

Implementing a 'Blueprint for Fairness'

**A report on progress with recommendations
of the Commission on Widening Access**

May 2017

“I WANT US TO DETERMINE NOW 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 GOING TO UNIVERSITY AS A CHILD BORN IN ONE OF OUR LEAST DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES.”

*Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland,
26 November 2014*

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Ministerial Foreword



When I was appointed Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, I was delighted to have within my portfolio the Government's agenda on fair access to higher education. Like others, I fully embraced the recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access and its belief that equal access is fundamentally about fairness and is compatible with academic excellence.

As the First Minister has made clear, education is the defining mission of this Government. Our work to reduce inequalities in higher education did not start and will not end with the Commission's recommendations. We have introduced statutory access agreements and, over the last four years, have invested £128 million in widening access and articulation places, which are now embedded in our core funding for universities. This year we also introduced 40 new places through our pre-medical entry programme, which focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Commission's final recommendation was for the Scottish Government to report on progress. This report provides that update and focusses on what the Commission called 'foundational recommendations' - the recommendations the Commission felt most crucial to implement if we are to achieve equal access. Good progress has been made on these and on the other recommendations from the Commission, in what is a significant programme of systemic and cultural change in Scotland's approach to widening access.

The report also sets out how we plan to coordinate and monitor work going forward. It concludes by setting out the Government's expectations of itself and others on what can be achieved in the coming year with regard to access thresholds, outcome agreements and data. These are the key areas where I believe we must maintain the momentum with implementation if we are to reach our targets.

Finally, I want to highlight the relevance of this work. In April this year, the Government delivered on the Commission's recommendation to replace student loans with a bursary for those with a care experience. At the time of writing, over 100 young care experienced students had been awarded this bursary of £7,625 for study in 2017/18. The Commission's recommendations are already making a real difference to the lives of some of Scotland's most vulnerable young people. I am determined that we deliver on them all.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S Anne Somerville'.

Shirley-Anne Somerville

Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science

May 2017

Introduction

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. The Commission on Widening Access ('the Commission') was established to advise Ministers on the steps necessary to achieve this.

The Commission published its final report: [A Blueprint for Fairness](#), in March 2016. The report contained 34 recommendations. The final recommendation was that the Scottish Government report on progress with the recommendations it accepted, one year from the date of acceptance.

This report provides an update on implementation of the Commission's foundational recommendations, as outlined below, along with an overview of the work undertaken to deliver the other recommendations.

It concludes by setting out the Scottish Government's plans to monitor and coordinate delivery along with its expectations for implementation in the next year.

The Recommendations

The Commission set out 34 recommendations (Annex A) which it believed would support Scotland to achieve the goal of equal access for people from deprived backgrounds or with a care experience. Recommendations were made for schools, colleges, universities, local authorities, the Scottish Government and its agencies, as well as for a new Commissioner for Fair Access. Annex B shows which parts of the system the Commission envisaged should lead on the delivery of each recommendation.

The Commission noted the importance of all its recommendations; however, it chose to highlight a small number of foundational recommendations which reflected the bold action it believed would be necessary to deliver a step change in progress. These were:

- The appointment of a **Commissioner for Fair Access** (Recommendation 1);
- The development of a **Framework for Fair Access** to provide Scotland with an authoritative, evidence based framework to guide future access work and set the benchmark for access interventions going forward. (Recommendations 2 and 3);
- The introduction of **access thresholds** for all degree programmes, and more transparency and promotion of these and wider contextual admissions policies (Recommendations 11 and 12);
- A guaranteed **offer of a place and a full bursary for students with a care experience** who meet the minimum entry requirements (Recommendations 21 and 22);
- Implementation of **targets** to drive forward equal access to higher education in Scotland (Recommendation 32).

Progress on Implementation

The Scottish Government

Foundational recommendations for the Scottish Government

Recommendation 1: The Scottish Government should appoint a Commissioner for Fair Access by the end of 2016

Delivered on time

Professor Sir Peter Scott was appointed Commissioner for Fair Access in December 2016. This is an independent role, with a remit to provide leadership and drive progress but also to hold to account all those with a role to play in achieving equal access. Peter is a Professor of Higher Education Studies at University College London's Institute of Education.

