

Universities Scotland brief for members of the Education and Skills Committee, 21 February 2018

Universities Scotland welcomes the Committee's decision to receive an update on widening access from the Commissioner and the Minister for FE, HE and Science. This brief includes a short update on delivery of the set of 15 actions we are working on and sets out some of the key issues as we see them at this point in time. Our questions for the Commission are highlighted in ***bold and italics***.

Universities are committed to delivering on the CoWA 2030 targets.

Since a *Blueprint for Fairness* was published, Universities Scotland and Scotland's 19 higher education institutions published a full and complete response to the university-facing CoWA recommendations in *Working to Widen Access* in November 2017. This includes 15 time-measured commitments for action. The commitments on admissions, articulation from college and bridging programmes from schools were developed with stakeholder input.

Since November 2017, universities have:

- Agreed the remit for the new National Articulation Forum (NAF) with key stakeholders and appointed the Co-Conveners. The NAF will meet for the first time in March. This was action #8.
- Created a practitioner sub-group to deliver on clear and consistent language for contextualised admissions so that it becomes far more accessible and user-friendly. This is action #1. Led by Rebecca Gaukroger, Director of Recruitment and Admissions at the University of Edinburgh, the membership of that group will give a voice to young people, through the Scottish Youth Parliament, adult returners via the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP); to parents through the National Parents Forum, to schools through School Leaders Scotland as well as UCAS, the Funding Council, the Plain English Campaign, universities and others.
- Working with all 19 HEIs to monitor their individual progress to set minimum entry requirements by 2019. This is action #3.

Our hopes and expectations of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access

The next big deliverable in the *Blueprint* is the publication of a 'Scottish Framework for Fair Access' in 2018.¹ Universities would like a Framework that sets out a clear summary of what's proven to work well to widen access, so that institutions are taking this forward with tools that are known to work. There's been a long-standing problem that many well-intentioned widening access initiatives (across the UK) are not robustly evaluated so partners working on access are not starting from a shared understanding of what's effective.

A tender for the development of the Framework went out in December 2017, and has subsequently been re-tendered by SFC in the absence of a satisfactory bid. ***It would be helpful to have further details on the Commissioner's expectations and timetable for delivery of the Framework and to understand the nature of the Commissioner's role in delivering that Framework.***

Continuing the commitment to a holistic approach

One of the most exciting things about the creation, initially, of a Commission on Widening Access and then a permanent post of a Commissioner for Fair Access, was the holistic, or whole-system, approach

¹ Commission (2016) *Blueprint*. Recommendation 2, p14.

that it was tasked with. The Commissioner's first year has focused on post-16 education but we understand that the next stage will focus on schools. If so, this will be a really positive reinforcement of a whole-system approach. The attainment agenda in schools and access agenda in universities are inextricably linked. Good partnerships already exist between schools and universities but we would be supportive of a role for the Commissioner in ensuring connectivity between all parts of the system. We think that evolving the Commissioner's role in this way could add a great deal of additional value to the access agenda.

It would be helpful to get the Commissioner's view of the importance of his role in ensuring Scotland continues a holistic approach to access. It would be helpful to understand more about the Commissioner's planned work as it relates to schools.

The need for data to drive action and evidence ambition

Universities are very keen to access a data set on Higher achievement levels by the end of S6² that would allow three very important things to happen:

1. Establish and agree the current baseline of the school-leaving SIMD20 population that is qualified for university entry. This is not available at the level of detail that universities need.
2. The Scottish Government could then project the growth in this group of eligible school-leavers as a result of work in schools to close the poverty-related attainment gap. This would give everyone working towards the 2030 targets full confidence that the collective efforts of schools, college and universities will meet the CoWA targets in full.
3. Universities could then set minimum entry requirements for SIMD20 applicants using the data to model the impact of those adjusted entry levels. The data would give universities knowledge of how many additional SIMD20 school-leavers would be eligible for application at different entry levels.

This data is not currently available. We have asked Government for this data and the Minister has committed the Scottish Government to producing it, which we welcome. However, we don't yet have a delivery date confirmed. We were concerned that the Scottish Government's consultation in measuring the attainment gap did not include measurements that would show increase in attainment at levels that would qualify learners for university entry, even with reduced offers through contextual admissions.³ The sooner universities can work with this data set, the better as 2019 is the target date by which universities are expected to have minimum entry requirements in place. This means that universities are doing this work now and throughout 2018.

Will the Commissioner do everything in his power to accelerate the publication of data in order that universities can set minimum entry requirements that are informed by data and evidence, and deliver the 'pace'⁴ of progress that the Minister expects from institutions?

² Boliver, V. et al (2017) [Identifying Minimum Academic Entry Requirements for Contextually Disadvantaged Applicants](#). Table 1.1.

³ Not all university entrants are school-leavers. This is an important point as entrants from college and adult returners will be key to meeting the 2030 CoWA targets. However, more detailed data on school-leaver qualification levels will be very helpful to universities' access work.

