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Higher Education Conference

*Quality and access: a zero-sum
game?*

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Quality & Access: a zero-sum game?

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at your conference this morning. The theme I have chosen is 'Quality and Access: a zero-sum game?', and I will explain what I mean in just a moment. But, first, let me lay out my personal credentials.

As well as being Commissioner for Fair Access here in Scotland I also have a 'day job' at the UCL Institute of Education in London. So I still have grass-roots experience of quality assurance, as a member of a course team who battles with grade criteria, and as an external examiner. I value this experience because it keeps your feet on the ground, and makes me aware of what sometimes is overlooked, the equivalent of what Clausewitz called the 'friction of war', how grand designs get played out in practice.

My second personal experience of quality assurance was as a Vice-Chancellor - I can well remember preparing for and waiting the results of (long gone) Teaching Quality Assessments and also being 'prepped' for encounter with QAA visiting teams in institutional audits (in case I wandered 'off script').

And my third involvement of quality assurance was as the member of the board of the (English) Funding Council where I chaired what was then the Quality Assurance Learning and Teaching Committee (but now has a new name - nowadays, of course, the 'student experience' has to be at least name-checked). Again I can remember being put on the spot by the chair of HEFCE who asked me, and the committee, to offer an audit-style opinion on the 'academic health' of the English system. I ducked that one, and said we relied on the QAA…

So I have multi-layered experience of quality assurance, you could say - although I am very aware that the QAA has followed different paths in England and Scotland, south of the Border still focused on audit and here emphasising instead quality enhancement. All I will say is that most rank-and-file academics north and south of the Border very much prefer the Scottish approach.

But I am here today as the Commissioner for Fair Access. The theme I want to address is a tough one, which we often shy away from. Here in the UK, in Scotland I suspect just as much in England, we instinctively believe - maybe feel is a better word - that, if you want to have more access to higher education, you may have to accept 'lower' standards (at any rate, in a traditional sense). That is not what Americans believe. One of my most formative - transformative - experiences was the two years I spent at the University of California in Berkeley. I arrived with that instinct, that belief, that there is inevitably a trade-off between access and quality. But, having experienced life in what is by any measure a world-class research university that nevertheless accepted its social responsibilities to the people of that State, I left with a very different belief, one that has left me with a passionate belief in widening participation and fair access - which is why I am here today.

In brief my argument will be this:

First, that we shouldn't ignore the 'elephant in the room' (the instinctive belief that access and quality are a zero-sum game); instead we should be open and honestly debate it;

Second, we shouldn't duck it either, by insisting that a more diverse student body can meet exactly the same standards (in terms of continuation rates, degree outcomes and the rest) as 'traditional' students - provided we pour in enough resources for 'support' of all kinds (academic, pastoral, financial);

Third, I will argue that, if we are committed to achieving fair access, standards will not be 'lower' but 'different' (and arguably higher). We need to define academic quality in new ways - if you like, going beyond 'enhancement' to something different - 'transformation', perhaps;

And I will end by saying something about my role as Commissioner for Fair Access

So - are access and quality truly a zero-sum game? The historical record does not suggest this is the case. In the past half century we have created a mass higher education system. Student numbers have increased ten-fold. Participation rates have jumped from below 10 per cent of school leavers continuing on to higher education in the 1960s to more than 50 per cent here in Scotland (and almost 50 per cent in England). This has happened everywhere. In South Korea, for example, participation is now more than 80 per cent. But there is no evidence that this has been at the expense of standards. Drop-out rates have increased a little - but even the worst performing universities would have low wastage rates in most other HE systems. The proportion of 'good' degrees, firsts and two-ones, has actually increased (I recognise I am getting into trickier territory here because universities control their own standards, but I think we have to attach some weight to the elaborate systems we have got measuring comparative standards, from external examiners through to all the work of the QAA). It is true that more graduates are taking so-called 'non-graduate' jobs - but that is a rather arbitrary distinction in a dynamic knowledge-based post-industrial economy, and we should never forgot the explosion of highly skilled jobs in a knowledge-based economy (which has been one of the major drivers of higher education expansion, alongside student demand). So - overall - there is little evidence that expansion, which inevitably opened up access to new kinds of student, has been at the expense of quality and standards.

