

Commissioner for Fair Access
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**Address to Forum for Access and Continuing
Education**

Fair Access - co-option or transformation?

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Introduction

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at your conference today, although I am not a stranger to FACE conferences. But I am here in a new role, as Commissioner for Fair Access here in Scotland. Having said that, I am not planning to talk in any detail about my role. Many of you are not from Scotland, so I imagine your interest in Scottish Government targets on fair access, the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, contextual admissions as expressed through adjusted offers for Higher Grades, articulation between Higher Nationals and degrees and so on may be rather limited. So instead I want to talk about wider issues.

The claim I am about to make is a bold one, and many people will reject it. It is that - it is only by opening their doors much wider that higher education can avoid ending up on the 'wrong side of history' and becoming the target of an insurgent 'populism' that rejects the kind of open society we all take (almost) for granted. Higher education's - our - salvation will not come from obsessing about 'world-class universities', which in many ways is counter-productive in building wider community support, but from the old-fashioned 'access' agenda. My further argument is that we also need to move beyond 'access' as co-option, a ladder to social mobility, to a more radical idea of 'access' as transformation (of us, higher education, at least as much as of the students who benefit), an instrument of social justice and even greater social equality.

The rise of populism

The rise of 'populism', the revolt against the elites (and the experts) may be overblown, another example of media hype in which awkward facts that don't fit the 'story' get lost. But maybe there is enough substance there to be worried - as a society and, in particular, as a higher education system. Let's start with some facts:

In the recent election Labour's lead among graduates was 15 per cent. In contrast the Conservatives enjoyed a 17-per-cent lead among those with no qualifications, and even a 6-per-cent lead among those qualifications below first degree

Last year the most important factor in determining whether someone voted for Trump or Clinton in the US, or voted to leave or remain in the EU in the UK, was level of education - more important than gender, occupation or even age. In the US two-thirds of those without college degrees voted for Trump. In the UK three-quarters of those without post-school qualifications voted for Brexit, while it was almost exactly the other way round with graduates.

And this is not confined to the US and UK. A recent 12-nation study across Europe found that almost 60 percent of those defined as having 'low' educational qualifications had broadly Euro-sceptic views, compared with less than 30 percent of those with 'high' educational qualifications.

The complacent view is that this is just further evidence that education makes people more liberal and tolerant. The less complacent view is that higher education, despite almost half a century of mass expansion, may be regarded by some people as an agent, an accomplice, of the hated global elites and a factory of the massed ranks of 'experts' who allegedly lack empathy for the condition of ordinary people.

The main charge is that, despite that half century of mass expansion, higher education still predominantly benefits the middle classes. The outcome has been to produce almost universal participation by students from more socially advantaged backgrounds while for students from disadvantaged backgrounds access to higher education remains a rationed privilege. For example, here in Scotland an 18-year-old in the 20 percent most deprived areas was almost four times less likely to enter university last year than an 18-year-old in the 20 percent least deprived areas - and that disparity is reproduced across the world (a bit less in

Scandinavia, a bit more in some other parts of Europe). This stubborn access gap is even more pronounced in the case of elite universities, so often the focus of national pride as 'world-class' universities, the narrative I have already mentioned.

Of course, we need to keep a sense of perspective:

First, definitions of 'middle class' and 'working class' have changed. The former has grown and the latter shrunk. It is hardly surprising that today's much more open higher education systems appear to be dominated still by the 'middle class', broadly defined - leaving aside, of course, the role higher education has played in (upward) social mobility, surely a beneficial outcome;

Second, although the access gap remains, in absolute terms far more students come from less privileged backgrounds. Millions more have been added to the college 'franchise';

Third, some previously disadvantaged groups have made spectacular gains - for example, some (but not all) ethnic and cultural minorities and, most decisively and visibly, women (although that has fuelled another complaint, that middle-class women have crowded out working-class men). Of course, true equality of opportunity remains to be achieved. Minority students tend to be concentrated in lower-status institutions, and female students are also concentrated in particular subjects (and, more arguably, as a result excluded from some elite positions and professions);

Finally, the growth of mass higher education has coincided with a period of growing inequality not seen since the years before the First World War, certainly in terms of income differentials. This is the result of the erosion of higher-tax welfare states, deregulation and privatisation since the 1980s as much as globalisation. The Chief Economist of the Bank of England even pointed out last week that labour market inequalities not seen since the start of the Industrial Revolution are reemerging. Higher education cannot reverse such powerful currents towards greater inequality all on its own.

Two other charges are levelled at the academy by the Trumpists, Brexiters and their fellow travellers around the globe. The first, as I have already said, is that the expansion of higher education has contributed to the growth of a new class of 'experts', who dominate public debate (and so stifle contrary voices) on a whole range of issues from climate change to women's rights. By default nearly all of these 'experts' are college graduates and many are professors. Maybe we need to reflect on this. Are we producing professionals who lack empathy? And, if some experience of higher education is close to being a human right, and is certainly a prerequisite for full participation in a democratic society and advanced economy, we need to worry about those who remain excluded, or exclude themselves. And, in our enthusiasm to develop new technologies, do we worry enough about their potential disruptive effects on the lives of ordinary people?

The third charge is that higher education is an agent of 'cosmopolitanism' - which resonates with fears about immigration, mass flows of refugees, even 'terrorism', and is held responsible for eroding community identities. But this is inevitable. Universities are vibrant, increasingly multi-cultural, places typically at the heart of Richard Florida's 'creative cities' where economic dynamism, technological innovation and social and cultural experimentation fruitfully coexist.

