic standard judged necessary to successfully complete a specific degree programme.

Institutions should set access thresholds with genuine ambition: the University of Glasgow's Top-Up programme and St Andrews, Gateway to Physics initiative have already set a benchmark of reducing standard tariffs by between five and seven grades. Crucially, by delivering targeted academic and pastoral support in the initial stages of study, neither has experienced any detrimental impact on academic standards. We therefore see no strong reason why similar, or even more progressive approaches cannot be mainstreamed right across the sector.

It may be argued that access thresholds are unfair and that everyone should be expected to meet the same academic standards. This would only be a good argument if all applicants had the same opportunities to realise their potential. But this is plainly not the case: disadvantaged learners face educational, cultural and systemic barriers which make their journey into higher education much more difficult. It is therefore squarely upon their shoulders that any disadvantage or unfair denial of opportunity rests. Access thresholds will simply help correct this imbalance by creating a more level playing field until such time as fair access is achieved.

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5   As a proxy for household income

Monitoring and regulating access thresholds

Though our intention is to maximise the pool of disadvantaged applicants with a realistic chance of succeeding at university, in the initial phase of change we do not envisage access thresholds operating as an entitlement. There may sometimes be good reasons, unrelated to grades, why an applicant may not be a good fit for a particular course.

That said, with a view to maximising the impact of access thresholds, the SFC should monitor both the level at which these thresholds are set and the number of disadvantaged learners who are offered places. Should the intended outcomes fail to be delivered, Ministers should consider options for creating an entitlement to a place for disadvantaged learners who achieve a certain level of attainment.

We acknowledge that the introduction of access thresholds is a radical step with potentially far-reaching implications. It will therefore also be important for institutions, and the SFC, to monitor their impact to guard against any unintended consequences.

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.

Admissions and University Rankings

Universities have drawn our attention to another factor that may be influencing the inflation in entry requirements: the fact that average entry tariffs are one of the key criteria determining an institution's placing in several of the most prestigious university rankings.

These rankings are crucial to a university's ability to attract income through research contracts and the recruitment of international students. This creates a strong incentive for institutions to increase entry tariffs: it is a straightforward way of improving their rankings and reaping the associated reputational and financial benefits. The global reputation of Scotland's university sector is a national asset and it is important that it be protected and enhanced. But we are clear that this should not be at the expense of opportunities for disadvantaged learners.

The priority attached to wider access is gaining momentum across the developed world as Governments increasingly recognise the social and economic value of improving social mobility. In this context it appears to be something of an anomaly that socioeconomic diversity should not be a key marker of excellence, especially in light of the evidence, presented in our interim report, that it can enhance the educational experience of all students.

There is therefore a strong argument for making the case to those responsible for compiling these rankings that they should take greater account of this shifting landscape.

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.

Non-Academic Factors

In our interim report we presented UK-wide evidence showing that the emphasis placed by admissions processes on skills and experiences that are broadly exclusive to more affluent socioeconomic groups serves as an additional layer of unfairness for disadvantaged learners. In response, we committed to exploring whether the system could be made fairer by placing more equal value on the diverse range of personal qualities and experiences which different socioeconomic groups offer.

However, we have found a degree of consensus that these issues are perhaps less of a problem in Scotland than is reflected in the UK-wide research. For example, several institutions stated they already have in place procedures which ensure that disadvantaged applicants displaying evidence of having overcome barriers are more likely to be offered a place.

Though this is welcome, we do not wish to be complacent over this issue, especially since the sector itself has acknowledged there is room for improvement. Moreover, the fact that even we have found it difficult to establish a clear picture of the processes used to across the sector suggests the need for significantly more transparency over how applications are assessed.

On balance, our view is that the most prudent course of action is to commission a review of the non-academic elements of the admissions process in Scotland.

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.

03

Scotland's most disadvantaged learners are a rich source of untapped talent. It is rightly a matter of national concern that, for a variety of reasons, far too few disadvantaged learners either aspire to enter higher education or achieve their full academic potential in school. The consequence is a significantly restricted pool of applicants to HE from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The proposals for systemic change laid out in Chapter 2 will make a significant contribution to advancing fair access. However, the impact of this fairer, more flexible system can only be maximised if these proposals are complemented with measures to ensure the system can draw from a much stronger, more reliable pipeline of talent.

In addition to enabling disadvantaged learners to access higher education it is equally important to support them both to sustain their studies and to overcome barriers they may face when embarking on their chosen career.

In short, to achieve fair access, Scotland needs to do a much better job of identifying and supporting the brightest talent in disadvantaged communities to fulfil their potential. In this Chapter we focus on the important ways in which this can be achieved.