But that is not the whole story. In very broad terms there is a correlation between entry standards (as measured by UCAS points), continuation rates and degree outcomes - although it is important to add that students who have followed dedicated access pathways perform well (at least as well, or even better than, students who get admitted through Clearing with low to middling grades). But these aggregate comparisons don't tell us much. After all, there are many other factors that affect continuation and attainment - social factors, because students from socially deprived backgrounds cannot call on the peer and family support that is naturally available to students from more privileged backgrounds; economic factors, because they are more dependent on (often inadequate) financial support (and may need to borrow, and therefore repay, more - student financial support systems tend to be regressive in their effects); and cultural factors, because 'non-standard' students may find it more difficult to 'fit in' into a university environment customised for 'standard' students. These factors are at least as important as any academic factors, such as prior educational attainment or less well developed study skills.

The success of dedicated access pathways, combined with ongoing support, demonstrate that we can substantially mitigate or eliminate the negative impact of all these factors - academic, but also social and cultural (I'm not so sure about the economic factors, which have much deeper roots in income inequality - which, we should remember, is significantly greater today than in the second half of the 20th century). But that very success may also expose its limitations. Most of these pathways are resource intensive, and often depend on customised, even personalised, learning. As a result only comparatively small numbers of students can benefit. More can certainly be done to generalise that learning, and to scale up these programmes. But there will always be limits of fair access, conceived of in these terms. To put it simply - if we put all our efforts, and hopes, into fitting 'non-standard' students into 'standard' systems, we will never achieve the level playing-field we all desire. To put it even more simply - it is not enough to change the students, we (in higher education) need to change at least as much (and possibly more). In a rather different context let's remember the - ironic and rhetorical - question asked by black and other minority ethnic students during the campaign to have Cecil Rhodes' statue in Oxford removed last year: 'why is my curriculum so white..?'

That is a radical challenge - because we may need to think how we define 'success'; and (even more difficult) how we define academic quality and therefore how we set academic standards.

Let me take 'success' first. We still expect students to 'succeed' on our terms not theirs - for all the talk of 'student centred' higher education.

First, all students in today's much more open (even mass) higher education - however different their social backgrounds, financial circumstances or cultural experiences - are expected to match

the 'continuation rates' established for a much narrower range of students. There is little recognition that for some students 'stopping out' (not 'dropping out' - our language is all wrong) might make better sense; nor that it is our responsibility to have sufficiently flexible study patterns to facilitate not to penalise such behaviour. How easy is it to switch from full-time or part-time study, or mix face-to-face with virtual learning? And we should always remember continuation rates in the UK are very high by international standards - or, if you prefer, wastage rates are very low. As I said earlier, he 'worst' performing university here in Scotland would look average-to-good judged against most US state universities, including some with 'world-class' reputations.

Next, attainment. Here, the 'improvement' in the proportion of 'good' degrees proves the limitations of using this as the predominant indicator of attainment. I am one of thosee cynics who puts it all down to 'grade inflation', or points her / his finger at the obvious self-interest institutions have in results that will play well in league tables. I am simply pointing out that (formal) attainment levels in today's mass system are significantly higher than in yesterday's elite systems. Why? Of course, part of the reason is higher entry grades, which reflects rising attainment in schools (at least for those likely to continue on to higher education). Another reason is better, certainly more organised and more systematic, teaching in universities. A third reason for this 'improvement' may be the more sophisticated learning resources now available. But I believe there is a more substantial issue here. Should we make degree outcomes the only measure of success for a university education - or is this focus simply another manifestation of the ubiquitous performance culture?

Finally, employment outcomes. As we know jobs are segregated into 'graduate' and 'non-graduate' jobs. Yet this distinction may take less account of the actual cognitive demands made by different jobs as opposed to their professional labelling - and it struggles to keep up with the volatility of a 21st-century post-industrial (and, arguably, post-professional) workforce. The shape - and tone? - of the highly skilled (and certainly highly paid) workforce has been transformed in the 21st century. Graduates now face a changed occupational world - elite jobs in finance, consultancy, marketing and design (often disproportionately populated by the most privileged) for some; a growing mass of jobs in SMEs or among the self-employed for others, and maybe even a precariat in the so-called 'gig economy'. Life-styles now meld with occupational roles in new ways. There has been such writing about 'clever cities, the rise of the 'creative class' and that mix of cultural and social experimentation and economic enterprise that is the engine of the most advanced economies. This takes us a long way beyond matching skills-to-jobs in an old-fashioned paradigm of workforce planning.

