CROSS PARTY GROUP (CPG) ON SCOTLAND'S COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

13.00 – 14:00 on Wednesday 8 March 2017, Committee Room 3, Scottish Parliament

Topic: Widening Access

Presentation from Professor Sir Peter Scott, Commissioner for Fair Access to Higher Education in Scotland.

Note of Meeting

Present:

Ms Elizabeth Smith MSP	Scottish Parliament	CPG Convener
Mr Iain Gray MSP	Scottish Parliament	CPG Deputy Convener
Mr Jeremy Balfour MSP	Scottish Parliament	
Ms Carolyn Bowick	Edinburgh Napier University	
Ms Megan Brown	EUSA	
Ms Joanne Buchan	Colleges Scotland	
Dr Sandra Cairncross	Edinburgh Napier University	
Dr Martin Campbell	University of St Andrews	
Dr Claire Carney	University of the West of Scotland	
Ms Risga Carson	NUS Scotland	
Ms Laura Cattell	University of Edinburgh	
Mr Martin Fairbairn	Scottish Funding Council	
Mr Michael Foxley	University of the Highlands and Islands	
Mr Patrick Garratt	EUSA	
Ms Moira Gibson	University of Edinburgh	
Ms Ann Gow	UCU Scotland	
Ms Lynn Graham	Higher Education & Science Division, Scottish Government	
Ms Jennifer Jamieson Ball	Heriot-Watt University	
Ms Susannah Lane	Universities Scotland	
Ms Sheona Lawson	EUSA	
Professor Karl Leydecker	University of Dundee	
Ms Eve Lewis	sparqs	
Mr Paul Little	City of Glasgow College	
Ms Tanya Lubicz-Nawrocka	EUSA	
Professor Matthew MacIver	University of the Highlands and Islands	
Ms Seonag MacKinnon	Glasgow Caledonian University	
Mr Murdo Mathison	UCU Scotland	
Ms Noele McClelland	Thorntons Law	
Mr Ryan McFadden	Glasgow Caledonian University	
Professor Peter McGeorge	University of Aberdeen	
Mr Sean McGivern	University of Glasgow	

Mr Duncan McKay	Universities Scotland
Dr Veena O'Halloran	University of Strathclyde
Ms Jane Scott	Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh
Professor Sir Peter Scott	Commissioner for Fair Access to Higher Education in Scotland
Mr Alastair Sim	Universities Scotland
Ms Heather Sloan	Universities Scotland
Mr Kenny Stewart	The Open University in Scotland
Mr Ross Thomson MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr Eóin Welsh	West College Scotland
Mr Philip Whyte	NUS Scotland

Apologies:

Mr Peter Aitchison	University of Glasgow
Prof Alan Dearle	University of St Andrews
Professor Sir Pete Downes	University of Dundee
Professor Charlie Jeffery	University of Edinburgh
Dr Finlay MacCorquodale	Edinburgh Napier University
Professor Clive Mulholland	University of the Highlands and Islands
Ms Elizabeth Passey	University of Glasgow
Ms Susan Stewart	The Open University in Scotland
Mr Andrew Witty	Colleges Scotland

1. Welcome and introduction from the Convener

The Convener, Ms Liz Smith MSP, welcomed everyone to the third meeting of the CPG on Colleges and Universities in session 5 of the Scottish Parliament, on the topic of Widening Access. Ms Smith gave a warm welcome to Professor Sir Peter Scott, Commissioner for Fair Access to Higher Education in Scotland. Ms Smith congratulated The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) on its ranking in the world's top three for performing arts education. Members were informed that due to a very busy education day in the Parliament, she and colleagues would have to leave the meeting early to be in the Chamber for the start of the afternoon session. Mr Alastair Sim, Director of Universities Scotland would act as Chair for the final part of the meeting.

Ms Smith thanked Universities Scotland for sponsoring the lunch for the meeting.

2. Apologies

Apologies were noted.

3. Approval of 3minutes from 14 December 2016 meeting

Members approved the minutes of the meeting.