Early Years

In our interim report we observed that, when it comes to fair access, there is no such thing as an intervention that is too early. The impact of socioeconomic disadvantage is evident before some children enter school and this often sets a course for a lifetime of disadvantage. By age five, the gap in vocabulary between children from low-income and high-income households is already 13 months and we know that children who experience multiple disadvantage in the early years are more likely to have lower attainment at age 14.

The pre-school years have never had more prominence within Scottish public policy than at present. This has led the current Government to commit to almost doubling the number of funded early learning and childcare hours available for three and four year-olds and for two year-olds in low-income households. We welcome these developments and endorse the powerful role they can play in supporting our most vulnerable children to realise their potential. We also recognise that the expansion of early learning and childcare can impact on fair access in other ways, for example, through increased opportunities for adults to return to education or to join the workforce.

It will take considerable time before we can assess the impact this investment will have on fair access to higher education. In the coming years the Early Years Collaborative Stretch Aims and the National Improvement Framework will provide an indication of progress and the potential impact going forward. We would also expect the Commissioner for Fair Access (Recommendation 1) to consider the impact of extended early years provision on fair access to HE as part of their assessment of progress.

The post-16 sector also has an important role in supporting this agenda. We have seen innovative programmes, such as the Children's University and the Caledonian Club, where universities work closely with early years providers and schools to introduce young children, and crucially their parents, to the world of higher education, supporting improved attainment through new approaches to learning in family homes. Increasing engagement with parents during their child's early learning, and throughout their education, will play a significant part in advancing equal access. We know that the more a parent is involved in their child's education, the more likely they will be to support their child through that learning at home.

Collaborations between the post-16 sector and early years providers are still few in number, with most outreach activity focusing on the senior phase of school. We therefore believe that the post-16 sector could potentially deliver real benefit by engaging more with younger children and their families, bringing to bear their substantial capacity for innovation to support other sectors in a shared endeavour to raise expectations, aspiration and attainment.

We are also aware that parents who re-engage in education can have a significant impact on their children's prospects. It creates opportunities to improve the economic circumstances of the family. It also provides children with a role model and the support of someone who understands the nature of higher education and the benefits it can bring. It is therefore essential that programmes aimed at supporting adults who wish to return to higher education, such as the SFC funded Scottish Wider Access Programme, also consider what can be done to support any children from disadvantaged backgrounds within their family to follow suit.

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.

School Attainment

There is consensus that closing the school attainment gap is crucial to achieving a fairer Scotland. It is a key priority of Scottish Government, which is reflected in a range of work to support improved attainment for those from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds.

For example, the Education Bill, passed in February 2016, establishes a statutory National Improvement Framework for Scottish education. Ministers also launched the Scottish Attainment Challenge in 2015, which includes provision for attainment advisors in all local authorities and additional funding to support local authorities and schools with high concentrations of primary-aged children living in deprived areas.

The Commission welcomes the priority being placed on closing the school attainment gap and recognises the potential contribution these policy interventions could make to advancing equal access by increasing the number of disadvantaged learners with the attainment necessary to enter higher education. This is an area that we would expect the Commissioner for Fair Access to consider as part of their assessment of progress in their annual report to Ministers (Recommendation 1).

Universities and colleges also have a key role to play in this agenda. For example, we believe there is scope for them to make a greater contribution to the development of their applicant pools. There is evidence from both the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission that there is a significant group of bright, disadvantaged learners who, despite being among the top performers in their cohort early in their school career, lose momentum between ages 11 and 16.

This points to the need for these talented learners to be identified at an early stage and supported to remain high achievers. This could be achieved through collaboration between Universities, colleges, schools and SFC's access programmes to deliver targeted academic support for highly able learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are strong examples of good practice in this regard such as the Sutton Scholars programme. The National Improvement Framework will also introduce more systematic and regular assessment of school pupils in Scotland, which will help schools to identify such learners going forward.

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.

Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

In our interim report we presented detailed evidence that disadvantaged learners have very specific IAG needs. The extent to which these specific IAG needs are met can impact profoundly on whether they enter higher education. Our position is not that IAG should be used to persuade all disadvantaged learners to enter HE as though that is always the best option, but neither should it should act as a barrier for those who have the ability and the aptitude.

Disadvantaged learners are less likely than their more affluent peers to aspire to enter higher education. This is borne out by the Sutton Trust, who found that each year, across the UK, there are around 3,000 disadvantaged learners with the grades necessary to enter university who either do not apply at all, or who enter institutions with entry tariffs substantially lower than their level of attainment. This suggests a clear role for IAG in raising aspirations, including encouraging applications to the most selective institutions and courses where that is appropriate.

