

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

13.00 – 14.00 on Thursday 20 June 2019, Committee Room 6, Scottish Parliament

Topic: Widening Access

**Note of Meeting**

**Present:**

Ms	Elizabeth	Smith MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Jeremy	Balfour MSP	Scottish Parliament
Ms	Shona	Barrie	University of Stirling
Mr	Barry	Black	Scottish Parliament
Mr	John	Blicharski	University of Dundee
Mr	Neil	Broadfoot	Skills Development Scotland
Mr	Terry	Brotherstone	UCU
Ms	Fiona	Burns	Scottish Funding Council
Mr	Arran	Cottan	NUS Scotland
Mr	Neil	Croll	University of Glasgow
Ms	Lynne	Currie	Universities Scotland
Ms	Fiona	Diggle	Audit Scotland
Ms	Laura	Duffy	Scottish Government
Ms	Halla	Edwards-Muthu	Scottish Parliament
Mr	James	Harrison	QAA Scotland
Prof	Grant	Jarvie	University of Edinburgh
Mr	Christopher	Kennedy	Unite the Union
Mr	Ben	Kinross	NUS Scotland
Ms	Fiona	Larg	University of the Highlands and Islands
Ms	Shona	Littlejohn	The Open University in Scotland
Mr	Murdo	Mathison	UCU
Mr	Liam	McCabe	NUS Scotland
Mr	Sean	McGivern	University of Glasgow
Mr	Duncan	McKay	Universities Scotland
Ms	Erin	McKee	University of Glasgow
Ms	Lynne	Raeside	Scottish Funding Council
Ms	Jane	Scott	Queen Margaret University
Ms	Liz	Scott	Edinburgh Napier University
Mr	Alastair	Sim	Universities Scotland
Mr	Boab	Thomson	Universities Scotland
Ms	Trudi	Tokarczyk	Colleges Scotland
Mr	Stuart	Tooley	University of Edinburgh

**Apologies:**

Ms	Seonag	Mackinnon	Glasgow Caledonian University
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Mr	Rob	Flett	Glasgow Caledonian University
Mr	Drew	McGowan	West College Scotland
Ms	Anne	Keenan	EIS
Mr	Iain	Gray	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Finlay	MacCorquodale	Edinburgh Napier University
Mr	Matt	Francis	University of Stirling

### **1. Welcome and introduction from the Convener**

The Convener welcomed members to the twelfth meeting of the CPG on Colleges and Universities in session five of the Scottish Parliament and informed members that a presentation would be heard from the Commissioner For Fair Access, Professor Sir Peter Scott.

### **2. Apologies**

The Convener noted the apologies for the meeting.

### **3. Approval of minutes from 21 March 2019 meeting.**

Members of the group approved the minutes from the previous meeting on 21 March 2019.

### **4. Introduction of topic: Widening access**

The Convener invited the Commissioner to make his presentation.

#### **Professor Sir Peter Scott, Commissioner for Fair Access**

The Commissioner began his presentation by reminding members that this is his second appearance at the CPG. He told members that he found the last meeting useful in informing his first annual report in 2017. Members were informed that the presentation would cover three broad themes: progress on widening, both in relation to governmental targets but also wider progress towards a fairer higher education system; the recent Framework for Fair Access; and the key messages in the Commissioner's 2019 annual report, specifically around admissions and articulation.

On progress towards meeting targets set out by the government, the Commissioner said institutions had been making good progress and that Scotland is leading the way on access across the whole of the UK. He added that many people deserve credit: government, political parties, sector bodies representing universities, colleges and students, and most of all, institutions themselves. However, the Commissioner said going forward, the sector needed to be aware of complacency as that the "last mile is always the most difficult to run." He added that since such good progress has been made, perhaps there should be discussion about bringing the 2026 or 2030 targets forward.

Discussing access on a wider front, the Commissioner said the sector needed to start viewing access as a positive contribution to higher education. To achieve this, mindsets and attitudes needed to change as much as policy. He added that the sector needed to change its key practices, which it had

been doing, but he also called on the sector to challenge its assumptions on what constitutes higher education. Fair access will never be achieved if it's always considered a concession, he added.

The Commissioner then moved on to discuss the recent Framework for Fair Access, saying it was a toolkit of good practice based on systematic evaluation of what works and what doesn't work. He added that it's intended to be more than simply a framework; it's a community of practice for practitioners. It's not a top-down policy instrument but a bottom-up tool for use by staff working in institutions.

The Commissioner then began discussing his annual report, which was published in mid-June. The report explores the relationship between school reforms, Curriculum for Excellence and the link to access and has two key recommendations on contextual admissions and articulations. The report also discusses the use of SIMD as a key measure of deprivation.

On contextual admissions, the Commissioner acknowledged there had been good progress by universities through setting minimum entry requirements. However, he said it was still too early to see how MER will be used in practice and how effective they will be in widening access to higher education. He added that institutions should be bold and adventurous with contextualised admissions.

Moving on to discuss articulation, the Commissioner said that not enough progress had been made on ensuring HN students are given full credit for prior study when they transfer to a degree programme. He added that he was disappointed to hear that it's "sometimes possible" for HN students to articulate with full credit. If HN students are not receiving full credit as standard, then they should at the very least be given partial credit. He added that no credit at all is completely unacceptable.

