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Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this seminar today. I want to cover two broad themes. I expect you will want me to talk about my role as Commissioner for Fair Access, but with your permission I would like to do that second. First I want to talk about the 'big picture - in two senses. The first sense is that, although it is extremely important to 'level the playing field' for young initial entrants to higher education (on which the official targets focus, although I have a wider brief as Commissioner), life - and therefore education - does not end at 21 (or even at 24, the terminal point for the Government's current Learner Journey initiative). That is the reason for the second part of my title - lifelong learning. The second sense in which I want to talk about the 'big picture' is fair access, or for that matter lifelong learning, are not ends in themselves; they are the means to advance social justice for individuals and a fairer society for all.

So let me begin with a quotation from Lord Robbins, who headed the committee that triggered the expansion of higher education in postwar Britain (and so, in a sense, created the world with which we are familiar half a century later - and, in a very direct and personal sense, gave opportunities to so many first-generation graduates, myself included). Shortly before his death I interviewed him (in my earlier life as a journalist). I asked him the obvious question - why had he, a rather conservative and orthodox economist (overshadowed in his day by John Maynard Keynes), nevertheless supported such a progressive cause as the expansion of higher education (You need to remember Kingsley Amis, and *The Times*, were running a campaign under the slogan 'more means worse'). He replied by quoting an LSE colleague, R H Tawney (of a rather different political persuasion, of course, and very much involved in the Workers Education Association). Tawney had spent the war years attached to the British Embassy in Washington, and he told Robbins: "we should never underestimate how much America has been improved by the fact that so many of her people have had at least the smell of a higher education". Of course, half a century later a 'smell' is not enough; we need the full three-course meal. But I still love that phrase.

So let me start with social justice. The issue here can be simply stated - we talk more about the need for social mobility because we have become a more unequal society. Many of you will be familiar with the work of the French economist Thomas Picketty, and his recent book *Capital in the 21st Century*. Now this book has provoked a lively debate. In particular critics have argued he places too much emphasis on the accumulation of capital (particularly in the form of property), which then accumulates across the generations, and too little emphasis on widening pay differentials (and, in particular, telephone-number salaries). I don't want to engage in that debate today. Both the 'bank of mum and dad' (so necessary for many first-time house buyers) and the escalating gap between top salaries and average earnings both play their part.

But, whatever the balance of causes, the effect is plain. In Britain inequality of incomes have now returned to levels not seen since before the First World War - not quite as wide a gap as in the United States but significantly wider than in the rest of Western Europe. And this matters because income buys advantage, not just in the present but also in the future (because access to higher education is strongly correlated with income level). And it gets worse. There is nothing like a level playing field for all those who are fortunate to gain access to higher education. Future opportunities - the human capital you acquire - is strongly correlated with what kind of institution you attend (and what kind of institution you attend is strongly correlated with prior education attainment - which is strongly correlated with type of school - which is correlated equally strongly with social class, and income level - you get the picture!).

Maybe it gets even worse. Social connections, of course, have always been important but unpaid internships are now increasingly important as gateways into some professions, and top jobs. The public sector, once the destination for most graduates, which did not - and does not - tolerate such flawed recruitment practices (with a few notorious exceptions), has declined. The shape - and tone? - of the highly skilled (and certainly highly paid) workforce has been transformed. Graduates now face a changed occupational world - elite jobs in finance, consultancy, marketing and design (often disproportionately populated by the most privileged), a growing mass of jobs in SMEs or among the self-employed (where informal contacts count for so much), and maybe even a precariat in the so-called 'gig economy'. In this new post-industrial - and post-professional? - landscape it has become more difficult to believe in the substance as opposed to the rhetoric of the 'career open to the talents'.

So I draw three, rather sombre, conclusions from all of this:

The first is 'beware the language of aspiration and striving'. It may be a curious combination of <u>illusion</u> (because the real scope for - successful - aspiration is actually more constrained than ever) and <u>compensation</u> (because it is aimed to reverse a strongly running contrary tide, towards maximising the advantages of social and economic status);

The second, more honourably, is that many of the entirely praiseworthy initiatives to promote fairer access to higher education, and to 'top universities', and equally praiseworthy efforts to open up pathways for non-elites into elite professions, have really been made necessary by the strength of this contrary tide. The days of postwar 'scholarship boys' (and some girls) are long over. Almost inevitably the numbers who benefit from such initiatives are often disappointingly small;

The third is that we focus more on social mobility precisely because of the increase on social inequality (certainly as measured by income). We stress the need for mobility because it has become more difficult (and clogged up) and maybe even because it legitimises inequality. In my darker moments I sometimes even wonder whether social mobility and social justice are contrary principles. After all, if we were more equal at the start, there would be less need for (upwards) mobility.