We know too, from research by the Rowntree Foundation, that even where the aspirations of disadvantaged learners are both high and realistic, they are often not supported with a clear understanding of the specific actions necessary to convert these aspirations into reality. This problem is reinforced by the fact that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are often less able to draw on the expertise of parents or peers with experience of HE and who have an understanding of its benefits and the actions necessary to access it.

Having examined these issues, we do not think there is any fundamental problem with the priority attached to IAG. SDS, universities, schools, colleges and the SFC funded access programmes are all active in this space. Moreover, the new Career Education Standard will introduce new entitlements for young people such as one-to-one guidance on subject choices, as well as placing clear expectations on their primary influencers.

However we remain convinced that the present IAG offer must take much greater account of the evidence that disadvantaged learners have far more acute and specific IAG needs than other groups. These learners would therefore benefit from more personalised, sustained support including earlier interventions, guaranteed one to one personal interviews, encouragement to pitch aspirations as high as possible and a better understanding of the nature of student finance.

There may also be other, more creative ways of deploying IAG to supporting disadvantaged learners to realise their potential. For example, IAG strategies which target young peoples' primary influencers could have an especially powerful impact. There is also an emerging evidence base to suggest that mentoring schemes can provide a valuable, sustained supplement to formal IAG and parental guidance.

Finally, it is worth noting that the current IAG model is focussed on ensuring that learners progress to a positive destination. While this is legitimate, it is also important to make clear to disadvantaged learners that higher education remains one of the most powerful and reliable pathways into the most well-paid jobs and professions. This is particularly important for those learners who are likely to progress to a positive destination but who, with the appropriate support and guidance, may prefer and have the ability to enter higher education.

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.

Access to Key Subjects

We have discussed what more can be done to close the attainment gap but for some higher education courses it is not sufficient to reach a specific level of attainment, that level must be achieved in particular subjects. While we expect that the recommendations on admissions will mean that, in due course, only those subjects entirely necessary for the successful completion of a degree will be being asked for by universities, we must ensure that students have access to these key subjects at school.

In the second half of our work we have become increasingly aware of the variance across Scotland's schools in terms of access to specific subjects at Higher and Advanced Higher level. We are also conscious that this may cause an access issue for pupils in schools with a high concentration of children living in deprived areas, as well as those living in rural areas. In these schools, there can be very small numbers of pupils wishing to study particular subjects at Higher or Advanced Higher level. This can create a challenge for schools, who may not be able to assign teacher time to a course with a very small number of pupils.

We know that local authorities are alert to this issue and we would encourage them to continue to explore how schools can come together to provide better access to Highers and Advanced Highers for pupils in their area. We have also seen innovative solutions from universities and colleges to support pupils to undertake these qualifications. Delivery of Highers and Advanced Highers via post-16 institutions not only provides the learner with access to the qualification, it can also support their transition into higher education. Young learners have an opportunity to come together in a post-16 institution, with likeminded pupils from other schools and lecturers, who can support their aspirations and learning. We know, however, that this approach is not without its challenges. School timetabling needs to be aligned and measures put in place to mitigate against any disadvantages placed on the student from having to travel from their school to study elsewhere.

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.

Student Finance

The Commission's remit is to advise Ministers on the steps necessary to increase the number of disadvantaged learners entering higher education. The evidence is mixed on whether raising the present levels of student support, or adjusting the balance between loan and bursary, would have a significant impact on advancing this goal.

While there is some evidence to suggest that levels of student finance do influence the participation of disadvantaged learners; the evidence suggests that, overall, other factors are likely to matter more. This evidence has perhaps informed the decisions of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCP) to advise universities in England to rebalance investment in fair access from generous bursaries to the most effective forms of outreach activity.

At the same time, we have spoken to many young people who have shared with us their concerns over accruing debt and how their decisions over which institutions and courses to apply for are being strongly influenced by these concerns.

The Commission has discussed these issues at length. On balance, we do not think it would be reasonable for us to recommend fundamental changes to the current student support package without strong evidence that it would have a positive impact on the participation of disadvantaged learners. This belief is strengthened by the fact that there are other interventions, highlighted throughout this report, where increased investment is almost certain to have a positive impact.

As with several other issues pertinent to widening access, it seems clear that the impact of student finance is a topic on which policymakers, and institutions, would benefit from a significantly more robust evidence base to inform future decision making.