4. Introduction to topic of Widening Access – presentation from Professor Sir Peter Scott, Commissioner for Fair Access to Higher Education in Scotland.

In her introduction, the Convener said that the CPG was extremely privileged to have Sir Peter presenting to members, he had a big task ahead of him, and that his formal presentation to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee had been very interesting. This CPG was a good forum for expanding on that. Ms Smith then invited Sir Peter to make his presentation.

Professor Sir Peter Scott - Fair Access in Higher Education (full transcript provided by Sir Peter, copied below)

1. 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.

<u>What do we mean by 'fair access'?</u>

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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* is jealously guarded, or more unified systems.

5. 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.

6. But, when we seek to go beyond this strong consensus that current patters 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.

7. '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 the 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 'nimbyism' (sorry, that is unfair...). That is the conservative 'take' on 'Fair Access'.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.

Concrete issues

11. 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).

Contexualised admissions

12. 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.

Articulation

13. 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.

Outreach and access courses

14. 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.

Two more issues - autonomy and metrics

15. 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 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.

Conclusion

16. 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.

5. Discussion and questions

The Convener thanked Sir Peter for his presentation and opened the floor for discussion.

Ms Laura Cattell, University of Edinburgh
Ms Cattel asked, 'who needs to do the heavy lifting' and who are the players in the' heavy lifting' of fair access to university? This was in reference to Sir Peter's comments on the differences in emphasis on fair access that universities have. (Some people in 'ancient' universities argue that fair access shouldn't 'hazard' Scotland's global reputation in research or academic standards, and although they take a lead and do what they can, the 'heavy lifting' on access must be done by others.

Sir Peter replied that universities have a major responsibility here, and make substantial contribution to fair access, as do colleges and teachers.

Mr Martin Fairbairn, Scottish Funding Council
Mr Fairbairn mentioned a visit he and Dr Veena O'Halloran (University of Strathclyde) had made to Dumfries and Galloway College, which shares facilities with Crichton University Campus. He commented that it had made him stop and think, listening to students who had gone through widening access routes. Whilst they valued the opportunity to go to university with advanced standing, many said the 'gear change was very crunchy' in terms of learning styles etc. Mr Fairbairn stated that if we are to increase the volume of advanced standing in articulation there is a need to think about that gear change, do something about it and above all, must keep listening to students.

Sir Peter agreed on the importance of listening to students and that in terms of 'gear change' it should be looked at subject by subject. He was not aware that this work had been done. He suggested that there may be a particular challenges within science subjects. Sir Peter also suggested that other groups of students, particularly international students, would also potentially face 'crunchy' transitions between different systems but universities seemed to get that right.

Mr Jeremy Balfour, MSP

Mr Balfour mentioned that the Equalities and Human Rights Committee in its work on widening access to Scottish universities for disabled people had discussed the use of personal statements by universities, which can pose additional challenges for disabled applicants or those from low income backgrounds. He asked how universities could help with the UCAS process?

Sir Peter said that universities need to think very carefully about their entry demands and road-test them across all potential groups of students. Some people will have parents and schools that help. Others won't have that and that is a barrier. He said he was against computer algorithms determining entry and that an element of judgement will always be necessary when trying to assess a person's potential.

Professor Karl Leydecker, University of Dundee
Professor Leydecker said he wanted to push back a bit on the 'playful' descriptions of universities and their attitudes to fair access, suggesting that there was a danger of following clichés. Professor Leydecker also commented that the sector has suggested using measures other than SIMD but it seems 'hard wired' into policy from the First Minister to Commission to SFC.

Sir Peter said that if you look at the nature of student bodies there are still some broad assumptions that ring true. He stated that he could identify the social make up of Oxford and Cambridge students, and similarly could guess the make-up of a large, urban post-92 university. On the issue of SIMD as a measure, Sir Peter said that he is tempted to 'duck it' at the moment as any metric used will have some disadvantages. He offered his view that if it was clear the higher education sector was making substantial progress it opens up the opportunity to ask for more flexibility in the metrics.