With those sombre conclusions let me move onto lifelong learning. I would like to come at this from two angles - the first is how we conceive of / define lifelong learning (and how that has changed over the years); and the second is what has happened in the policy world and in practice within institutions.

On the first - once there appeared to be a convergence between higher education and lifelong learning. It was even imagined they would become almost the same thing. Higher education, having gone through the transition from being an elite to become a mass system, would eventually move on to become a universal system - and merge with the *education permanente* imagined back in the 1960s by both radical thinkers and Establishment figures such as the French Education Minister Edgar Faure. Now we see things very differently. The number in higher education has indeed expanded dramatically - here in Scotland the young participation rate is 55% and in England 46% (in some countries such as South Korea it is approaching 80%) - although, curiously and possibly

revealingly, we have tended to abandon the label 'mass' and prefer instead the more neutral 'high participation' label.

But two features from the elite higher education systems of the past have been preserved:

First, it is still predominantly focused on young adults - even if the average age has crept upwards into the mid and late 20s. The gaze of politicians seems to be even more firmly fixed on younger entrants than it was 10 or 20 years ago - and it is interesting to speculate why this is the case (perhaps the obsessive focus on skills and employability are one factor).

The second feature is that higher education is now more fiercely stratified than ever. League tables never allow us to ignore this stratification - and league tables, we should remember, are fed by official ranking tools such as the REF (and now, in England and for some Scottish universities, the TEF). University 'mission groups' are another factor, as what began as informal vice-chancellors' / principals' 'clubs' have morphed into a new hierarchy of esteem. And a new, but now dominant, policy discourse of 'top universities' / 'our best universities' has become established.

And there is a third characteristic that is important in my view. Although lifelong learning may never have been conceived of exclusively in terms of the radical aims of adult, and workers', education, it was conceived of essentially as a public project serving to realise social as well as individuals goals. Now the idea of the, at least semi-privatised, 'market' has become firmly lodged in educational policy making, and especially in higher education (even in Scotland where charging fees has been resisted, at any rate for Scottish students). As a result the ways in which we think of lifelong learning have changed; now the focus is much more on continuing professional development, often as a revenue-earning operation and linked to essentially consumerist aspirations or economic goals.

As a result of this transformation, how we conceive of lifelong learning policy and practice have also been transformed. This is my second angle on lifelong learning. Although I am generalising (and also probably being unfair) the attitude of policy makers towards lifelong learning - by which I mean older students who are often part-time - is characterised either by condescension (certainly they attach a lower priority to lifelong than initial higher education) and/or ignorance (they sometimes suspect that most of the beneficiaries of lifelong learning are already over-privileged in educational terms, so less worthy). Here three factors are at work:

First, because lifelong learning is often a relatively low priority, it often suffers collateral damage from mainstream higher education policy making. The most spectacular example is the collapse of part-time higher education in England following the decision to move towards high fees. No one in or around Government understood that this would lead inevitably to pro-rata increases in part-time fees, which most part-time students would have to pay up-front. A decade ago, also in England, the Labour Government's decision to remove funding for equivalent or low-level qualifications, because it wanted to maximise the number of funded student places available, is another example. Even here in Scotland the decision to fix fair access targets in terms of young entrants rather than all students may also have tended to discriminate against lifelong learners (because institutions will focus on meeting these targets).

Second, the focus on quality and standards, operationalised through rankings and more particularly continuation and attainment rates, may also discriminate against lifelong learners. 'Success', by definition, is much more difficult to assess for older students, often with a complex mix of individual, social and economic goals, than for younger students, who are focused more on their future careers. The measure of 'success' are largely based on the study patterns and attainment outcomes of 'standard', ie younger full-time, students.

