

Cross-Party Group meeting - June 20, 2019

Fair Access: How Are We Doing?

Introduction

1. Thank you for inviting me to talk to you today about recent developments in fair access to higher education. I remember I found the last time I spoke to the Cross-Party Group very useful in helping me develop my thinking about fair access ahead of my first Annual Report. From my point of view the timing of this meeting is ideal because last week I published my second Annual Report. Ideal because it offers a timely opportunity for an exchange of views, for you to react to what I say in the Report and tell me what I got wrong (and maybe right) and for me to map out my future work. So, once again - thank you for inviting me.
2. I want to cover three broad topics today:
 - First, to ask how Scotland is doing in fair access, both in relation to the Government's targets for increased SIMD20 representation and, as or more important, the wider progress being made towards a fairer higher education system;
 - Second, to say a few words about the Framework for Fair Access, which was launched here in Edinburgh at the beginning of last month;
 - And, finally, to highlight some of the key messages in my Report - focussing in particular on articulation (or maybe the lack of it..?), the debate about whether SIMD is the best measure of progress and the fear that other applicants are being 'displaced' by those from the 20-per-cent most deprived communities here in Scotland.

Progress on fair access

3. So, first, progress towards fair access. Here the news is very good - and maybe not-so-good. Let me try to explain what I mean. The news is very good in terms of meeting the Government's target. Already we are very close to meeting the 2021 target, having 16-per-cent of entrants from the 20-per-cent most deprived communities (SIMD20). Scotland is setting the pace across the whole of the UK. Although England uses a different measure (POLAR), the rate of advance south of the Border has been significantly slower.
4. As I have said on earlier occasions, many different groups deserve the credit - the Government for providing crucial political leadership from the very top, and also all the political parties in the Parliament for contributing to an impressive consensus on fair access, which has decisively shaped public opinion (it's a shame we have had neither on Brexit); many other agencies and organisations - the Funding Council, the representative bodies like Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland, the NUS Scotland and others; and, most of all perhaps, the institutions themselves in terms both of their leadership and of the commitment of access and participation practitioners.
5. But - there's always a 'but' coming! - two thoughts occur to me.
 - The first thought is that we need to beware of complacency. It's a truism to say that the last miles of any race are usually the most difficult - or, to switch metaphors, that once the low hanging fruit has been picked it gets more difficult to pick the fruit higher on the

tree. This is relevant to what I am going to say in a moment about the news not being so good;

- My second thought is that, if we are making such progress, perhaps we need to bring the 2026 and 2030 targets forward or to set more stretching targets at both national and institutional level. Not such a popular thought I imagine...

6. So the news on meeting targets is very good. But I am not so convinced about progress on the wider front. Are we really ready to make the step-change needed to see fair access not in terms of compensation - or, still worse, remediation - and to see it instead as potentially a major contribution to the academic health of the system. Mind-sets need to change as well as policies. We are prepared to work very hard to support potential applicants adapt to what we, in higher education, expect - to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge. But are we yet willing to be more self-critical about ourselves, and accept that a truly democratic system of higher education can only be built if we change not only some of our key practices but also our assumptions about what constitutes 'higher education'. For fair access to be fully realised the transformation has to be two-way - of young people from deprived communities whose live-chances, and lives, will be transformed by being allowed access to higher education; but also of the system. Fair access will never be fully secure if, deep-down, it is seen as based on concessions in terms of how higher education 'should really be', freely made for the greater public good but concessions nevertheless.
7. In a nutshell what I mean is that, while we are perfectly prepared to see a lot of academic knowledge and practice as gendered (or, even maybe, racialised - from the perspective of non-European students and scholars), we have been reluctant to recognise the imprint of social class on that knowledge and practice. Yet it seems to me self-evident that higher education as we know it, especially in our so-called 'best universities', developed in the context of a particular student demographic - originally (but thankfully no longer) male, still too white, and also still too middle-class. I won't really pursue that point now, although I'm very happy to debate it afterwards.