Dr Sandra Cairncross, Edinburgh Napier University
A comment to agree with Sir Peter that contextual admissions also needs to be followed with contextual support for students. Also agree with goal of scaling up and joining-up of access programmes. The Edinburgh-based universities are working together on that.

Sir Peter replied that he is aware of post-16 destinations other than further and higher education (although that is the focus of the Commission) and we must be careful not to denigrate them. He noted that the access targets are focused on young entrants which is not helpful.

Mr Paul Little, City of Glasgow College
Shared his aspiration that the Commissioner outlines the system of advantage that exists given it is often expressed in terms of disadvantage. He asked how important the word 'higher education' is and would use of the term 'tertiary education' help with fair access?

Sir Peter replied that the term further and higher education are essentially bureaucratic terms and they could potentially be a barrier to student choice because of perception. He would take all opportunities to think holistically.

Mr Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland

Commented that he finds the attainment gap the most upsetting thing as is it a waste of talent. A goal within the fair access agenda has to be widening the applicant pool. He asked how the Commissioner saw his role in widening the talent pool?

Sir Peter replied that the responsibility is to look across the whole system; across schools and communities. He commented that he disliked the mindset of 'standard' and 'non-standard' students and advised that he felt that everyone was probably better described as being between those two definitions.

Mr Eóin Welsh, West College Scotland College.
Questioned whether the Commissioner saw his role as widening access to higher education in further education colleges as well as widening access to universities?

Sir Peter replied that he wanted to retain flexibility and to avoid prescribing what 'success' looked like for students. He wants to move away from the notion that there are 'certain' types of programme for 'certain' types of people.

Dr Claire Carney. University of West of Scotland
Commented that she works for one of the institutions doing the 'heavy lifting' on access. That brings demands in terms of student support, retention and destinations of leavers. There also needs to be consideration given to the (in) compatibility between the development of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and fair access. We must link all of these things together as we address widening access.

Sir Peter stated that HEIs in Scotland have the freedom to choose to enter or not to enter TEF. He agreed that league tables often work against widening access as entry grades are often one of the metrics used to assess universities' performance on the league tables. He reflected that one of the *Blueprint's* recommendations is for him to speak with some of the organisations that run university league tables to influence this. He noted that progress here is likely to be difficult.

Professor Matthew MacIver, University of Highlands and Islands
Commented about the public perception of universities and fair access, highlighting the work that UHI was doing delivering courses in colleges across the region.

Sir Peter said that the difficulty is sometimes that the public can have contradictory views, citing that many may feel universities should be doing more in terms of fair access but perhaps would not want any changes to impact adversely on those closest to them.

Mr Kenny Stewart, The Open University in Scotland
Referred to Sir Peter's Guardian article from the day before in which Sir Peter had many references to part-time students in regards to the Higher Education & Research Bill. Kenny asked if the role of part-time students would figure in his work as Commissioner.

Sir Peter replied that he hoped it would and had he been in charge of writing the terms of reference for his work, he would have certainly included it. He commented that the distinction between full and

part-time education is often quite blurred. He noted that the Open University has an open admissions policy in a way that other institutions seem to fear. He suggested that we should not over-obsess about completion rates if we have a well-functioning credit system.

Dr Martin Campbell, University of St Andrews
Referencing Sir Peter's comments from his presentation, he was asked how best practice would be disseminated.

Sir Peter responded that he sees the Framework for Fair Access, required by the Blueprint as serving this function. He does not want it to be prescriptive or top-down. There will be no one 'right way' but he sees a role for the Framework in providing a broad taxonomy of fair access interventions and their effect.

6. Date and topic of next meting

Members were advised that the next meeting of the CPG is:
- Wednesday 10 May 2017: 1- 2pm in Committee Room 3. Mr Sim announced that the topic for discussion would be, ***How universities and colleges engage with their local communities*** (including community relations and additional community contributions such as teaching and research).

Members are kindly invited to sponsor the lunch for the next meeting.

7. Close

Mr Sim closed the meeting with thanks to all for attending.

Ends