Third, public expenditure constraints have forced institutions to focus on developing alternative income streams - behaviour which, of course, is encouraged by the rhetoric of the 'market' (and their role in the knowledge economy). So, as I have said, there are inevitably pressures to treat lifelong learning as a business with inevitable consequences for targeting some kind of older students at the expense of others.

These shifts in how we think about lifelong learning have been reproduced at the level of more detailed institutional policy and practice. Liberal adult education, of the kind that once sustained extra-mural departments in traditional universities, is on life-support. The overwhelming assumption is that the mass expansion of higher education has destroyed its *raison d'être*. I wonder, given the continuing (and maybe worsening - in England) discrimination against part-time students. If anything, the already overwhelming focus on initial full-time entrants has intensified. In many universities lifelong learning departments and/or activities have taken on two main forms:

The first is the promotion of CPD in the widest sense; 'executive' programmes of all kinds have proliferated, as have in-company courses. Many institutions now have a growing periphery of university 'hotels', conference centres and other campus-based resources that cater for this market - and, of course, some have often established formidable online presences as well. But most of this is conceived of in terms of the delivery of repackaged and redesigned curriculum content (the OU remains exceptional as a primary producer of such material);

The second form taken by departments / functions labelled as 'lifelong learning' is access to higher education (shared, of course, in an administrative context with admissions offices). Perhaps this is because they are seen as good at 'outreach' (in a faint echo of the original extramural idea?). This is doubly revealing - first, because the major focus is often on attracting young entrants (although from wider and more complex social backgrounds) rather than mature or part-time students; second, because it suggests that such work is still somehow 'outside the walls', an add-on to the mainstream mission.

I now want to move onto the third part of my talk this morning - my own role as Commissioner for Fair Access. I have no regulatory powers - thank goodness. My only formal responsibility is to produce an annual report - addressed mainly to the Scottish Government which appointed me, but also to the Funding Council and universities, colleges and schools and, indeed, national agencies. Fair access is very much a multi-agency issue. Of course, the appointment of a Commissioner was recommended in last year's final report of the Commission on Widening Access - with the intention of reviewing progress against the targets it had set (and adopted by the Government) but also, I suspect, of continuing to agitate for the wider 'cause' of fair access. So, in part, I see my role as that of a reasonably well-informed and reasonably responsible 'agitator'.

What have I been doing? A lot of my time so far has been spent familiarising myself with higher education in Scotland. But I also decided it is important that the Commissioner have some kind of 'presence' - in between annual reports. Unlike Donald Trump I have decided against 'shouting' via a Twitter account.... Instead we will be publishing a series of briefings on the Commissioner website bringing together what we know on key issues relating to fair access, in as accessible and as objective a form as possible, along with a short commentary by me highlighting key gaps, issues, choices. The first two briefings will be published before the summer - the first setting out data on the sequence of applications, offers, acceptances and admissions by SIMD quintile and also by institutional groupings; and the second on contextualised admissions. At least two more are planned for the autumn.

Inevitably I have to focus on a limited number of key issues, although I don't want to miss the bigger picture, the need for radical culture change even in a relatively democratic higher education system like Scotland's.

The first of these issues is targets. The headline target is that by 2030 SIMD 20 students will represent 20 per cent of students in higher education, as is their right if 'fair access' is to mean anything. Interim targets have been set for 2021, not so far away, both nationally and for each institution. Crucially every institution will be expected to recruit 10 per cent of its students from SIMD 20 areas by that date. Here I want to make three points:

> The first is that there are drawbacks with all targets, all metrics - and higher education has been overrun by a performance culture. Targets /metrics tend to oversimplify what is always a complex picture, and they encourage game playing. Institutions will focus on recruiting SIMD 20 students to meet their targets at the expense of other groups also suffering disadvantage (I am particularly concerned about older and part-time students). And, even with adjusted offers, the pool of SIMD 20 students may be limited, with the result that institutions will compete for them - shuffling SIMD 20 students around without necessarily increasing the total number.

