

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework:  
*Linking the Learner Journey*

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Fair Access to Higher Education in Scotland

Address to the Conference  
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## Introduction

1. Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this conference this morning. I have now been Commissioner for Fair Access just over a year, and my first annual report was published in December. So this conference provides me with a good opportunity to take stock - to look back but also forwards. After saying just a little about the key themes in my report I would like to cover three broad topics:

- The first is to talk about the prospects for making further progress towards fair access - not just fair access but a fair experience and fair outcomes for students from more deprived backgrounds; but also against a background of potentially significant changes in the higher education (and learning) landscape;
- Then I want to focus on one major recommendation made in my report - the need to develop a joined-up system of tertiary education here in Scotland, including not just higher and further education but also workplace learning; and the key role that 'smart' systems of articulation, credit transfer and recognition of prior learning (and experience) play in making such a system a reality;
- Finally, I will say something about the important role that the SCQF can play in enabling such 'smart' systems - but also sound a warning because it is crucial to retain a clear focus on fair access. Credit and qualification frameworks, more portable and transferable recognition of awards (and, as I said, learning experience), and 'smart' systems of articulation will not in themselves guarantee fair access.

## Key themes

2. But, first, just a brief word about my report, its key messages.

- i) Top of the list has to come a recognition that Scotland offers higher education to a greater proportion of its people than other nations in the UK. The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) in Scotland is 56 per cent, compared with 49 per cent south of the Border. There is nothing to apologise for, or feel defensive about;
- ii) Second, 'free' (i.e. fee-free) higher education is an essential foundation on which to build fair access. But we need action on a number of other fronts - especially financial support for students;
- iii) Third, every institution has a part to play. The ancient universities have a key leadership role here, but the contribution of the colleges is also crucial and needs to be respected (and reinforced). We need a balanced

approach. If the ultimate success is a First-Class Honours Degree from an ancient university, and everything else represents a 'deficit', we have got it wrong;

- iv) So-called contextual admissions, taking other factors apart from Higher grades into account in making offers, is new. Universities have always taken other factors into account (Presumably they read the 'personal statements' that UCAS applicants make...). Nor are contextual admissions 'dumbing down'. They are the reverse - identifying those with the greatest potential to benefit;
- v) Higher National students who transfer to degree courses should be given the credit they have earned, not told to go back (almost) to the starting line. We also probably need to address a cluster of issues around the transition from S6 to the first-year of university, while preserving the integrity of the four-year honours degree;
- vi) The Government is right to use SIMD as the main measure of disadvantage. The challenge is to confront deep-rooted community-based inter-generational deprivation. But, of course, other forms of potential disadvantage - age, gender, ethnicity, disability - are also important. Also more individualised measures of deprivation would help - but, to supplement not supplant SIMD;
- vii) But the Government should review the total number of places it funds in colleges and universities. Demography, 'smarter' articulation', even the removal of non-UK European Union students from capped numbers after Brexit provide some room for manoeuvre. Progress towards fairer access is easier if the fear that other students are being 'displaced' can be reduced;
- viii) Finally, fair access is just one element in the struggle for social justice, which resonates with Scotland's history and culture. It is about democratic entitlement for individuals and solidarity as a society, not just marginal tinkering with HE admissions. Fair access is not just about optimising the skills of the Scottish workforce, important as that is.

### Prospects for future progress

3. That last point leads into one of the major themes I want to address this morning. Fair access needs to lead to a fair experience and fair outcomes. That is a much tougher call than just meeting a Government target for admitting more SIMD20 applicants. Let me set out the current position:
  - Meeting the overall target based on the First Minister's conviction that by 2030 - only 12 years ahead - young people from the most deprived areas of Scotland should have the same opportunity to go on to higher education as

those from the least deprived areas is probably not too difficult to achieve. Just to put a number on it colleges and universities only need to recruit an additional 1,700 SIMD20 students;

- But it gets more difficult if we focus on targets for individual institutions. The spirit of the First Minister's target will not have been met, even if the letter has been, if most SIMD20 students are concentrated in colleges rather than universities - or in post-1992 universities within the university sector. Some institutions have already over-achieved the target of 10 per cent SIMD20 students by 2021 (the University of the West of Scotland has 27.5 per cent). Others have a long way to go (The University of Aberdeen has only 4.3 per cent). Those institutions that confer the greatest advantages on their graduates - broadly speaking, the ancient universities - have further to go and face greater challenges;
  
- Then, if we look at what happens to students from more deprived backgrounds when they are in higher education, the difficulties accumulate further:
  - i) First, they are more likely to drop-out, and more of them fail to continue into the second (and subsequent) year;
  
  - ii) Then they are more likely to leave with an ordinary rather than an honours degree;
  
  - iii) If they do graduate with an honours degree, they are less likely to get 'good' degrees, i.e. Firsts or Two-Ones;
  
  - iv) Finally - and perhaps the most worrying fact - even if they get a 'good' degree they are less likely to get a 'graduate', i.e. professional-level, job.
  