The Scottish Government has established a team to support Professor Scott in his role as Commissioner. The team includes a Widening Access Manager from the University sector and provides professional support in the areas of statistical analysis, research, and access practice and policy. The team also supports the Commissioner's diary and engagement arrangements.

Progress with delivery of the Commissioner's recommendations is discussed below and further information on the Commissioner for Fair Access is available on the Commissioner's [website](#).

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.

Delivered on time

From 2017/2018, new and continuing care experienced students undertaking an eligible undergraduate course will be eligible to apply for a funding package of tuition fees and a non-income assessed Care Experienced Students Bursary. The amount available in 2017/2018 is £7,625. Applications for 2017/18 opened on 10th April 2017.

The Commission deliberately used the term 'care experienced' within its recommendations as opposed to 'care leaver'. It wanted to take an inclusive approach, which recognised that the challenges faced by those with care experience continue throughout their education and beyond, having a long term

impact on educational attainment and employment outcomes. The term ‘care experienced’ is widely used. Unlike ‘care leaver’ or ‘looked after’, however, it is not a term that is defined in legislation. To implement the bursary it was therefore necessary for the Government to establish criteria against which the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) could assess eligibility.

After consideration of analysis and research on educational outcomes for people with a care experience, alongside discussion with key stakeholders including Who Cares? Scotland, Ministers decided that the nature of a person’s care experience should *not* restrict their eligibility for the bursary i.e. anyone who has been looked after by a local authority would be considered ‘care experienced’ for the purpose of the bursary. The bursary is currently limited to those aged under 26 on commencement of their course.

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.

Implementation underway

The Government accepted the Commission’s targets in full. In its letter of guidance to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Government set out its expectation that the SFC demonstrate how Scotland’s colleges and universities are contributing to the targets set by the Commission, which should be reflected clearly within Outcome Agreements.

Further information on the steps taken by the SFC to build these targets into its outcome agreement process is provided in the SFC section of the report below.

Work to deliver other recommendations for the Scottish Government

Four of the remaining recommendations for the Scottish Government (Recommendations 23 and 29-31) relate to improved measurement, analysis or sharing of information. Implementation is being led by Scottish Government analysts in liaison with other data users and providers. A summary of progress with these recommendations, along with Recommendation 28 on regulation, is provided below.

Identifying learners with care experience (Recommendation 23)

The implementation of an approach to identify learners with a care experience will potentially require changes to administration and IT structures in the education sector and is a long-term project. Initial scoping work identified substantial technical and ethical barriers associated with implementing a 'marker or flag' as recommended by the Commission. In response, the Scottish Government is currently exploring alternative approaches that are likely to involve more targeted use of existing data to allow learners' experience of care to be confirmed at key stages using a robust and consistent approach. In keeping with the spirit of the Commission's recommendation, we aim to agree an approach which minimises the burden on learners, institutions, support providers and local authorities.

Tracking learner progress and sharing data (Recommendation 29)

The implementation of a unique learner number (ULN) is another significant, long-term commitment, likely to require changes to administration and IT structures across the education sector. The Scottish Government is currently conducting a feasibility exercise with IT specialists and key stakeholders to determine the most suitable approach.

The Scottish Government has also consulted admissions professionals at all Scottish universities on their contextual admissions policies and practices, including the indicators used and additional data required. The findings will guide the development of a core dataset of school level indicators to be made available to all institutions to use for contextual admissions.

Further work on data access arrangements will be scheduled as the work on developing measures (Recommendation 31) progresses, on the basis that any new approach to identifying students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds for measurement purposes should use data that admissions professionals can access and use when considering applications.

Improving analyses and publication of data (Recommendation 30)

The SFC is currently reviewing its Learning for All publication. Analysts at the SFC have worked with colleagues in the Scottish Government to map current access data, identify overlaps and gaps, and explore options for new analyses. The SFC will consult key data users and data providers in the coming months and will publish the first edition of its successor access publication later in the year. The new publication will provide a coherent and consistent set of statistics to allow better monitoring of fair access at key stages.

