



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

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19 March 2018

Dear Shirley-Anne,

Thank you for giving evidence to the Education and Skills Committee on 7 March 2018.

I am writing to you to follow-up on a number of issues raised during the meeting that the Committee has agreed to seek further clarification on.

Questions from Members

An issue the Committee raised with you was whether the new higher exam materials will be ready for teachers to start using in June and you noted that you would bring this to the attention of the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education, as this issue falls within his remit. The Committee seeks clarification from you on whether you have raised this issue with the Cabinet Secretary and to provide further detail on his response.

During the meeting, the Committee also asked you about what work has been done “on analysing students who have articulated successfully into second or third year at university in terms of their final degree result or the retention rate?”¹ The Committee welcomes your commitment to provide more information on what analysis has been done in your response to this letter.

¹ Education and Skills Committee, 7 March 2018, Official Report, Cols 20-21.

Another issue raised by the Committee was the approach to funding, insofar as “in the past, moneys went to universities for widening access places, but now that is part of their core funding”.² The Committee seeks further clarification from you on the rationale behind the apparent change in the approach to funding widening access policy and on what leverage the Government has if any universities are underperforming under the revised funding arrangements.

The Committee also asked whether “...any analysis been done to find out what courses young people from deprived areas are going into”.³ You explained that the Data Working Group has been examining this issue and we welcome your commitment to provide further information on the relevant work being done in your response to this letter.

The Committee noted the submission by Universities Scotland, in which it has asked for data on “the achievement levels of secondary 6 pupils in the SIMD quintile, as a trend” to make it easier for universities to assess the level at which their minimum entry level requirements should be set. You noted that this issue was due to be tabled at the next meeting of the Data Working Group. Could you provide an update on the availability of this data, including whether a decision was taken to share it with universities at the most recent meeting of the Data Working Group?

Questions from the public

As you will be aware, the Committee asked members of the public to send in questions relating to your portfolio as part of our commitment to public engagement. Whilst Members were able to ask many of the questions received during the meeting itself, we were not able to ask them all due to the limitations of time. I have included the questions the Committee received but were not able to ask during the session below. We seek your response to the questions accordingly and we intend to share your response with the members of the public who provided the questions.

David Hiddleston via Twitter–

- What is planned to widen access in alternative university routes, such as Foundation Apprenticeships?
- What is planned for FE College and University partnerships, increase articulation agreements?
- What role will FE Colleges play in widening participation?

Scott Smith via Twitter–

- What does the minister believe lies behind the disparity in access to university for students from deprived backgrounds between England, where tuition fees are in place, and Scotland, where they are not?

² Education and Skills Committee, 7 March 2018, Official Report, Col 23.

³ Education and Skills Committee, 7 March 2018, Official Report, Col 24.

Future work

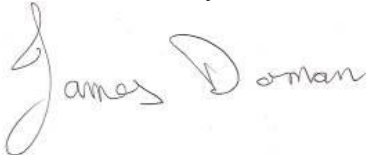
As part of its further consideration of widening access policy, the Committee will invite a selection of universities to give evidence on the work they are doing at an institutional level to widen access later this year.

The Committee understands from your evidence that the Government will be looking at specific issues raised during the meeting as part of its wider work programme. For example, you noted that the unique learner number will be considered as part of the Government's work on the learner journey, and the issue of displacement will also be considered further, either through the Commissioner's work or through the Access Delivery Group. The Committee requests an update from you on these work streams when more information is available to inform its watching brief on widening access policy.

The Official Report of the meeting has been published and can be found on the Parliament's website [here](#) for your reference.

The Committee would be grateful to receive your response to this letter by **Monday, 16 April 2018**.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James Dornan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

**JAMES DORNAN MSP
CONVENER**