- 4. So fair access, to be real, needs to lead on to fair experiences and fair outcomes. But that is a daunting challenge, as the sequence above of continuing deprivation / discrimination demonstrates. Clearly there are some things colleges and universities can control. For example they can make sure that their academic regulations on progression, and continuation from year 1 to year 2 and beyond, are sufficiently flexible. My guess is that students who are admitted and then drop-out are sometimes worse off than if they had never been admitted in the first place. And often, I suspect, our expectations about patterns of student progression are based on patterns designed for younger, middle-class students with good (or, at any rate, standard) academic qualifications. Maybe we also need to look at our academic regulations on the criteria for degree classifications. After all, universities seem to have been perfectly comfortable about substantially increasing the proportion of first-class degrees they award. Too often, 'they' - students from less traditional backgrounds or following non-standard patterns of study - are expected to

conform to 'our' - higher education's - way of doing things. It needs to be the other way round too...

5. But clearly there are some things that colleges and universities do not control - particularly access to 'graduate' jobs. Over the past 30 years income differentials have widened, and so too have differences in life-chances. That is happening not just in Scotland and the UK but across the world. The most extreme consequences of this growing inequality can be seen in the flows of increasingly desperate refugees and migrants. But there are less dramatic effects nearer home. Despite the best efforts of some professions to recruit new entrants from wider social backgrounds, far too much use is made of - often unpaid - internships as gateways to some well paid jobs. Social networks still play far too great a role in entry to elite professions. Although what we are now expected to call our 'best' universities are not directly responsible for these unfair recruitment practices they are certainly complicit in them.

#### A tertiary education system in Scotland

6. One of the recommendations I made in my report is that Scotland has a unique opportunity to create a joined-up tertiary education system, embracing higher and further education and workplace learning - but that, so far, that opportunity as not yet been fully realised:
  - It is more than 10 years since the single Funding Council was created for further and higher education. Yet there is still a tendency to see them as separate - and not simply in terms of governance and funding but of educational character and purpose. I am not suggesting, of course, that we should necessarily have the same governance arrangements and funding regimes for FE and HE. But maybe we need something a bit more dynamic than an overall framework against which we can map awards, qualifications and learning experiences (I will come back to this in the final section of my talk). Certainly if you compare the potential for integration of the Scottish tertiary system with the chaos of competing agencies south of the border, there should be an opportunity for Scotland to set an example to the whole of the UK - as well as better serving the needs of learners.
  - The Government has also launched its Learner Journey 15-24 initiative which looks across all the learning experiences available to young people from their late-teens to their early-20s with the aim of ensuring that they are free to choose the ones best for them. Key to this, of course, is the need to have clearly marked pathways - and ideally pathways in which movement is easy between workplace learning and college, and then on to higher education, whether in a college or university.
7. Relevant here, I believe, are some important changes even in higher education. First, the number graduate apprenticeships building on modern

apprenticeships, and other FE and training opportunities, is likely to increase - even if the traditional pattern of academic and professional education based on a four-year honours degrees remains the standard model. Second, although I am by no means an advocate of wilder ideas about how new technology will transfer higher education, with data analytics, online platforms and social media replacing traditional models of learning, there is bound to be a growing impact. My own view is that this is more likely to take the form of a gradual accretion of new modes of learning, and consequently a loosening up of traditional patterns, than a wholesale 'paradigm shift' from traditional to new-age learning. But clearly both changes - more work-based forms of higher education, and new delivery systems - are going to pose additional challenges in terms of developing a properly joined-up system of tertiary education. We must not allow heterogeneity, flexibility, even customisation of provision create new barriers to movement and progression. Rather we should see them as an opportunity to make movement and progression easier for learners.

### The Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework

8. The third topic I would like to cover is to focus on the importance of the SCQF. The framework is essential if tertiary education, in its widest sense, is properly joined up. It is also essential if the work on the Learner Journey is to be progressed. But my particular interest is in fair access. The framework can help learners to find what is right for them. But, given the un-fairness of access that currently prevails, that would not necessarily produce greater fairness. It might even tend to reinforce current perceptions among learners not only about what is best for them but also what is not meant for people 'like them'.
9. Of course, I accept that a first step to achieving fair access is to credit-rate different forms of provision, and as a result establish the equivalence between them. But the next step is to make sure that credits can be - so-to-speak - cashed in when learners want to progress - and also that formal equivalences are respected. That doesn't always work at the moment. For example, one of the recommendations in my report is that for HND students who progress on to degrees the default position - not the maximum amount of credit allowed for a minority - should be two years' advanced standing, i.e. entry into year 3. But currently that happens in only a minority of cases. I accept that sometimes there will be good reasons why an HND student should enter year 2 rather than 3 (although never for them to go back to the starting line, as still happens). But the approach should be 'innocent until proved guilty'. It shouldn't be up to the students to demonstrate that she or he deserves it. It is also too easy to get bogged down in the 'difficulties' - mismatches in knowledge between HNs and degrees, differences in learning styles, the importance of sustained peer-group support and so on. So my point - and challenge maybe - remains that a credit and qualifications framework is an

enabler; it does not, of itself, produce fair access. That only happens if it is used in a dynamic and progressive way.

### Conclusion

10. Last January, very soon I had been appointed Commissioner, I attended an SCQF reception at the Parliament in Edinburgh. I was very impressed by the examples of how the framework had made it possible for less traditional forms of learning, especially in the workplace, to be equated with more formal and traditional learning experiences - and how that had helped transform the job prospects, and lives, of so many people (some of whom were present that evening). That evening demonstrated how important a contribution the framework has made to achieving fair access to higher education. So I would like to end by congratulating the SCQF on the key role it plays in supporting fair access, and thanking the organisers for inviting me to speak at this conference today.