Prior to the Commission's final report, Scottish Government analysts were already working with UCAS on improving the presentation of Scottish data and UK comparisons. The SFC, meanwhile, was working with the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) on improving its UK-wide Performance Indicators on widening access. Discussions with HESA, UCAS and others following the Commission's final report confirmed that the development of an agreed method for UK comparisons, in the spirit of the Commission's recommendation, is an ambition shared by key UK-wide stakeholders. These discussions also highlighted several technical and presentational issues that we are currently looking to address through established UK-wide statistical forums.

Developing measures to identify access students (Recommendation 31)

This recommendation is being delivered through two complementary strands of work. Firstly, we are working to improve the quality of the data and measures available. The Commission identified measures that could potentially be used to supplement the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) but highlighted fundamental issues regarding their robustness, coverage and consistency. The Scottish Government is currently exploring the potential to address these issues through data linkage or additional data collection.

Secondly, we will confirm which measures are the most appropriate identifiers to use and agree an approach to using those measures in combination, to identify access students. The Commission found a consensus among experts on the types of measures that should be used but not on the best way to combine measures in practice. The Universities Scotland Admissions working group is likely to touch on similar issues and will provide further feedback from the sector. The evidence base on the validity and relative importance of potential additional measures, such as those proposed by the Commission, is growing. SFC-funded research from the University of Glasgow published in December 2016 showed the relative importance of the SIMD quintile a pupil lives in and the school they attend, on their likelihood of progressing to higher education. Further SFC-funded research from Durham University will provide initial recommendations on the most suitable potential indicators in the summer of 2017 with further empirical analysis to follow in the autumn.

Embedding access objectives in wider regulatory frameworks (Recommendation 28)

The initial stage of this work is to identify what is currently included within regulation to support the access objectives and where regulation could be further enhanced. The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science will shortly write to the relevant agencies and public bodies on this matter.

Integration with wider Scottish Government policy

Implementation of the Commission's recommendations sits within the context of wider work to improve the life chances and educational opportunities of young people in Scotland. We will seek to align all implementation with existing and future policy developments. A number of new policy developments have been initiated since publication of the Commission's final report. Five of the Commission's recommendations are now being taken forward by, or in parallel with, these areas as outlined below.

15 to 24 Learner Journey Review

The 15-24 Learner Journey review is a programme of work, led by the Scottish Government in partnership with others, to review the effectiveness and efficiency of the Learner Journey for all 15 to 24 year olds. The review is considering the 15-24 Learner Journey from the senior phase (S4-S6) to employment, including the stages of further and higher education in college, higher education in university, vocational training and apprenticeships. Work to deliver Recommendation 6 (Better use of key transition phases) and Recommendation 17 (Improved offer of information and guidance) will be taken forward through this review.

Further and Higher Education Student Support Review

This independent review, chaired by Jayne-Anne Gadhia, CEO of Virgin Money, has a remit to thoroughly review student support and ensure that the entire system is firmly focused on meeting the needs of all students in further and higher education. The review was launched in October 2016 and is scheduled to report to Ministers by autumn 2017. The Chair met with the Commissioner for Fair Access in May to discuss the links between the Student Support Review's work and the findings of the Commission. Work to deliver Recommendation 19 (Research on student finance) and Recommendation 20 (Better information on student finance) will be considered in the context of this review.

Review of the Care System

The independent Care Review will look at the underpinning legislation, practices, culture and ethos of the care system. Work to deliver Recommendation 23 (An approach to validate care experience across education) will be taken forward in the context of this review.

The Scottish Funding Council

Foundational recommendations for the Scottish Funding Council

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:...

Implementation underway

Following acceptance of the proposed targets by the Scottish Government, the SFC has integrated these targets into its Outcome Agreement Guidance and negotiation process with universities. Widening Access is presented within the Guidance as the SFC's top priority and, in addition to setting numerical targets for access, each institution has been asked to:

... summarise their strategies to reduce barriers, and proactively promote access to higher education to learners from deprived or disadvantaged backgrounds. This summary should include evidence of strategic commitment to and aspirations for widening access to disadvantaged groups (specifically those from SIMD20 and care experienced backgrounds).

In addition, the SFC has provided guidance to institutions on its expectations with regard to the ongoing use of the additional access places that have been funded to support access over the last four years. These places will continue to be funded from 2017/18 and, from 2018/19, they should be focused solely on supporting the intake of students from the 20 per cent most deprived areas of Scotland according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (referred to as SIMD20).