⁴ Minister for FE, HE & Science, [Topical Question Time: University Applications, 6 February 2018](#)

Can the Commissioner share his perspective on the limitations of SIMD as a robust measure for tracking progress on widening access? The authors of the SIMD have been clear that most income-deprived people on Scotland live outside areas of multiple deprivation identified by SIMD.⁵ What role can the Commissioner play in progressing work to produce a ‘more balanced package of measures’?⁶

Areas for clarification:

The CoWA targets should include learners of all ages

- The 2016 *Blueprint* report from CoWA, which set out the 2030 access targets, does not clarify what age groups of entrants this target is intended to cover.⁷ ***We would find it very helpful if the Scottish Government and Commissioner clarified that the 2030 CoWA targets are inclusive of all groups. Doing so would allow all stakeholders to proceed with the same understanding of the metric that will be used to judge success.***
- Universities feel very strongly that the 2030 CoWA target, specified as 20% of entrants to university should be from SIMD20 areas should relate to entrants of all ages. This is consistent with our belief in lifelong learning and it would recognise that nearly one in five existing first-degree students in higher education are over 25 years of age.⁸ Being inclusive of all age groups reflects the fact that many learners have not realised their full educational potential by the time they leave school.
- Mature entrants or adult returners will make a significant contribution to achievement of the 2030 CoWA targets. The most recent UCAS applicant data showed an increase in applicants of all ages from SIMD20 areas by 2% or a total of 110 applicants.⁹ The same applicant data showed a 4% decrease in the number of 18 year old applicants from SIMD20 areas. The number of 18 year old applicants fell across all quintiles.

Status of the recommendations in *Laying the Foundations*

- ***It would be helpful to understand the status of the new set of 23 recommendations published in the Commissioner’s first annual report, [Laying the Foundations](#), which are addressed to the Scottish Government, Scottish Funding Council, universities, colleges and others.***
- When combined with the 34 recommendations set out in CoWA’s *Blueprint*, a total of 57 recommendations have come forward from the Commission/Commissioner in less than two years.
- The original set of 34 recommendations from the Commission, as published in the *Blueprint*, has been and continues to be Universities Scotland’s reference point for action. It is the framework on which we have based our recent work. Annex A of *Working to Widen Access* maps our set of 15 actions directly onto the CoWA recommendations to show how we intend to deliver on the original recommendations.

⁵ Scottish Government (2017) [The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2016](#) p7.

⁶ Commissioner, *Laying the Foundations*, P33

⁷ The access ‘target’ as expressed in the [Blueprint for Fairness](#) does not make any reference to age group. It reads: “By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to higher education.” Pg 13. The *Blueprint* is clear that its objective is to deliver on the First Minister’s ambition that: “a child born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the same time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of entering university..” The First Minister’s language expresses this in terms that could be understood to mean the target relates only to school leavers.

⁸ HESA Student FPE 2016/17.

⁹ UCAS (2018) January deadline analysis: SIMD quintile. Tables D.13.3 and D.13.4.

The priority given to retention

- Universities Scotland believes that widening access and retention go hand-in-hand. The goal of widening access is not just that students from deprived backgrounds get in, but that they are supported to achieve successful outcomes from higher education.¹⁰
- The Commission was clear about the importance of retention, the Minister has been so in statements to Parliament and the Commissioner's most recent Discussion Paper¹¹ is also clear that the goal of access goes beyond entry to completion and employment outcomes on par with other graduates.
- However, not all messages about retention have been as consistent on this point over the last 12-14 months. ***It would be helpful to take this opportunity for clarification on the importance attached to retention, as this is a very important factor in the decision-making and direction taken by institutions and others.*** This is probably most important when it comes to decisions relating to contextualised admissions and adjusted grades.
- The Commissioner's June 2017 Discussion Paper on contextualised admissions appeared to challenge a university rationale which attaches importance to good retention and outcomes when making decisions on contextualised admissions and adjusted grades.¹² Similarly, a research paper on contextualised admissions and minimum entry grades, commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council and published late summer 2017, suggested a retention rate of 80% of access students might be an appropriate level of 'success' for SIMD20/40 students.¹³
- An 80% retention rate for entrants from deprived areas would be a fall of 7 percentage points from current retention rates of 86.7%¹⁴ for SIMD20 students. It would also turn a retention gap into a retention gulf between SIMD20 students and SIMD80+ students, as the rate for the latter group is currently 93.1%. In recent years, there has been positive progress to close the retention gap between most and least deprived students. The gap has gone from 7.5 percentage points to 6.4 percentage points.
- We intend to respond positively to the Commissioner's challenge that more should be done to transform the notion of drop-out into 'stop-out'.¹⁵ This would allow students to exit their studies at a given point (for a job opportunity or for personal reasons) with recognition for their academic achievement to that point and without any of the stigma of dropping-out. Ideally, the option to resume studies at a later date would be open to students. There are clear links between this suggestion and the work of the Learner Journey review.

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¹⁰ Universities Scotland (2014) [Action on Access](#). We previously expressed this as 'getting in, staying in and getting on'.

¹¹ Commissioner (2018) [Retention Outcomes and Destinations](#)

¹² Commissioner (2017) [Discussion Paper: Contextual Admissions](#) p5.

¹³ Boliver, V. et al (2017) [Identifying Minimum Academic Entry Requirements for Contextually Disadvantaged Applicants](#). Table 5.1. In this case retention is defined as progress from the first to second year which is a fairly standard measure of retention in HE.

¹⁴ SFC (2017) [Report on Widening Access](#) Table 9. Data for AY 2015/16.

¹⁵ Commissioner (2017) [Laying the Foundations](#) recommendation 22, p45.