

Commissioner for Fair Access
Professor Sir Peter Scott

Address to the Scottish Parliament
Cross Party Group on Colleges and
Universities

The Scottish Parliament

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Agenda/minutes of the Cross Party Group can be found at:
<http://www.parliament.scot/msps/colleges-and-universities.aspx>

Thank you for inviting me to speak to the group today. What I would like to offer, very much in the spirit of stimulating discussion, are some thoughts on what we mean by 'fair access' and also on the particular issues that are relevant to the challenges facing universities and colleges in Scotland. I hope you will recognise that I have only been Commissioner for two months - I say not that because I believe I have a right to an 'easy ride' (please be as challenging as you would like) but because I am worried that any remarks I make, which are intended to be tentative, may be taken as evidence of firm positions I have already taken up. What I am about to say is definitely not the first draft of the annual report I am required to make under the terms of my appointment.

So let me start with what we mean by 'fair access' to higher education. On the face of it we are all agreed that 'fair access' is a 'good thing'; it is obviously 'unfair' that a young person from a deprived background is four times less likely to go to university than one from an advantaged background. Whether it is universities ('ancient' or modern) or colleges, different political parties - there appears to be an unassailable consensus on this question.

Of course, there are differences of emphasis:

Some people in 'ancient' universities (a label incidentally I am told many of them hate) argue that wider / fair access must never be allowed to jeopardise academic standards, or to hazard the global reputation of Scotland's universities in research and scholarship; so, although universities should undoubtedly take a lead and do what they can, the 'heavy lifting' on access must be done by others. People in post-1992 universities, of course, see things a little differently because it is their mission, and maybe their 'business model', to offer opportunities to all kinds of students. Having worked in both kinds of university, admittedly in England, I am familiar with both attitudes.

Although I am much less of an expert on politics, there are clearly also differences of emphasis between different political parties - some may argue that the key is expansion, and the provision of additional funded places; others may toy with the idea that a carefully modulated tuition fees system might even be fairer if enough of that fee income is plowed back into access activities.

But the key thing is there is a consensus - no one thinks 'fair access' doesn't matter. The second key thing, which may also be a source of some comfort (or shared discomfort) is that this is a worldwide issue, not a peculiarly Scottish one. The disparity in access rates to higher education between the socially deprived and socially advantaged is broadly consistent, whatever the funding arrangements - high-fee, low-fee or no-fee - and whatever the structural arrangements - three-tier systems as in many US States, binary systems like in Germany where the distinction between traditional universities and *fachhochschulen*¹ is jealously guarded, or more unified systems.

I draw two conclusions from this:

First, I don't believe we should get too hung up about detailed funding and organisational arrangements (although I may not follow my own advice in the second part of my talk!). They are important but not decisive. Personally I believe free tuition is a precondition of making progress towards 'fair(er) access' - my heart tells me that, because I benefitted from free tuition myself; and my head, because that is what the accumulation of research evidence suggests. But I recognise there are other views,

on this question and other questions, such as whether 'outreach' (summer schools, early interventions, school partnerships and so on) is more effective than [financial] 'support' (whether a national system of loans and grants, or institutional bursaries).

The second conclusion I draw is that we shouldn't get too dismayed, or elated, by comparisons with how other countries are doing - England is better, Wales is worse, that-kind-of-thing. When you go into these comparisons in detail, you nearly always find that 'like is not (quite) being compared with like'. When you look at the 'big picture' on fair access (or, rather, the lack of it), it looks quite similar.

But, when we seek to go beyond this strong consensus that current patterns of access to higher education are unfair and the fact this is a global phenomenon, it begins to get more difficult. There are competing ideas of what is 'fair'. First, there has been an interesting slippage in the language we use. The headline term used to be 'widening participation'; today, although we still talk about 'widening participation', the headline term is 'fair access'. 'Widening participation' implies an extension of the higher education franchise, rather like voting in the past. Although there was an interesting debate 10 years or so ago about whether you could 'widen' participation without 'increasing' it, the use of this term suggests at a minimum a dynamic rather than static system. As such, maybe 'widening participation' is not an especially threatening idea - we can continue to do what we have been doing, and add some more by creating new opportunities for a wider range of students.

'Fair Access', confusingly, has the potential to be either a more conservative or a more radical idea. It can suggest that the main challenge is getting more poor kids into privileged universities, which is the main thrust of the work of the Sutton Trust (which I am not for a moment denigrating) and also, inevitably, the main focus of the work of the 'ancient' universities - or, alternatively, ensuring there are opportunities elsewhere for these students, in post-1992 universities, Colleges or apprenticeships (with some, modest and moderate, opportunities for the most promising to progress to more traditional institutions) - a kind of higher education 'nimbism' (sorry, that is unfair...). That is the conservative 'take' on 'Fair Access'.

The radical 'take' is that there is a more pervasive, and systemic, failure to secure fairer access that must be addressed. To put it starkly, and much too simply, things need to be turned on their head. Instead of making our best efforts to ensure that 'they', more deprived young people, can benefit from what 'we' currently offer in higher education, it is we who must adjust - by which I do not mean accepting lower standards, but critically examining what we mean by 'standards' as well as the hidden assumptions, those treacherous givens we all accept without too much (or any) thought - plus, of course, all the admissions processes we currently use in which are deeply encoded these assumptions and givens.