Other recommendations for the Scottish Funding Council

The SFC plays a key role in funding and supporting access activity, and in the outcome agreement process. This means that, as well as a responsibility to deliver the recommendations it was set by the Commission, the SFC also has a significant role to play in the successful delivery of other Commission recommendations. To take forward its work the SFC has therefore established five work streams that cover all SFC recommendations but also acknowledge the SFC's role in supporting wider delivery:

- Evidencing improvements in the admissions and selection processes (Recommendations 11-12, 14, 15 and 21-23);
- Engaging with schools (Recommendations 4, 15, 16, 18)
- Effective pathways and transitions into higher education (Recommendations 5-10)
- Funding, targets and regulation (Recommendations 24-27, 32)
- Measurement and reporting (Recommendations 30-31).

A summary of each of these work streams is provided below.

Evidencing improvements in the admissions and selection processes

As noted above, the SFC has funded research from Durham University into contextualised admissions and has requested greater information on current contextualised admission processes within institutions' Outcome Agreements. In addition to the above, the SFC is also contributing to these recommendations through its support for the Universities Scotland's Admissions Working Group and through membership of the Framework for Fair Access Group.

Engaging with schools

The SFC has undertaken initial consultation work with its existing school related access initiatives to seek to better coordinate activities. This has led to the proposal for a School Engagement Framework (SEF) which is being considered by the SFC's Access and Inclusion Committee. Through a more integrated approach the SEF will seek to achieve greater reach and impact through the SFC's school related initiatives, by:

- Engaging with all schools;
- Targeting support to socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils, not only those in low progression schools;
- Engaging with pupils earlier i.e. P7 and S1 onwards;
- Securing regional discussions and agreed outcomes;
- Removing duplication.

Effective pathways and transitions into HE

This work stream will take forward the SFC's work on flexible transitions and articulation. It will encompass work to improve monitoring of articulation including development of a new Articulation Database to replace the National Articulation Database, previously hosted by the Edinburgh and Lothian's Articulation Data Hub. Work is also being undertaken to review the effectiveness and future direction of the additional articulation places funded through the SFC. The SFC has set out its national aspirations for growth in the college and university Outcome Agreement Guidance for 2017-20. The SFC is also supporting Universities Scotland's working group on Articulation, and is represented on both Universities Scotland's Admissions Group, and the Scottish Government's Learner Journey project group on Provision and Transitions.

Funding, targets and regulation

This work stream has taken forward implementation of targets as outlined above. The SFC will also conduct a review of the use and effectiveness of the additional access places funded over the last four years. This will inform future funding decisions.

Measurement and reporting

This work stream includes the SFC's contribution to delivery of Recommendations 30 and 31 jointly with the Scottish Government as outlined above.

The Commissioner for Fair Access

Strategic Role of the Commissioner for Fair Access

As set out above and in line with Recommendation 1, a Commissioner for Fair Access was appointed in December 2016.

The main functions of the Commissioner are 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, including Ministers and the SFC;
- 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 and the development of a Framework for Fair Access;
- 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.

Engagement and Leadership

Since his appointment the Commissioner has met with key stakeholders and visited institutions to meet staff and students involved in access. The Commissioner has also delivered presentations and keynote addresses at events and conferences throughout Scotland, as well as writing contributions for newspapers and other publications. Where possible the Commissioner will make these available on his website. Throughout his engagements the Commissioner has purposely kept alive the debate on what fair access means to different people and has sought to encourage open discussion on a range of important and often challenging access topics. These include: access thresholds, displacement and the use of SIMD.

Improving the evidence base

The Commissioner is keen to look at how we can make better use of the evidence and data currently available to inform access activity and policy. He also wishes to make information as accessible as possible. To this end, the Commissioner has chosen to make his initial contribution to improving the evidence base through a series of Briefing Papers on key issues relating to fair access. These will seek to present evidence in an accessible and objective form; and will also include a short commentary by the Commissioner to highlight key gaps, issues and choices. The first two briefing papers will focus on applications and contextual admissions and will be published on the Commissioner's website before the end of June 2017.