> My second point is that, like all area-based metrics, SIMD will yield false-positives and false-negatives - in other words, poorer people who lives in richer areas and vice-versa. But it is worth remembering SIMD is a comparatively sophisticated metric. Of course, it would be lovely to have an individual rather than area based metric. But some individual attributes are not available to admissions staff early enough, or they depend too much on self-reporting (with inevitable issues relating to accuracy and integrity), or there are significant data protection issues - none of these, of course, is a reason for not working towards better individual-based metrics. But my key point is that no metric can claim to be totally comprehensive, to tell the whole story. If we are serious about reducing discrimination in access to higher education, we should have the imagination (and generosity) not to be constrained by a single performance measure.

> The third point is that I am not sure that we have recognised how challenging these targets are. If we are to achieve equal treatment for students in terms of access to higher education, which is what SIMD20 students making it 20% of all students really represents, a genuinely level playing field (especially if there is a reasonable distribution of such students around the system, and they are not all concentrated in colleges and post-1992 universities), we will have achieved something that no other

country has achieved. It will require a radical transformation of the whole higher education system, its mentality so-to-speak, not just fairer admissions policies.

The second issue is what we now call 'contextualised admissions', although we urgently need a more user-friendly label. Universities have always varied the grades they ask from applicants, depending on a range of factors (of which the school they attended was probably the most important). So the principle of variable entry grades is not seriously in dispute. The key issues are, first, which groups of applicants deserve to be given a break by asking them to meet lower (formal) entry standards; and, second, how big a break they should be given. I know that all universities, publish the adjusted grades they make. That is a big gain in transparency (although the various adjustments are varied and complex, and not always very easy to decipher). But, if we are serious about tackling the most serious forms of deprivation rather than just running an across-the-board flexible admissions system, we probably need to make bolder adjustments, based on clearly expressed educational rationales (subject-by-subject) - which is where 'access thresholds' come in.

The third issue is articulation. Frankly it is not right that half of HN students transferring to degree courses in universities receive no credit and basically have to go back to the starting line. It is unfair to them, and costly to the taxpayer. Of course, I recognise the weight of the arguments about the need to match subject content in some disciplines. There are differences between HNs and degrees in terms of what might be called their 'learning cultures' and, in particular, assessment methods. And I know there are also peer-group arguments about the difficulties of social integration for students entered in the second or third year. But these differences and difficulties shouldn't be exaggerated.

The third issue - outreach programmes, including top-up programmes in schools, summer schools, 'junior universities', access pathways and such like - is less contentious. I believe the best approach here can be summed up in a single phrase - we need to scale up and we need to join up. We need to 'scale up', because the numbers involved are small compared with the scale of the under-representation by students from deprived backgrounds. And we need to 'join up', because it is important that the credit and experience gained by students on these programmes can be transferred, and doesn't limit them to just a small number of entry points. Of course, a lot of inspiring work is already being done. But we need to rigorously evaluate what works well and what works less well. This is where the proposed framework on fair access comes in; scaling-up, joining-up and spreading best practice.

I have spoken long enough - and it is now time to listen to what you have to say. But I would like to end with three thoughts:

> The first is that, although it is important that no institution, however ancient or eminent, is allowed to opt-out of fair access, it is also important that the very distinctive contribution made by colleges to higher education in Scotland is recognised, and celebrated. Quite simply, if Scottish higher education is more 'democratic' than English higher education, it is largely down to the college - for all the historical memories (myth?) of the 'democratic intellect';

> The second is that, if we really serious about fair access, we have to ask searching questions about how we think about success, and even how we assess attainment. To take a simple point, although continuation and completion rates are important (we

must never set people up to fail), is it reasonable to expect students from more diverse backgrounds to fit the historical study patterns set with students from a much narrower and more elite background in mind? This a radical project, more radical perhaps than we care to acknowledge. We - higher education - need to change not just help students to fit in;

And the third is that we should constantly remind ourselves about why fair access to higher education matters. It matters because in a 21st-century economy we cannot afford to waste the talents of so many people if Scotland, or the UK, or any country wants to have a prosperous future. But it matters even more because in a 21st-century democracy access to advanced higher education is a close to being a civic right, a human right. If you are denied that opportunity, you are being denied your full rights as a citizen. I think we have already observed with the rise of so-called 'populism' with its 'alternative facts', the election of Donald Trump and (closer to home) Brexit, the dangers of denying people their civic and human rights, and the consequences of creating barriers to aspiration and hope.