There is, however, one issue relating to student finance on which there is considerably stronger evidence. In our interim report we highlighted evidence that disadvantaged learners in Scotland are considerably more averse to student debt than their peers in England. This aversion is in some part based on misconceptions about the nature of student debt such as over-estimating interest rates, incorrect assumptions over impact on credit ratings and not understanding that loans are repaid only after reaching a certain income threshold. Often these misconceptions reflect the views of parents and key influencers, again highlighting the importance to fair access of effective parental engagement. While this aversion to debt does not appear to be a

significant barrier to entry overall, it does seem to impact on the kind of choices made by students. For example, there is evidence it is a key factor in the propensity of disadvantaged learners to remain at home while studying. Scottish learners are also more likely than their English peers to select an institution and course they perceive as being affordable, with educational factors a secondary consideration.

We recognise that organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group do provide training on student support and benefits; however we remain concerned that disadvantaged learners may often be basing crucial decisions about their future on incomplete and incorrect information. It is therefore crucial that work to improve the IAG offer to disadvantaged learners includes a much stronger focus on clarifying the nature and availability of student finance than is presently the case.

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.

Retention

Fair access is not just about ensuring more people from deprived backgrounds enter higher education, it is just as important to ensure that they can maintain their studies and successfully graduate. In 2012/13 the retention rate for SIMD20 students at Scottish universities was 87% compared with a rate of 91.3% for all students. Institutions are already alert to the need to support retention for this group of students and many are providing tailored support. Specific funding is also provided from the SFC to support retention. The Framework for Fair Access, which should cover all learning from early years to graduation should help to identify and provide guidance on the activities that have the most impact on supporting retention.

Supporting those with Care Experience

Advising on how best to support those with a care experience to succeed in higher education was explicit in our remit and we have embraced this task unreservedly. We have no doubt that many, if not all, of the recommendations within the other parts of this report will help to support those with care experience; however we are also conscious that the challenges they face, both by their nature and magnitude, set this group of learners apart from those we have focussed on thus far.

The picture of educational attainment and outcomes for those with care experience is stark:

- 40% of looked after children leave school with one or more qualification at SCQF Level 5 or more; compared with 84% of all school leavers

- 74% of looked after children who left school in 2013/14 were aged 16 or under; compared with only 27% of all school leavers

- the exclusion rate for looked after children is over seven times that for all children

- 73% of looked after children were in a positive destination nine months after leaving school, compared with 92% of all children

- 6% of looked after children were in higher education nine months after leaving school, compared with 39% of all children

- We also know that looked after children find it harder to maintain positive destinations

Many young people with care experience are required to miss school classes to attend care related appointments and may have to move schools due to different care placements. They can often be labelled as having behaviour issues and can be stigmatised by their peers. It is vital that support is given to these young people by all those around them, both to develop aspirations and expectations but also to sustain their academic attainment. It is also important that universities and colleges ensure that they provide an inclusive environment and a personalised package of support for those with care experience and that up-to-date information on the support available is communicated clearly to potential and existing students.

Even within a supportive environment, those with care experience may, due to financial or personal reasons, have to take a break from study. It is often difficult for them to return to education due to the personal challenge of coming back. Some learners we spoke to also felt that the system was too inflexible and that it was difficult to transfer credit or to secure funding to repeat a level of learning. This group of students often need more than a second chance; they may need a third or fourth chance to succeed. There is some flexibility in the system and support for those leaving to return, and this must be communicated effectively to students; however we also need to consider what additional flexibility could be introduced.

We are also conscious that methods of identifying and targeting support to those facing difficult socioeconomic circumstances will not always reach those living in care. The majority in care placements will not be resident within the most deprived postcodes and may not be identified by other markers of deprivation. Some of the challenges they face are not captured by socioeconomic disadvantage and may be impacted by placement breakdowns, trauma, instability or poor mental health. It is therefore essential that, within our data and information systems, we separately identify those with a care experience so that they can receive the most suitable support to access and succeed within higher education.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 has introduced a new framework of Corporate Parenting duties and responsibilities for public bodies including local authorities, further and higher education bodies, Skills Development Scotland and the Student Awards Agency Scotland. These duties require corporate parents to collaborate with each other to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of our looked after children and care leavers enabling them to achieve the best outcomes. This includes support to overcome barriers and live a life they feel in control over. By working collaboratively to fulfil these duties, we envisage that the education sector will address some of the issues outlined above; however we have identified a number of specific recommendations that we believe are necessary to improve access to higher education for those with a care experience.

As noted above, our support for this group of learners must reflect the specific challenges they face. Our message to those with care experience should emulate that of a positive parent: we believe in you, we'll do all we can to support you and if things don't go to plan, we'll help you to get back on track. To make clear Scotland's ambition for, and commitment to, those with care experience we believe that an entitlement system should be introduced for this group of learners until such time as they are fairly represented within higher education. Not only will this make clear our commitment to these young people we believe that this will help to turn their aspirations into expectations. If an individual learner can demonstrate the potential to get a degree, we will guarantee that learner the offer of a place at a university.