What is to be done?

How to respond to this charge sheet? The first response must be to refuse to be spooked by these charges of elitism. Modern higher education systems play a key role in the emancipation of millions around the world. Democratic societies, for all the weaknesses revealed by the (hopefully, transitory) triumph of Trump and Brexit, cannot function without a well-educated citizenry. The choices we face are difficult and complex. Beware so-called populists peddling easy and simple ones. Similarly the success of our econo-

mies, which have generated historically unparalleled wealth (however unequally it may be distributed), depends on the 'experts' so despised by the alt-right and, more broadly, on the skills of an increasingly well educated workforce. The academy has been a key agent in both processes - individual and social emancipation and economic betterment. The development of more open higher education systems has been among the most powerful social transformations of the past half century.

But I believe a second response is also needed. We need to counter the pseudo-populist narrative, that focuses on fear, with an even more compelling narrative, based on hope (apologies if I am beginning to sound like Jeremy Corbyn!). Most urgently we need to recalibrate our language, away from 'world-class' universities and beggar-your-neighbour league tables, and back to social purpose, social responsibility and - of course - more open (and fairer) access.

I am a long-time critic of global league tables, and other rankings - and one of the tasks I inherited from the Commission on Widening Access here in Scotland was to open a 'dialogue' with those who compile league tables to try to persuade them to make them a little more access-friendly;

But I am even more worried about the pervasive language of 'world-class', our 'best' universities and the rest. It is divisive, because talk of the 'best' universities inevitably implies the 'rest' are second-rate. But it is the 'rest' that will always enrol the majority of students, and certainly new groups of students from less privileged backgrounds. It is no surprise that students from more deprived social backgrounds in Scotland (as elsewhere) are concentrated in the colleges and the post-1992 universities. This language also produces perverse policy outcomes. Being in the top 10/50/100 adds not a jot to the real research quality and capability of these universities, however hyped it may be by marketing departments, and it carries the real risk that strategies will be distorted by focusing excessively on the metrics that determine league-table positions - and we all know access is not one of them.

As part of this recalibration of language, we also need:

To resist the increasing commodification of higher education (more advanced, of course, south of the Border than here in Scotland). Last week saw the publication of the results of the first real round of the Teaching Excellence Framework (in which a small number of Scottish institutions participated). I know the intention is to improve teaching, and the wider student experience (if we are prepared to overlook the crude simplifications required in a gold-silver-bronze classification). But I fear the effect will be a further advance towards a 'performance' culture in which the interests of institutions end up taking precedence over the real needs of students;

To develop new, and more democratic, forms of research - which go beyond top-down measurement of 'impact' or encouraging greater dissemination outside the pages of highly-rated academic journals. Research should not be something that is done to people, even with the best intentions, but what people also do to (and for) themselves.

To strengthen community engagement - not simply treating universities as key elements in 'clever cities', as engines of innovation and enterprise. To consolidate, and win back, the trust of the whole people, including those at risk of being suborned by Trump, Brexit and other 'populist' ideologies, institutions need also to become activists for their own communities. We need to be on the side of the people not the elites, of radical change not the establishment.

The role of access

But I would like to focus again on access. As I said at the start, there are two broad approaches to access:

The first is to think of access in terms of co-option. The aim is to more accurately and sensitively assess future potential, by taking into account things like social background, type of school and other so-called 'contextual' factors. But the aim remains to recruit the best possible students who will achieve the best possible outcomes (in terms of academic awards, at any rate). It is about recruiting the 'best and the brightest', no longer pre-sorted by social class. In the process higher education, of course, will have to adapt - but its essential features will remain unchanged. In its simplest form this approach to access tends to focus (over-focus, in my view) on making it easier for 'poor' students to attend our 'best' universities - that baleful language again... That is the essence of many access agreements in England;

The second approach is to think of access in terms of transformation, not just of the students who benefit but of the institutions (and even of society itself). The focus shifts away from fine-tuning admissions systems, having targeted scholarships, offering more generous financial support and providing students with better academic and pastoral support - all of which, of course, are necessary - to changing how institutions work and, in particular, challenging the deeply ingrained notions of 'merit', and even 'potential, that we often take for granted. For example, should we expect the same levels of continuation, or 'success' (as judged by degree outcomes), for a much more diverse student body when these standards were set for students drawn from much narrower social backgrounds. Of course, I recognise the difficulties here - I am certainly not being complacent about so-called 'dumbing down' of standards. But we should recognise we have been moving in the opposite direction for the past 10 years, ratcheting up entry standards and ramping up degree outcomes.

Of course, in practice, we have to take both approaches to access. But I sometimes worry that too many people feel the first approach is sufficient. I would argue that it is necessary but not sufficient. If we are not prepared also to adopt the second approach, I fear we will be fated to be disappointed in the drive to fair access. To generalise the point I am trying to make, it is not enough to strive for greater social mobility - while accepting the fundamental inequalities in our society that create the barriers to social mobility in the first place. Instead we have to focus on social justice, and seek to reduce those inequalities and remove those barriers - especially if we want to combat the 'populist' poison represented by Trump and Brexit and put higher education once again where it deserves to be, on the right side of history. Thank you for listening.

Peter Scott

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