Initial priority areas

The Commissioner intends to propose further areas for improvement going forward, in addition to those set out by the Commission. To do this, he will consider a number of

specific access issues in greater detail within his annual report. The Commissioner will outline some of these areas at the SFC’s Widening Access National Conference on 20th June.

Foundational recommendations for the Commissioner for Fair Access

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.

On track for delivery in 2018

To take forward this recommendation, the Commissioner for Fair Access has convened a Framework Development Group to produce the initial iteration of the Framework. The group is chaired by Conor Ryan, Director of Research and Communications at the Sutton Trust and a member of **the** Commission.

The Commissioner is keen to ensure that those working on access play a key role in the development of the Framework as its primary purpose should be to support and enhance the work they do. Membership is therefore drawn from experts in widening access practice, research and evaluation. In addition to those listed below, the group will also include representatives from the college and school sectors.

Framework for Fair Access Development Group

Conor Ryan (chair)	Director of Research and Communications, Sutton Trust
Kenny Anderson	Director, SWAP West
Dr Vikki Boliver	Director of Research, School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University
Dr Dee Bird	Assistant Director/ Outcome Agreement Manager, Scottish Funding Council
Dr Katrina Castle	Head of Widening Access, Edinburgh Napier University
Dr Neil Croll	Head of Widening Participation, University of Glasgow
Lynn Graham	Strategic Lead for Access to Higher Education, Scottish Government
Dr Stephanie Mckendry	Implementation Advisor/Researcher, Commissioner for Fair Access
Sarah Morrison	Manager, LIFT OFF (Schools for Higher Education Programme)

The Framework Development Group is not a strategic representative body, but rather a small, active working group created to design the Framework. Cross-sector engagement will therefore be crucial as the group’s work progresses and this will be achieved through sustained consultation with relevant stakeholders throughout the design and development process.

Further information on the Framework Development Group is available on the framework section of the [Commissioner's website](#).

Other recommendations for the Commissioner

In addition to the Framework, the Commissioner was tasked with implementing three further recommendations. A summary of progress on each of these is provided below.

University rankings (Recommendation 13)

The Commissioner recognises the importance that institutions place on university rankings and the impact they can have on driving behaviour. With all UK universities now tasked with doing more to widen access, he also recognises that a rankings process which penalises efforts to widen access could become a key barrier to progress. That said, the Commissioner also recognises the independence of the ranking process and will consider carefully, with key stakeholders, how best to take this work forward.

Research into student finance (Recommendation 19)

The original timescale for Recommendation 19 was for research to be commissioned within three months of the appointment of a Commissioner. The Commissioner has indicated that he does not want to undertake new research unless its purpose is clear. He also wishes to avoid duplicating or pre-empting the work of the current review of the student support system in Scotland, which was announced after the Commission reported. The Commissioner has met with Jayne Anne Gadhia (Chair of the Student Support Review Board) to discuss links between his work and that of the Board and how they can best support and complement each other going forward. He will give consideration to what further research is necessary within this context.

Access issues for other groups (Recommendation 33)

To take this work forward, the Commissioner first wants to establish the range of work that is already going on to support different groups of learners into, through and beyond higher education. He has asked his staff to bring together information on current activity and support for key groups of learners. He will use this to identify where further work is most needed.

The Wider Education System

Foundational recommendations for Universities

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.

and

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.

On track for delivery in 2019

Universities Scotland has established a working group on admissions and entry requirements, which will take forward work in relation to the above recommendations and also Recommendations 5, 14 and 21. The group is being led by Professor Sally Mapstone of the University of St Andrews. In addition to representatives from across the university sector, membership includes Colleges Scotland, NUS Scotland and the SFC.

The Admissions group is seeking to agree a 'core' set of contextual indicators and key terms across all universities. This work will then form the basis of a coordinated public information campaign. This will help to improve transparency and use of contextual admissions to support access thresholds. The group is also examining research that has mapped successful student outcomes to contextual indicators, to provide evidence to support the setting of access thresholds. The group is due to report back to universities in September 2017.

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.

On track for delivery 2017/18 academic year

Universities have for some time provided additional support and consideration to those with care experience as part of their admissions process. All universities have a named contact for those with care experience in order to provide one-to-one application support.