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; and

- 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.

Supporting the Professionals

It is important that we recognise the role that professionals will play in delivering fair access. We have heard of many instances where an individual teacher or lecturer has been pivotal to a young person's decision and ability to access higher education. The importance of individualised support, understanding and guidance cannot be underestimated for those from a deprived background or with a care experience.

The expansion of the early years workforce will, of course, require a significant increase in the number of early years practitioners. We understand that work is underway, following the Review of the Scottish Early Learning and Childcare Workforce and Out of School Care Workforce, to ensure that the quality of this workforce is maintained through this period of growth. Given this planned expansion and the current priority placed on closing the attainment gap, it is key that teachers and early years practitioners are equipped with the necessary knowledge and understanding of the issues faced by those from disadvantaged backgrounds and how this impacts on their learning. Many will have experience of how best to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with care experience but some may not and may value specific training on:

- how to work most effectively with Scotland's youngest children and their families from our most disadvantaged communities to support attainment

- how to work most effectively with those from disadvantaged backgrounds to support their school attainment

- understanding the care system and the challenges that those with a care experience face when going through the education system and how best to support them to succeed.

We support the above areas being included in the development of future Career Long Professional Learning for teachers and early years practitioners in Scotland.

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It is important that the recommendations for change we have made thus far are complemented with the right architecture to support delivery. We must ensure that we are making the best use of available funds, targeted at the most effective activity to support fair access. We also need to utilise our data to its full potential and develop improved data systems so that information supports and enhances what we do rather than acting as a barrier to progress. Robust regulation will be necessary to monitor and drive progress and this must sit alongside a set of targets that make clear our ambition and expectation for change.

Funding

Within this report we have highlighted the need for tailored and targeted support (including pastoral care) for learners to support access and retention along with additional activity such as the expansion of bridging programmes and articulation. All this requires funding. Consideration has to be given to whether these costs can be met through reallocation of existing resources or whether additional funding will be required. There is also a question of what institutions might be expected to deliver within the bounds of current funding and what might require additional resource. While we are very clear that access should already form part of the sector's core mission – and we are encouraged by the commitment that institutions have made to access to date – it is nevertheless reasonable to explore whether current funding is being used to best effect and whether there are more creative ways of providing funding to the sector that delivers change and eases any additional or transitional financial pressures associated with fair access.

Firstly, we need to better understand how much is currently being spent on supporting access across institutions, the effectiveness of that spend and what funding might be required going forward. We also need to consider how to make best use of the funding for access provided directly by SFC. We are aware that the SFC has recently reviewed the Access and Retention Fund, but we believe it should be reconsidered again in light of this report.

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.

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The Commission also discussed options to drive progress through better targeting of core funding towards access students or access activities, such as differential teaching grant for access students or ring-fencing a portion of funding for access activity. Further work is needed to assess the feasibility of alternative approaches to target funding and their likely impact. Options for more targeted funding models should be considered in the second phase of implementation; by which time we will have a greater understanding of the impact of the recommendations delivered in the first phase.

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.

While the Commission is clear that it is not within our remit to consider how higher education is funded in Scotland, the Commission has discussed how we deliver fair access to university within a system with a fixed number of funded places for undergraduate students. We are mindful that the introduction of access thresholds may raise concerns about the displacement of other applicants. It is our belief, however, that if we are serious about achieving a fairer Scotland, this will require some movement across the system and a breaking down of entrenched patterns of advantage. We are also aware of the breadth of opportunity being developed for young people in Scotland. The Developing the Young Workforce programme is delivering new vocational pathways and higher level apprenticeships. We do not take the view that higher education in university is the best or only option in Scotland; nevertheless it has to be an option that is available to people from all parts of our society.

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There are a number of options (which are not mutually exclusive) for increasing the number of higher education students from disadvantaged backgrounds:

- the system could be grown to increase the number of places to support the entry of a greater number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds;

- the current number of places available could be used more equitably, e.g. through use of minimum entry thresholds; or

- provision could be restructured to make best use of the places that are available, for example, by removing unnecessary duplication of study years where this is not a requirement for a student to succeed.

The Commission has focused on how we make access fairer within the current system. It is for the Scottish Government to determine the size the higher education sector required to deliver the skills necessary for economic growth. If the Government chooses to make changes to the current system then it should, of course, consider how such changes might be used to best effect to support fair access.

Regulation

We recognise that harnessing the commitment, capacity and capability of the education system and those who work in it is critical to achieving progress on access. But it needs to be underpinned by a framework of regulation. In our interim report, we indicated our intention to consider whether Scotland has in place the necessary regulatory arrangements to drive progress and to ensure appropriate levels of accountability.