Framework for Fair Access

8. The second topic I want to cover is the Framework for Fair Access. I don't have time today to cover it in the detail it deserves. It is a key development - and, of course, its establishment fulfils one of the key recommendations made in the original Commission for Widening Access report. As you probably know it has two pillars - a toolkit of good practice, based on systematic evaluation, and support for a community of access and participation practitioners. What is particularly important about the Framework is that it is - or certainly should be - not an imposed top-down policy instrument but rather a bottom-up process owned by the practitioners themselves. This is important because it is crucial to strike the right balance between encouraging innovative, and locally owned, access initiatives - 'letting a thousand flowers bloom' - on the one hand and on the other encouraging more rigorous evaluation of what works best - so we build best practice.
9. A similar consideration applies one of the recommendations in my Annual Report, that we need to develop a stronger national network of access, outreach and bridging programmes. I know that 'network' can be one of those weasel words, a truly Brexit-style cake-and-eat-it label because you either respect local autonomy or you impose a national system. But I believe this is one area in which you do have to try to have your cake and eat it. I accept the legitimacy of both imperatives - to respect local initiatives, which are often based on building up close personal links and specifically targeted and customised, while accepting that by their very nature those characteristics get in the way of both their scalability and - crucially - their portability and readability in the eyes of some potential

beneficiaries. So we need to balance intimacy and focus with scale and portability if we are to move to the next stage of development in access, outreach and bridging programmes.

Annual Report

10. The third topic I want to cover, of course, is my latest Annual Report. Although it is not as comprehensive as my last Annual Report, it turned out to be longer than I had originally planned and it covers a lot of ground. So my comments today have to be very selective. For example, there is a substantial section on the relationship between school reforms, in particular the Curriculum for Excellence, and fair access to higher education, which I am not going to talk about (although I am very happy to answer questions and engage in discussion afterwards). So want to focus on just two key recommendations - on contextual admissions and articulation; and two key debates - on the use of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as the key measure, and 'displacement', the fear that middle range of applicants are getting squeezed out by high-achieving (and often socially advantaged) applicants on the one hand and by SIMD20 applicants on the other.

11. First, the two recommendations:

- The first is on the use of contextual admissions. Of course, I acknowledge that every considerable progress has been made on this front. All universities have now set, and published, minimum entry requirements. Clearly they differ from university to university and course to course. So it is far too early to see how MERs will be used in practice and real time, and how much difference they make. It might a lot - or it might not be very much. So my plea is that we need to be bold, even adventurous, in the use of contextual admissions;
- My second recommendation is on articulation. Here I am afraid I am less forgiving. Far too few HN students are given full credit for what they have achieved when they transfer to degree courses, even when all the caveats about changing subjects, different learning styles and so on have been entered. Frankly I was disappointed to read in Universities Scotland's otherwise excellent update on fair access that, when it comes to articulation, the words used were so grudging: "It is sometimes possible..." That is simply not good enough. The default position must be that HN students, who we should remember are much more likely to come from SIMD20/40 communities, should receive full credit unless giving them partial credit can be justified (giving them no credit is simply not acceptable). Innocent until proved guilty, if you like.

12. There are several other recommendations I make in my report including, as I said a moment ago, some about the interface between schools and universities, which I am very happy to discuss. But, for the moment, I would like to focus on two key issues - the use of SIMD are the measure of progress towards fair access; and the fear that in the drive to fair access some applicants are getting squeezed out (or, in the current jargon, 'displaced'). I want to focus on these issues for two reasons - first, they are the most controversial ones; and, secondly, as again I said earlier, because they have the potential to act as a drag on future progress towards fair access to higher education.