Let me offer you an example from my personal experience (which, I apologise, comes from England). When I was at the University of Leeds, I was doing some research on Access courses, and I was sitting in a class in Furness College in Barrow in Cumbria. The students, mostly older and all what in shorthand terms we would call 'working class', were discussing social change and industrial restructuring. Nearly all of them lacked the appropriate 'academic language' which their younger, and more privileged, students back in Leeds with their high grades could deploy with ease. But in its place they had a truly 'lived' understanding and knowledge of these issues that their younger, brighter, peers completely lacked because they were beyond their experience. And I was left wondering

why we rated so highly one form of knowing and almost failed to recognise the other. Now I realise this example does not translate so well to physics, although it may translate better to many other subjects, even traditional ones like medicine. My key point is that maybe 'we' in universities need to change just as much as 'they', people from more deprived and less 'academic' (in a conventional sense) backgrounds, do.

There are two layers of complexity talking about 'fair access'. The first is the obvious tensions between being 'fair' to different groups, which we should always remember are made up of individuals with the right to achieve their potential (and their dreams) - for example, by unintentionally disparaging the high grades that school leavers have achieved just because they come from privileged backgrounds or good schools, but also failing to recognise the scale of achievement of someone who has had to struggle against multiple disadvantages, even if their formal achievement levels are not quite so high; or allowed the moderately advantaged with decent entry qualifications to be squeezed between the very bright and the seriously disadvantaged. The second is what I have been mostly talking about - exposing the hidden biases and unexamined givens about who deserves access to higher education.

I now want to move onto the specific issues that need to be addressed, which were ably analysed in the report of the Commission for Wider Access and are also well covered by the three working parties established by Universities Scotland (although I would like to add a couple).

The first is what we now call 'contextualised admissions', but have actually been around for the long time. 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). Of course, they didn't always do so in a systematic or transparent manner. 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). 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. At the moment I get the impression universities work out how much of an adjustment they need to make to meet their targets, which is a bit circular. They also expect students with adjusted grades to behave in exactly the same way as 'standard' students with good grades, which they can do of course but need support. So the idea of 'contextualised admissions' is not new, nor especially radical. But maybe we need to be bolder in terms of the scale of the adjustments we are willing to make to achieve fair access.

A second big issue is articulation. Frankly it is not right that half of HN students transferring to degree courses in universities receive no credit and basically have to go back to the starting line, especially when the Funding Council has set a much higher target for HN students to be given advanced standing (75 per cent, I believe). It is unfair to them, and costly to the taxpayer - and, most important of all, it is treating a HN as entry-level qualifications, like Highers, when, in fact, they are two-year post-school, and higher education, qualifications. 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. But there shouldn't be exaggerated. Two other thoughts on articulation - first, I don't need to look at the statistics to know which universities are doing the 'heavy lifting' on articulation and are most open to transferring HN students - are we happy to live with that imbalance? Second and more fundamental, maybe there is an elephant in the room here - a continuing prejudice in favour of academic and against vocational education.

The third issue - outreach programmes, including top-up programmes in schools, summer schools, 'junior universities', access pathways and such like - is, I hope, less contentious. So I won't spend so much time on it. 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 (or is used as a way to separate the sheep from the goats, in effect another selection tool more highly regarded universities can use to cherry-pick the best students consigning the rest to lesser fates). Of course, a lot of wonderful (and inspiring) work is already being done in both respects. But - a third point - I also believe 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.

Finally, there are two more issues I would like briefly to mention:

The first is the question of autonomy which universities in particular guard fiercely - and rightly so. Put simply - we don't mind doing things to ourselves but resist having the same things done to us by others (although we sometimes want to do rather less...). In general terms this is a healthy instinct. There is no stronger advocate of autonomy than me. But that does not abate, in any way, the social responsibilities of universities; indeed it increases those responsibilities. Universities are key institutions in open and democratic societies, because of not despite their social responsibilities;

The second issue is the vexed question of whether SIMD is the best metric to use in measuring progress. Of course, we need to be conscious of unintended, and possibly perverse, consequences - the obvious one is that institutions will focus on SIMD 20 students at the expense of other groups also suffering disadvantage (I am particularly concerned about older and part-time students). I would only make two points - first, even the most sophisticated metric (and SIMD is a comparatively sophisticated one) does not claim to be totally comprehensive, to tell the whole story. If we are serious about reducing discrimination in access to higher education, we should have the imagination (and generosity) not to be pinned to a single performance measure; secondly, and much more simply, critics of over-reliance on SIMD should suggest alternatives. The ball is on their court.

I have probably spoken for too long already - maybe I have also spoken too freely, if anything I have said is interpreted as representing my firm view, or final position, on any of these matters. But on balance I am prepared to run that risk, because I believe one of the primary roles of the Commissioner is to provoke a wider debate, to get people talking more about fair access. In that spirit I look forward to hearing from you.