We have examined the merits of various regulatory models, including the possibility of an independent access regulator. However, on balance, we are agreed that the most appropriate solution is to build upon the existing regulatory framework, and the established relationships which underpin it, rather than introducing an additional layer of complexity and bureaucracy which risks duplicating arrangements already in place. The Commissioner for Fair Access will play a key role in harnessing the best use of existing regulation, across all sectors, to support fair access.

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Post-16 Regulation

In terms of post-16 education bodies, the SFC already possesses substantial regulatory powers in relation to fair access, including relatively recent powers under the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013, which give it the authority to require outcome agreements, set targets and to attach stringent conditions to the award of public funding.

In line with the increased emphasis being placed on fair access by Ministers, we believe that going forward the SFC should consider more extensive use of these powers where that is deemed necessary to drive progress, both in relation to overarching targets and on more specific access issues such as articulation and access thresholds.

We also recognise that the extent to which regulatory powers are exercised is dependent on the strength of the mandate passed to the SFC by the Scottish Government. Ministers should therefore ensure that their guidance to the SFC provides the necessary level of authority.

Wider Regulation

We repeat again that ensuring fair access is an objective that can be achieved only if every part of the system maximises its contribution. Therefore we believe that there is a strong argument for embedding fair access into the regulatory frameworks of all sectors with a responsibility to support it, e.g. for schools and providers of early learning who have a role to play in closing the attainment gap and raising aspirations and expectations for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to study higher education. In implementing this, the cross system voice of the Commissioner for Fair Access could be crucial.

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.

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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.

Better Use of Data to Support Fair Access

In our interim report we discussed how Scotland is not making best use of the data it has to support fair access i.e. through the sharing and linking of data across sectors to provide insightful analyses. More could be done with the data that we have to support and understand the progress that Scotland is making to achieve fair access. Enhanced monitoring at key stages of the education journey, better comparative information and a more coherent approach to publishing data will help to develop the evidence base.

But it is not enough to simply present 'snapshots' of progress in different areas; we need to join our data systems together. A more systematic approach to the use of data is required and fundamental to that is the ability to track learners throughout their education journey. A unique learner number, used appropriately by all parts of the system, would help sectors to share information to support learners as they transition from one stage of learning to another. It would also facilitate better data linkage and tracking of individuals to improve our understanding of outcomes, which in turn will inform our assessment of the impact of activity. A unique number could be based on existing identifiers within the system e.g. the Scottish Candidate Number, or could be delivered through a new approach.

Building a coherent data system will take time but now is the time to start. Enhanced use of data to support work with those from disadvantaged backgrounds is already being explored within education policy e.g. the Early Years Collaborative and the National Improvement Framework are looking at enhanced monitoring. Scotland needs a data system that focuses on the learner and their progress, rather than the institution or establishment they attend.

In our interim report we noted the lack of UK comparator measures that could be used to robustly assess relative progress on access across the UK nations. Scotland must be able to compare its progress against that of others if it is to identify areas for improvement and the best solutions for fair access. A consistent and valid UK comparison would be a first step in making this possible.

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We are mindful of the timescale of our remit. By 2030 the data and technology available to us will have changed. We are therefore keen to explore how new data science solutions can be developed to support fair access activity going forward. For example, the ability to use detailed data on individuals to identify those who would benefit from interventions and the interventions that would be most effective for them. This is something that The Data Lab, Scotland's new Data Science Innovation Centre, could assist with.

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.

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Measures to Identify Access Learners

As we discussed in our interim report, the use of data to support access is one of the areas that has been brought to the attention of the Commission repeatedly. Much of this discussion has focused on how we define deprivation and, in particular, the limitations of the current approach, which focuses on use of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). This was an area that the Commission was committed to exploring in its work, not least, because it was felt that the debate about how we measure deprivation was, at times, overtaking the discussion on how we might achieve fair access.

The main concern expressed on the use of SIMD is that it is an area based measure and therefore is less likely to capture individual circumstances. Also, because SIMD identifies geographical concentrations of deprivation, it is less likely to identify those from disadvantaged backgrounds in more rural areas where the population is more geographically dispersed. This has led some universities to question the use of SIMD alone for access related targets and funding, as they consider that it does not capture the individuals they are currently supporting and those from disadvantaged backgrounds in their local population.

In our interim report we recognised that different measures are required for different purposes, including real time data to support decisions about individuals and data to support targets to monitor progress – and that the solution for these purposes may be different. The Commission brought together an expert group to explore the issues around data and evidence, including what measures could be used in addition to SIMD to identify those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There was a clear consensus that a set of measures, which includes SIMD but also a measure of an individual's income circumstances and their school environment was important for use when making decisions about individuals.