SIMD

13. The first issue is the complaint that, by using an area-based measure, applicants living in the 20-per-cent most deprived areas as measured by SIMD, equally deprived applicants from others areas get ignored. This is a real problem in rural and more sparsely populated areas like the Highlands and Islands (for example, Shetland doesn't have a single SIMD20 area), the Borders and maybe the north east; much less of a problem in the central belt

particularly the west of Scotland. Obviously the measure of deprivation should be made be as accurate, and as fair, as possible. That is why an expert group has recommended that university applicants who have ever received free school meals should also be counted. I support that recommendation, as I support the idea that care-experienced applicants should receive special treatment.

14. But I would defend the use of SIMD as a core measure. Fair access is not just about cherry picking basically bright and motivated individuals who have been held back by their social circumstances and/or school experience - what has, maybe unfairly, been called 'getting poor kids into posh universities'. That is (too?) easy, in philosophical if not practical terms. The onus is on applicants to come up to the standards universities require - with lots of help and support, of course. But I believe that universities also have a responsibility for addressing deep-rooted inter-generational community deprivation. And, if they do that, they will have to ask - and try to answer - some difficult questions about their current practices and values and whether they have been responsible in any way for this deprivation and discrimination. The onus then may be on universities to change not just the other way round.

'Displacement'

15. The second issue is 'displacement', the fear that some applicants will get squeezed out if more places are earmarked for applicants from the 20-per-cent most deprived communities in Scotland. The applicants who potentially might lose out do not necessarily come from privileged social backgrounds and they worked hard to get good Higher grades only to see applicants with worse grades get - unfair? - preference. They belong to the so-called 'squeezed middle', squeezed that is between highly qualified applicants from socially privileged backgrounds, who will always get in, and 'fair access' applicants, who are now given priority.
16. The fear is real enough. Very occasionally I get letters from parents, who mistakenly believe I am an ombudsman, complaining their daughters or sons have been discriminated against. I can easily imagine the many more letters in the post bags of Ministers, MSPs and University Principals. But is the fear justified? After all overall student numbers and participation rates have continued to increase, which on the face of it does not suggest widespread displacement. In my report I have tried to present the available data. Not easy, of course, because there are so many factors - demography, the ebb and flow on the popularity of individual subjects, the supply of places as well as changes in 'market share' of different SIMD quintiles. The verdict at this stage has to be 'not proven'. It is unlikely that any significant number of applicants have been squeezed out of higher education completely as a result of the drive to fair access, although they may not have got into their first-choice course or university.
17. The Scottish Government could help by providing more funded places. As a university academic I naturally support the claims of higher education for extra public funding. I also hope that, if other EU students are no longer entitled to free tuition after Brexit, higher education will be allowed to hang onto that funding. But at the same time I have to recognise competing claims, particularly from schools, social services, the police and, of course, the health service. Maybe we also need to be honest about fair access. If you are serious about attempting to rectify class-based discrimination in university admissions, it is dishonest to insist at the same time that opportunities for those who have benefited from that discrimination must not be affected in any way. How would it be if opportunities for men had to remain unchanged while promoting gender equality?

Conclusion

18. I would like to end by arguing that we need to think about fair access in a fundamentally different way. Still in Scotland, as in nearly every other country, fair access is conceived of in terms of deficit. It is seen in terms of carefully controlled compensation for the educational disadvantage of young learners from more deprived backgrounds. It is generally accepted that this will require some lowering of standards. The debate is essentially about how much lowering is acceptable without compromising overall academic quality and without setting students up to drop out or to fail.

19. Instead fair access must be seen in terms of asset - the positive qualities that students from more challenging social backgrounds bring to higher education (for example, determination and resilience) but also the positive benefits that institutions derive from having a wider, and more democratic base, with potentially transformative impacts on learning and teaching and on research (choice of topics, methodologies and channels of distribution). Above all, the case for fair access to higher education must be firmly located within a wider commitment to social justice and the vision of a 'good society' from which all ultimately benefit, the privileged as much as the deprived.

Peter Scott
Commissioner for Fair Access