Staff supporting the Commissioner for Fair Access have been in contact with all universities regarding their contextual admissions processes and all have confirmed that they take care experience into consideration. The Government will continue to liaise with institutions and Universities Scotland on implementation of this recommendation during the 2017/18 application process. This

recommendation is within the remit of the Universities Scotland Admissions group and will be considered in detail at the group's June 2017 meeting.

Other recommendations for Universities

Following publication of the Commission's final report, university leaders summarised an initial set of actions for higher education institutions in the document [Futures Not Backgrounds](#). To take forward this work, Universities Scotland established three working groups, each covering a number of recommendations:

- Admissions (Recommendations 5, 14, 21, as discussed above);
- Articulation (Recommendations 8-10);
- Bridging Programmes (Recommendations 4, 7, 15-16).

All three groups are due to report over the summer or into early autumn 2017. Universities will then start to implement the groups' recommendations. A summary of each of the working groups is provided below.

Admissions and entry requirements

The work of the Admissions group is outlined above in relation to Recommendations 11 and 12.

Articulation

The Articulation group, led by Susan Stewart, Director of the Open University in Scotland, is undertaking a detailed analysis of articulation data at subject level. The group expects to use this to identify where there are gaps in articulation pathways in certain subjects. The group is also considering whether there are other qualifications, in addition to Higher Nationals, that could be used to articulate into university.

Bridging programmes

The Bridging Programme group is led by Professor Petra Wend from Queen Margaret University. The group is currently mapping the bridging programmes offered across Scotland. The group will use this to assess where there is a lack of opportunities and how universities can work together to give learners more choices.

Other parts of the education system

This report has summarised progress on implementation by the Scottish Government, the SFC, the Commissioner for Fair Access and Universities Scotland. Much of the work described above is being taken forward through joint working with representatives from other organisations or parts of the education system e.g. through the Framework Development Group; Universities Scotland's working groups; and the project groups of the 15 – 24 Learner Journey Review.

It is also recognised that within individual institutions and regions further work is being undertaken to progress the Commission's recommendations. In the next section of the report we set out how we plan to coordinate and monitor implementation activity going forward.

A Whole System Approach to Delivery

Delivery Group

The Commission recognised that socioeconomic inequality in higher education is a problem which spans the whole education system and beyond. Not all recommendations were for the Scottish Government to lead on; however this Government accepted them in full and is committed to supporting delivery of them all.

As this report highlights, there are now a range of work streams and groups established to take forward implementation. It is right and proper that different parts of the education system, the Scottish Government, its agencies and the Commissioner have all had space to establish their thinking on how best to implement the recommendations. That said, the Commission made clear that a system wide effort is needed to deliver progress and that duplication and lack of coordination are genuine issues that need to be tackled as part of the implementation effort.

The Government is therefore bringing together a Delivery Group to coordinate and monitor progress with implementation across all parts of the system. The group will provide a forum to discuss challenges with implementation and will facilitate the coordination of efforts. It will also provide a mechanism through which implementation can be monitored and reported to the Commissioner for Fair Access and Government Ministers. All those with a responsibility for implementation will be invited to attend the group which will also include the Commissioner and Conor Ryan within its membership. Additionally, key stakeholders such as NUS Scotland and those from the wider education system will be invited to attend. This will ensure that those who have a stake in implementation continue to have a voice in the delivery of fair access going forward.

In recognition of the importance that the Scottish Government places on this work, the Delivery Group will be chaired by the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science.

Maintaining the Momentum

There are two foundational recommendations due for delivery in the coming years: the Framework for Fair Access in 2018 and Access thresholds in 2019. Most of the remaining recommendations did not have delivery dates specified by the Commission and many will inevitably take time to implement in full. It is vital, therefore, that we set a pace and focus for delivery that will maintain momentum in the next phase of implementation.

With this in mind, the Government has set out below its expectations for progress in the coming year - expectations of ourselves, as well as of others. These are the areas that we see as priorities in the next 12 months, not only to deliver the remaining foundational recommendations, but also to enable us to develop a more integrated system to support our most vulnerable learners throughout their education.