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The Commission looked at the data currently available in the education system that could be used to help identify individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. In its assessment, the Commission considered:

• What variables could be used as a marker of low income or school environment

• The robustness and coverage of these variables, along with their validity in terms of identifying disadvantage and their overlap with SIMD20

• Whether or not the use of these variables could be implemented across all parts of the education system

• The distribution of learners identified by these markers across Scotland

• The viability of their use for institutional and national targets

• Other data development work underway, or being considered, in the education sector that was relevant to this area.

The Commission has published, along with this report, a separate paper setting out the results of this analysis. The main findings are:

• Uptake of Free School Meals (FSM) was considered as a proxy measure for low income; however there are issues with coverage of this measure.

• Attendance at a secondary school with low progression to HE was considered as an indicator of school environment; however there are issues with the robustness of this measure.

• There is a strong correlation between SIMD and the other two measures i.e. those from more deprived areas are more likely to register for FSM or attend a low progression school; however around half of those receiving FSM and in a low progression school do not live in SIMD20 areas.

• The only measure of deprivation that is available, and used, across the entire education system is SIMD.

• None of the measures considered, either singly or in combination, identify a group that is more evenly distributed across Scotland i.e. regardless of the measure used, the spread of deprivation varies across Scotland.

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- There are a number of areas of policy development in Scotland e.g. Early Years Collaborative, expansion of early learning and childcare, the National Improvement Framework and work to close the attainment gap; all of which are designed to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds and are looking at enhanced use of data to support this.

There is no doubt that the more sophisticated and targeted we can be when providing support or making decisions about individuals the better. However, we also need an approach that is based on valid measures and allows us to monitor progress by institutions, and as a nation, to deliver fair access.

It is our view that a more individualised approach to identify those from disadvantaged backgrounds would be beneficial but that this would need to be adopted across all parts of the education system if we are to provide coherent support for individuals to drive forward fair access. A more individualised measure would also need to be relatable to the wider population if it were to be used for targets and monitoring. At this stage, it is the Commission's view that we do not have robust and valid data to implement this approach across all access work in Scotland. The Commission would, however, be supportive of any moves to develop a more individualised approach to measuring deprivation for use across the entire education system should the data become available to do this.

Despite the limitations outlined earlier, the Commission believes that SIMD is a valid marker of deprivation. SIMD is based on a wide range of data, covering a number of domains relevant to deprivation; unlike the additional measures we have explored, which focus on a single aspect. SIMD is also used as a marker for deprivation across the Scottish public sector, including all parts of education. It is therefore the Commission's view that SIMD should continue to be used for tracking, monitoring and targets relating to fair access in the coming years. The use of SIMD for these purposes must, however, recognise the distribution of those living in SIMD20 areas across Scotland and this should be reflected both in the expectations of, and reporting on, progress for individual institutions.

We also recognise that additional measures, like those identified above, can help with decisions about individuals and the support they require – a process that is already happening in some institutions for example, to inform contextual admissions. A consensus, however, needs to reached on the best and most reliable measures to identify individuals for these purposes so that we can be more consistent in the support and opportunities provided to learners across Scotland.

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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.

Targets to Realise Our Ambition

The Commission was asked to propose both a short and long-term target for increased participation in higher education. We are aware that progress to improve attainment will be monitored through the Early Years Collaborative and the National Improvement Framework; in this section we set out our expectation for the part that post-16 institutions can play in delivering fair access.

In developing these targets we have considered the need to ensure that increased participation in one part of the post-16 sector will not be at the expense of participation in another part; we have therefore included a recommendation for equality of access in both colleges and universities. We are aware, however, that it is progress within universities that is necessary to deliver equal access and therefore we have provided interim targets for this sector to drive progress in the coming years.

In our interim report we noted the significant variation across institutions in the level of participation for those from deprived backgrounds. It is our view that every individual college and university in Scotland should be expected to work towards equality of access to higher education for its entrants. The Commissioner for Fair Access should ensure that the SFC works with institutions to identify how further and faster progress can be made to this end through development of stretching targets within the Outcome Agreement process. Consideration should be given to the deprivation levels within the local population when discussing expectations for progress with individual institutions; however consideration should also be given to how institutions can better support access students to attend institutions from outwith their local area if they wish to do so. While recognising this variation

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between institutions, the Commission also felt it was important to make clear our expectation of each institution's contribution to fairness, by setting a level of participation below which we feel is unacceptable. We have therefore included a target to ensure that no institution in Scotland has fewer than 10% of its entrants from the 20% most deprived backgrounds.

We believe that the targets below are both necessary and achievable.

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:

- By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds 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.

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.