The Commissioner then moved onto discuss two big unresolved issues about access which could impede progress. The first is displacement, which is the fear that some applicants will be 'squeezed out' if more places are allocated for applicants from deprived areas. Whilst he accepts the fear of displacement is very real, evidenced through letters he receives from concerned parents who think he is an ombudsman, the issue is not as prevalent as reported in the press. The overall numbers of Scottish-domiciled entrants to higher education has increased so it's difficult to conclude that anyone has lost a place. He added that the Scottish Government could help by providing more places, which could be funded by the resource which currently supports free tuition for EU students.

Another issue with the potential to act as a drag on progress is the complaint that SIMD is not an effective measure of deprivation. He said the complaint that applicants living in non-SIMD 20 areas, but who are equally deprived as those in SIMD20 areas, are being ignored is only legitimate in rural and sparsely populated areas such as the Highlands and Islands. In the central belt, it's much less of a problem.

## **5. Discussion and questions.**

The Convener thanked the Commissioner for his presentation and invited members to ask questions.

### **Liz Smith MSP, Scottish Parliament**

Ms Smith asked about the role of schools in widening access to higher education. She added that work by colleges and universities needed to be complemented by work in schools in raising aspirations in pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Commissioner said when he speaks to headteachers in schools, the overriding message he receives is that they don't want SIMD20 pupils to be allowed into higher education as an act of charity. They don't want pupils to be given an "easy" route into university. Secondly, higher education is only one destination and schools must keep the multiple pathways available to learners in mind. One of the initiatives of the Learner Journey is to keep the multiple pathways open, and make them as smooth as possible for learners. Finally, the Commissioner said universities could focus on providing more outreach programmes – it's not right that universities will stand aside and wait for the attainment gap to close.

**Jeremy Balfour MSP, Scottish Parliament**

Mr Balfour asked whether disability was being considered as fully as it should be, in regards to access. He said he had recently sent Freedom of Information requests to universities across Scotland and the responses revealed that only 1 per cent of university students have declared a physical disability, which is very low.

The Commissioner replied that disability is a very important issue in access and he recently published a discussion paper on this in the spring. Of course, there are different types of disability, and some are protected characteristics. Universities may see physical disability as a secondary issue due to mental health being higher up the agenda. The Commissioner added that there are many other forms of disadvantage and that he hopes to do more work on these in the future.

**Jane Scott, Queen Margaret University**

Ms Scott asked if there were other ways higher education needed to systematically change to truly be open to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Commissioner replied that Scottish universities do not make good enough use of the first year as a transitional change. For example, universities in America allocate the first two years to general study and specialisation comes later. The first year could be used to build skills needed for academic study. Furthermore, the Commissioner said that universities could place more emphasis on lived experience. This was not considered nearly enough as it ought to be, he added.

**Liz Smith MSP, Scottish Parliament**

Ms Smith asked if the Commissioner had detected any concerns around subject choice in schools and how a narrowing of choice can impact on widening access. She also asked if the Commissioner recognises that there is an inequity of subject choice between the most and least deprived schools in Scotland.

The Commissioner replied that it has been raised, but there are lots of issues around it, such as teacher shortages and actually having enough students who want to study a particular subject. There are mechanisms in place, such as Advanced Higher hubs, which help broaden choice. He added that universities should be less restrictive in terms of the subjects they require.

**Neil Croll, University of Glasgow**

Mr Croll said that Curriculum for Excellence has reduced subject choice in schools, and that his institution looks to see if there are alternatives if pupils have been unable to study certain Higher subjects. He added that the University of Glasgow is looking more closely at articulation now and that they missed out on funding a few years ago which restricted their ability to do more on articulation. Continuing, he questioned whether HN study is preparing students for Year 2 or Year 3. Mr Croll's institution has had to set up bespoke panels to assess HN students' preparedness for each subject area.

The Commissioner replied that he does recognise the efforts of admissions staff and he is not suggesting that this work is easy. He added that it is not his job to come up with answers, but to push and challenge.

**Murdo Mathison, UCU Scotland**

Mr Mathison asked about funding cuts imposed on the higher education by the Scottish Government and whether this was harming efforts to widen access. He said institutions who were doing the most on access were the ones in the most financial difficulty and asked whether funding should be linked to progress on access.

The Commissioner replied that people working in universities will always argue for more funding and that it's true that there is a disparity of funding between universities, particularly the research-intensives. He added that it is the responsibility of the Scottish Funding Council to devise different formulae for funding and that funding for the sector is ultimately a political decision.

**Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland**

Mr Sim thanked the Commissioner for his work in constructively challenging the sector and said the points raised should be taken as a starting point to inform debate, and that the sector should respond with evidence.

The Commissioner replied that simply waiting for evidence reduces the rate of progress – institutions needed to move ahead of the evidence. Sometimes, action can be mired in data.

**6. Dates and agreement of topics for future meetings in the next parliamentary year.**

The Convener thanked members for their questions and noted that the next meeting would be on Thursday 10 October 2019. She informed members that a presentation would be heard from Nora Senior, Chair of the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board.

**7. Close.**

The Convener closed the meeting.