

Commissioner for Fair Access
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Address to Scottish Funding
Council's Scotland's Fair Access
Conference

20 June 2017

Perth Concert Hall

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this conference today. I am now six months into what is a fascinating role as Commissioner for Fair Access - fascinating because it is something I have always believed in passionately, and also fascinating because it is a new role so there is no road-map to follow (so I am on my own!).

That is where I want to start - why is fair access so important?

I think we tend to frame the answer in economic terms. No nation can afford to rely on the skills of just a proportion of its population, those with all the social advantages. Government after Government across their world has placed education at the heart of their political agendas. A few years ago the Government in Australia published a report with the title *Clever Australia* that says it all. The Scottish Government is no exception.

But there is another more powerful argument for fair access; it is about social justice as well as economic efficiency. We are fortunate to live in an open democratic society, but it is still far from being a fair society - and the gap between the most fortunate and the most deprived is apparent in higher education as it is everywhere. Access to education, even higher education, is now close to being a civic right because those denied it struggle to participate fully as citizens (and not just in the labour market). There is a lot of writing these days about the rise of 'populism', as with the election of Donald Trump and (nearer home) Brexit. That is a big subject, and I personally think some of this writing is a media bandwagon and bit over-blown. But, if people feel left behind, excluded from the opportunities they have a right to expect, if their aspirations frustrated, they 'answer back'.

So fair access is about more even than social justice; it is also about building communities that are at ease with themselves - which is as much in the interests of the fortunate and privileged as those in danger of being left behind. Looking at recent newspaper headline and TV reports it is difficult to feel the UK (maybe Scotland is a little more fortunate) is a society at ease with itself. I believe that, when we get absorbed in all the details of delivering fair access in universities and colleges, we should constantly remind ourselves why it is so important. It is about far more than education.

This morning I want to cover two topics. The first is to talk about the 'blocks', real and imagined, to fair access; and the second is to focus in a little more details on policy and practice.

What do I mean by 'blocks' - and what do I mean when I say that some are real and some imagined? These are the kinds of thing I have in mind:

First is the 'counsel of perfection' - some people argue we can never really have fair access in higher education until we have addressed these fundamental inequalities in our society. And they point to the widening gap between the most privileged and the most deprived since the 1980s, as the French economist Thomas Picketty and others have shown. But, without for a moment denying the need for action on a broad front, that doesn't absolve us from the responsibility to do what we can now in our particular part of the imperfect world we inhabit.

The second 'block' is the assertion that most of the trouble is in schools. I am aware of the heat and (some) light that is being generated by the current debate about the Government's record on school attainment. But let's be clear. Even with the most pessimistic view of school attainment, schools are still producing (more than) enough well qualified and motivated applicants. If there is a 'supply' problem, especially in terms of the pool of sufficiently qualified SIMD20 applicants, it is only because we take too narrow - and rigid - a view of potential;

The third 'block' is the conviction it is all down to (a lack of) resources - so we need more funded places, more generous student financial support, more cash for supporting 'non-standard' students. Of course, all those things would help. But there will always be limits, imposed by the need to balance competing priorities nationally (the duty of the democratically elected Scottish Government, which we should also remember simply doesn't have the powers to launch a Keynesian-style boost of the economy by massive across-the-board increases in public expenditure) - and there is the same need to balance priorities within institutions. But I will say a bit more about this third 'block' later;

A fourth 'block' is the belief that by keeping higher education 'free' for Scottish students the 'heavy lifting' on free access has already been done. Here I don't to be misunderstood - I have always opposed tuition fees (and would never have taken this job if students were charged fees in Scotland) - but 'free' tuition is a necessary not a sufficient condition of fair access. It mustn't be used as an excuse for giving a lower priority to financial support for students - which I know from my conversations with students is a major issue;

A fifth 'block' is the argument we need more research. But we will always need more research. I know - because it has been (and still is) my 'day job' as an higher education researcher to try to get research contracts. Again, I don't want to be misunderstood - I believe absolutely in the need for evidence-based policy (and practice). But we need to recognise there already is a lot of research; there are lots of things we know already. So we need to concentrate on the identified gaps in our knowledge and, even more important, in making sure the research findings we do have are made more accessible, and injected into political and public debate. I'll also come back to this later;

The sixth 'block' is that the conviction that the need to maintain quality is a brake on fair access. We can go only as fast, and as far, as the overriding need to maintain current levels of 'performance' - in other words, continuation and completion rates, and degree outcomes. That is both good and bad - good because, of course, we should never set up students to fail nor fail to support them properly; but bad if it means we insist that 'non-standard' students have to conform to the study patterns set by, and for, 'standard' students (and, in particular, if the real motive is to burnish institutional credentials and brands in league tables);

The final 'block' is the argument that, unless universities, in particular, have an appetite for radical change, progress towards truly fair access will inevitably be (too?) slow. But, as with deep-seated social inequalities, we need to start from where we are. Universities are dynamic and innovative institutions but also at the same time conservative institutions. We cannot reasonably argue that, because we cannot turn

the world upside down, we cannot still make substantial, if occasionally grinding, progress. We can - and we must.

In the second part of my talk I want to focus on some more specific issues (and, in the process, come back to some of the 'blocks' I have just flagged up). Because I have limited time I will have to talk in headlines, although I hope I will have opportunities on other occasions for more detailed consideration.