Between us, the thirteen members of the Commission, have been involved in many similar projects and working groups. However we are agreed that few of these have matched the breadth and challenging timescale of this work. To maximise the value of our contribution, the Commission therefore made a decision to focus our efforts on fair access to the core provision of higher education (i.e. full-time first degree study) for those from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds or those with a care experience.

This has meant, to our regret, that there a number of areas which we have simply not had the time to examine in detail. Examples include:

- Outcomes for disadvantaged learners following graduation, including access to postgraduate study.

- Additional barriers faced by people with protected characteristics.

- Additional barriers for carers, former offenders and young people leaving the armed forces.

- Access to the high demand degree subjects (e.g. medicine).

- Access to HE for those from rural areas.

- Access to part-time HE study.

No doubt some of the recommendations within this report will assist other groups of learners and it is important that those implementing them do so in a way that recognises this, for example, new data systems to track and monitor progress could also support enhanced analysis of access for those with protected characteristics.

However, these groups of learners and areas of study are important and the recommendation below is intended to ensure they are not lost sight of as Scotland enters the next phase of this work.

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.

This is our *Blueprint for Fairness* – a system wide plan for fair access in Scotland. The proposals in this report are demanding but achievable and mark the beginning of the next phase of strategic change. It is our firm belief that they can deliver equal access within a generation.

We repeat that Scotland has a moral, social and economic duty to make this a reality for our most disadvantaged children. Ultimately, the success of this work is in the hands of the professionals and practitioners who will be tasked with implementing it. In progressing this work we engaged extensively with them and were consistently impressed with their commitment and appetite for change. We look to them to maintain this approach and to embrace these recommendations in the spirit in which they are made.

There is an opportunity here for Scotland to lead the way on fair access – we invite the whole system to stand with us in this place of possibility.

COMMISSION MEMBERSHIP

- Dame Ruth Silver (Chair)
- Jean Carwood-Edwards, Chief Executive, Early Years Scotland
- Russell Gunson, Director, Director, IPPR Scotland (Institute of Public Policy Research)
- Ali Jarvis, Former Chair of the SFC Access & Inclusion Committee and Interim Chair, Glasgow Colleges' Regional Board
- Gerry Lyons, Head Teacher, St Andrews Secondary School, Glasgow
- Helen Martin, Assistant Secretary, Scottish Trades Union Congress
- Liz McIntyre, Principal, Borders College
- Maureen McKenna, Executive Director of Education, Glasgow City Council
- Professor Anton Muscatelli, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of Glasgow
- Conor Ryan, Sutton Trust
- Vonnie Sandlan, President, NUS Scotland
- Caroline Stuart, Oracle Ltd
- Professor Petra Wend, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

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- Lynn Graham (Head of Secretariat)
- Stephen O'Neill
- Ryan Scott
- Supported by: Rebekah Widdowfield

Scottish Funding Council:

- Fiona Burns
- Carina MacRitchie
- Supported by: John Kemp

COMMISSION ON WIDENING ACCESS REMIT

The Government's ambition is that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities.

To achieve this, Scotland requires:

- A shared understanding of the barriers to accessing higher education, and their removal, for those from the most deprived communities and households, based on reliable and comprehensive evidence.

- A clear target to achieve equality of access and an understanding of the actions required to meet that ambition.

- A culture of partnership between early years, schools, colleges, universities, employers and the Government, where each recognises the part that it can play in eradicating the inequality in access to higher education and works in partnership with others to achieve this.

Building upon the Government's commitment to free tuition fees for higher education, the introductions of Curriculum for Excellence, School Attainment Policy, reforms to the Post-16 education system and Developing the Young Workforce programme, it is proposed that the Commission on Widening Access will:

- synthesise existing evidence around barriers to widening access and retention, and their effective removal, for those from deprived backgrounds and, within this, identify any specific barriers for those with different equality characteristics or those from a care background;

- propose both a short and long-term target for participation in higher education and clear milestones, to drive further and faster progress to widen access;

- identify best practice on widening access across early years, schools, colleges, universities and employers, and make recommendations as to how best practice on access and retention can be scaled up and embedded, within the work of individual institutions, across the wider education and employment system;

- identify the data and information required to monitor and support improvements on widening access across all education providers, and recommend the processes necessary to support this.

In addition to formal meetings of the Commission, it will use a number of events and visits to meet with those who have direct experience of the barriers to widening access, whether from a personal or professional perspective, including: school pupils, parents, graduates, widening access professionals and community groups. The Commission may also enlist the help of a number of expert advisors to support its work.

The Commission is expected to draw preliminary conclusions and recommendations in autumn 2015, with a final report, to Government and institutions, by spring 2016.

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