Expectations for progress

The Government's expectations are that over the next 12 months:

The Scottish Government will:

- Hold regular meetings of the Delivery Group in order to review implementation and facilitate the coordination of efforts;
- Bring together a working group to ensure delivery of **Recommendation 31** (*Develop a consistent and robust set of measure to identify access students*). Seek to align measures, where possible, with those being used to identify students in need of support with school attainment. Work with Universities Scotland and the SFC in delivery of this recommendation;
- Set out the proposed approach and timetable for delivery of **Recommendation 29a** (*Develop and implement the use of a unique learner number*);
- Complete Stage 1 of the 15 – 24 Learner Journey Review;
- Following the initial findings of the Framework for Fair Access, initiate a review to ensure that the use of public funding is consistent with the Framework **Recommendation 3**.

The Scottish Funding Council will:

- Ensure that the access targets being set through the outcome agreement process are sufficient to ensure delivery of the targets in **Recommendation 32**, including at institution and national level and for full-time first degree entrants. Within this:
 - Monitor delivery by institutions and identify where targets are not met or where it feels they are not being set at a sufficiently challenging level
 - Improve transparency by setting out more clearly the access related activity and ambitions being set by institutions through the outcome agreement process, as well as progress against these;
- Conduct a review of the use and effectiveness of the additional access and articulation places over the last four years to inform future funding;

- Complete the work to establish a new Articulation Database;
- Consult on the Schools Engagement Framework and finalise proposals for future working.

Universities will:

- Make clear and demonstrable progress that will ensure delivery of access thresholds (**Recommendation 11**) by 2019, as recommended by the Commission
- Make clear how they will deliver a more open and transparent approach to their use of access thresholds and wider contextual admissions policies (**Recommendation 12**).
- Take forward delivery of (**Recommendation 21**) to provide an offer of a place to those with care experience and make clear how this is being implemented.

Scottish Government
May 2017

Annex A: Recommendations from the Commission on Widening 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Annex B: Summary of recommendations and delivery responsibilities

The Commission addressed the majority of its recommendations to specific stakeholders such as the Scottish Government (SG), Scottish Funding Council (SFC), universities, colleges, schools, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), local authorities (LAs), early years practitioners or the Commissioner for Fair Access. The table below shows which parts of the system the Commission envisaged should lead on the delivery of each recommendation.

■ = Responsible for delivery □ = Key stakeholder

Recommendation	SG	SFC	Unis	Colleges	Schools	SAAS	SDS	LAs	Early Years	Comm. Fair Acc.
1. Appoint Commissioner	■									
2. Develop Framework for Fair Access										■
3. Public funding – focus on programmes consistent with the Framework	■	■	■							□
4. Coordinated approach to access, coherent & comprehensive offer to learners		■	■	■	■			■	■	
5. Admissions/entry based on education rationale/recognises more flexible pathways			■							
6. Better use of key transition phases (SCQF 6 to 8)	■									
7. Development of national model of bridging programmes		■								
8. More demanding articulation targets		■								
9. Monitor expansion of articulation		■	■	■						
10. New models of articulation		■	□	□						
11. Access thresholds			■							
12. Transparency re: thresholds / contextual admissions			■							
13. University rankings										■
14. Independent review of non-academic factors		■								
15. Engage with youngest children and families		□	■	■	□			□	□	

Recommendation	SG	SFC	Unis	Colleges	Schools	SAAS	SDS	LAs	Early Years	Comm. Fair Acc.
16. Academically based programmes for highly able school learners			■		□					
17. More coordinated & tailored information advice and guidance offer					■		■			
18. Access to Highers			■	■	□			■		
19. Research into impact of student finance										■
20. Better information on student finance					■	■	■			
21. Care experience offer of place			■							
22. Care experience full bursary	■					□				
23. Approach to identify care experienced learners	■									
24. Review of funds incl. Access & Retention Fund		■								
25. Monitor institutions' spend from core funding		■								
26. Options for more targeted funding models	□	■								
27. Make more extensive use of regulatory powers	□	■								
28. Other regulatory frameworks to include access objectives	■									
29. Improve tracking (ULN) and sharing of data	■									
30. Enhanced analysis and publication of data	■	■								
31. Develop access measures	■	■	□	□	□					
32. Implement targets	■	■								
33. Consider further work (other access groups & outcomes after study)										■
34. Report on progress	■									



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