The points I want to emphasise are simple ones. I would never argue we should just accept higher wastage and lower attainment rates or graduate under-employment (or unemployment) as the price we must pay for fairer access. Of course, we should never set up people to fail; nor fail to help them achieve their full potential (regardless of their social backgrounds). I am simply saying - first, that we should not impose inflexible and anachronistic measures of 'success' that do not reflect contemporary realities; and, second, that we shouldn't just impose our ideas about 'success' on students but allow students themselves more room to define 'success' on their terms.

It won't have escaped your notice that many of the things I have just been discussing will be important metrics in the English Teaching Excellence Framework, which some Scottish universities have decided to enter - but I will pass over that embarrassment. But let me move on to how we conceive of, and measure (or enhance), quality - a topic that is central to this conference. I do not have time this morning - or, if I am frank, the expertise - to discuss in any detail the changing landscape of quality assurance, enhancement or management. I just want to make the simple point that we should continuously and critically examine what we mean by 'quality' and 'standards', and we can only do so by scanning the wider intellectual, the cognitive and cultural, landscape as well as the policy and management landscape.

So the issue is less about the mechanisms we use - audit, enhancement, even metrics - but what we are auditing, enhancing, measuring. Some of these issues are familiar - how do we assess standards across very different disciplines with very different intellectual structures and learning cultures, or between specialised and interdisciplinary studies, or across time (because ideas of

what constitutes 'quality' changes over time) and space (because, especially perhaps in the humanities and to a lesser degree the social sciences, these ideas are culturally contingent)? We tend to address these issues by relying heavily on the two 'P's - peer review and process.

But these issues are very relevant to discussion of any supposed trade-off between access and quality, my theme this morning. We value particular forms of cognitive expression at the expense of others, often without self-critical scrutiny. Consider the balance between academic knowledge and experiential learning. Or take 'academic writing'. I remember once sitting in a class in an access class in a college. The students, mostly older and all from more deprived backgrounds, were discussing social change and industrial restructuring. Nearly all of them lacked the 'standard' academic language which younger, and more privileged, students in 'good' universities with high grades deploy with ease. Instead they had a 'lived' understanding that their younger, brighter, peers lacked. Why do we rate one form of knowing so much more highly than the other.

Finally I am sure you would like me to say a few words about my own role as Commissioner for Fair Access. Appointing Commissioners is a growth industry - here in Scotland across the UK (and the world). In the media they are always called Tsars (which, if that label suggests absolute power, gives a very misleading impression in my case...). One day someone will come up with explanations for this 21st-century growth industry - I suspect it has something to do with the importance of media impact (or even 'spin'), something to do with 'out-sourcing' of activities that would once have been the responsibility of the traditional civil service, something to do with the pervasive 'performance' / 'delivery' agendas.

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. Others planned for the autumn are likely to focus on articulation between Higher Nationals and degrees, other forms of disadvantage in addition to social deprivation, part-time students and 'displacement' (the fear that mid-range students are missing out because of the focus on fair access for the most deprived).

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 issue is what we now call 'contextual 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, primarily between Higher Nationals and degrees although there may be overlaps between S6 and the first-year of degrees also. Frankly it is not right that half of HN students transferring to degree courses in universities receive no credit and 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 - access pathways, outreach programmes, top-up programmes, summer schools, 'junior universities' 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 would like to end with just two thoughts:

The first is directly relevant to my theme this morning - access and quality: a zero-sum game? As I have tried to emphasise this morning, if we are really serious about fair access, we have to ask searching questions about how we think about' success', whether academic attainment or employment outcomes. Is it reasonable to expect students from more diverse backgrounds to fit the historical study (and life) patterns set for students from much narrower and more elite backgrounds? As I have said, we - higher education - need to change not just help students to fit in. And we have to change not by accepting 'lower' quality outcomes but by having the courage to re-imagine what we mean by quality;

The second is to remember remind 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 people are denied that opportunity, they are being denied their full rights as citizens. With the rise of so-called 'populism', the election of Donald Trump and (closer to home) Brexit (but also the fundamentalism that rejects the value of liberalism, secularism and - more controversially - cosmopolitanism - worldwide), we have been reminded of the dangers of denying people their human rights - in terms of secure and well paid jobs, secure and safe communities and respected identities, as well as educational opportunities. Quite simply, regardless of any detailed educational considerations, we simply cannot afford to treat access and quality as a zero-sum game. We have to have both.