The first point I want to emphasise is that we should never forget the reason why Scotland has a more accessible higher education system than other nations in the UK - which is largely down to the contribution made by the colleges and the number of students on HN courses, which command a lot of support among employers. Of course, the concentration of students from more deprived backgrounds in colleges (and post-1992 universities) is troubling, because it suggests there may still be barriers placed in the way of these students in 'ancient' universities. So it is important that there is a reasonable distribution of students from all backgrounds in all Scotland's institutions.

But maybe we should beware of focusing too much of our efforts on fair access on, what I rather unfairly call, getting 'poor students into posh universities' - or predominantly access to full-time degrees at universities - although I know there is partly inevitable because that is where the shortfalls are in fair access. That could have the unintentional effect of downgrading colleges. They may have less to do in terms of fair access, because they do so much already, but they play a key role in the diversity of the system, and so the pathways open to individual learners. Their role needs to be enhanced not, however unintentionally, marginalised.

Second, there is a number of key issues that frame the debate about fair access - contextual admissions, articulation, bridging programmes, targets, displacement and so on (the first three are being considered by working groups established by Universities Scotland). I don't have time now to cover them all this morning. So I would like to focus on just two and link them to something I mentioned earlier, the role research can play - and, in particular, the need to bridge the gap between detailed research findings (and rigorous data analysis) and political and wider public debate. That is why I decided to publish a series of discussion papers on key topics relating to fair access, and the first two have been posted on the Commissioner website today. We need robust but accessible analyses of what we know on these key topics. Before I go any further, I should emphasise these are not 'all my own work'. The substance of both papers has been produced by two colleagues in the Scottish Government, Stephanie McKendry and Ryan Scott, However, I am solely responsible for the concluding commentary, carefully segregated on a take-it-or-leave it basis.

The first discussion document is relevant to the targets. It analyses the data on the applications - offers - acceptances cycle by SIMD quintile and by institutional patterns. The broad picture is encouraging (at national aggregate level), although not grounds for complacency (at individual institutional level). Two quick reflections - first, we need to expand the number of SIMD 20 applications not just treat applications more 'fairly' (the last thing we need is beggar-your-neighbour behaviour by institutions competing against each other for too limited a pool of applicants); and, second, some universities have been more successful than others in recruiting a more balanced student intake - and, importantly, they include some with strong research and international reputations. Maybe there are lessons others can learn.

The second discussion paper is on contextual admissions. It demonstrates how seriously nearly all universities are taking this. But, again, some reflections - first, we urgently need some more learner-friendly language (and a new overall label); second, we need to make our admissions systems, and adjusted offers, simpler and more readable (too many are highly complex, and some amount to a 'black box' into which student characteristics are fed at one end and out of which decisions emerge at the other, but the working is hidden); and, finally, we need to move beyond contextual admissions to access thresholds. The aim is not just to run a more flexible admissions system but to produce a step-change in achieving fair access, by setting the true academic 'rate' for entry rather than just accepting a discounted market 'rate'.

The final thing I want to discuss is the responsibilities of the Government and the Funding Council:

First, the Government. The evidence is limited that applicants from the middle SIMD quintile are being displaced by the drive to fair access in significant numbers because of the overall cap on students numbers, but clearly making available additional funded places provides the head room for across-the-board expansion. Widening access is a lot easier if, at the same time, you are increasing participation. Certainly the extra ring-fenced places for SIMD20 students when students from the rest of the UK were removed from the cap made an significant contribution, even if the overall number was (too?) small and even if some universities asked for and were given only modest additional places. One of the effects of Brexit (I will not say 'benefits' because in almost every respect leaving the European Union is a disastrous course of action) will be to remove other European Union students from the cap, freeing up additional places. Of course, the Government could decide to spend the money somewhere else entirely or continue to provide some form of subsidy to EU students post-Brexit (and, in any case, any 'spare' money could easily get gobbled by other elements in the HE budget). But I hope the Government will give serious consideration to boosting fair access by increasing the overall number of funded places, whether through this route or others.

As far as the Funding Council is concerned, I believe that more robust use should be made of outcome agreements. I know that it is not straightforward. Outcome agreements are very effective in encouraging institutions to come up with compelling narratives about their strategic direction, and also as instruments for ensuring public accountability in a broad sense; they are probably less effective as more detailed control and steering mechanisms. But it should be possible to link the targets that institutions themselves freely set for recruiting more disadvantaged students with the student numbers they receive. Is it too radical to suggest that, if those targets (and aspirations) are - consistently - not met, there should be some reduction in funded places? I believe this would be essential if extra places are provided. I know this is a delicate issue. Universities might respond by recruiting more uncapped students from the rest of the UK, or the world, or by boosting other forms of income. The alternative would be to weight funding to offer institutions that meet their access targets a premium (on the lines, perhaps, of the existing retention premium for post-1992 universities, which has been successful in cutting drop-out rates). Either way some gentle funding pressure, or moderate funding incentives, might have some effect.

These are very much thoughts, rather than concrete proposals. Let me end with two reflections - first, I am very aware of the excellent work that is being done on fair access in (all) institutions; and second, to go back to the start of my talk, we should never forget why fair access matters.