"I WANT US TO DETERMINE NOW
THAT A CHILD BORN TODAY IN
ONE OF OUR MOST DEPRIVED
COMMUNITIES WILL, BY THE TIME
HE OR SHE LEAVES SCHOOL, HAVE
THE SAME CHANCE OF GOING TO
UNIVERSITY AS A CHILD BORN
IN ONE OF OUR LEAST DEPRIVED
COMMUNITIES."

Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland,
26 November 2014

CHAIR'S INTRODUCTION

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be chairing this Commission. Our task, working within Lord Nolan's principles in public life, is to advise Ministers on the steps necessary to achieve the ambition that every child, irrespective of socioeconomic background, should have an equal chance of accessing higher education.

CHAIR'S INTRODUCTION

It is an objective that is both honourable and necessary on so many fronts: promoting fairness, mitigating poverty and eliminating exclusion. At its core, the work of this Commission is about creating a better future for all and in this way it resonates with Scotland's egalitarian traditions.

Given the importance of the task, I am delighted that it is in the good and wise hands of the experienced and talented individuals we have around the Commission table, all of whom share a strong commitment to meeting the challenge we have been set.

Though our task is primarily about higher education, from the outset it has been our stance that people, and particularly the young, should have the opportunity to pursue an academic or vocational route that best matches their interests, abilities and aptitudes, irrespective of background.

At this halfway point in our enquiry there is a growing sense in the Commission that, on the issue of equal access, Scotland is a nation, and an experienced education system, that is ripe for development. Commitment and innovative practice on widening access has coincided with an unprecedented appetite for progress across the political spectrum and the emergence of a series of complementary policies and reforms.

We have been clear from the outset that this Commission will build upon the good practice that already exists. As our work has progressed we have learned that there is plenty of it and that it takes place right across the education system. Indeed, Scotland has had more than a decade of strategic discussion, experimentation and prototyping on widening access approaches. This work has significantly advanced our shared understanding of where the barriers lie and of how they can be most effectively overcome. Yet there remains a persistent gap in access to university between those in our most and least deprived communities.

CHAIR'S INTRODUCTION

I therefore believe that we must progress to a new generation of work on equal access that will take its place alongside a wider suite of education and social justice policies. College reform, the work of the Developing the Young Workforce Programme, the commitment to closing the attainment gap and the expansion of early years provision, together, if successful, all have the potential to make a significant difference to widening access. Put simply, if we set our collective minds and efforts to this task, the ground is fertile for Scotland to solve a problem which, across most of the world's developed economies, has long appeared intractable.

It is therefore our intention that this interim report should be the first step on a route that will lead us to equality of access. We are committed to an appreciative and rigorous inquiry: we have sought to understand through evidence why Scotland is where it is on this issue, what has been learned and what more is required to achieve equality as early as possible. We have found that the present inequities are the result of a very complex mix of social, economic and educational factors. For this reason, any examination of this issue which concludes that inequality can be fixed in a single part of the system is bound to fail.

We are clear that the achievement of our goal will not be easy. The Commission reached an early consensus that no stone would be left unturned in carrying out our work. With that in mind we pose challenging questions throughout this report to all parts of the system.

I will close by thanking all of those who have generously given to the Commission their time and expertise. These searching dialogues have made a significant contribution to the shaping of this interim report and we will continue to build on that approach and to work closely with partners as we move towards recommendations and the publication of our final report.

Dame Ruth Silver
November 2015

BACKGROUND TO THE COMMISSION

The 2014-15 Programme for Government set out the Scottish Government's vision of a fairer, more equal Scotland. Central to that vision is a long-term ambition to eradicate the present social inequality in higher education, so that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities.

The purpose of the Commission on Widening Access is to advise the Scottish Government on how this ambition can be met. Specifically the Commission has been asked to:

- synthesise existing evidence on barriers to equal access and retention;

- propose both a short- and long-term target for participation in higher education and clear milestones, to drive further and faster progress;

- identify best practice on widening access across the education system; and

- identify the data and information required to monitor and support improvements on widening access across all education providers, and recommend the processes necessary to support this.

The Commission's full remit is available at Annex B. The Commission has been asked to follow up this interim report with a final report in spring 2016.

01

BACKGROUND

In the 2014-15 Programme for Government the Scottish Government set out an ambition that every child, irrespective of socioeconomic background, should have an equal chance of accessing higher education. This Commission on Widening Access was established to advise Ministers on the steps necessary to achieve this.

PURPOSE OF THE INTERIM REPORT

This interim report sets out what the Commission has learned at the halfway stage of its work. It takes stock of where Scotland is on equal access to higher education. It then identifies and examines the main barriers and systemic issues which may be obstructing equal access and highlights some of the models of best practice that we have encountered. The report should be regarded as a mechanism for dialogue. It does not offer solutions at this stage but instead identifies the areas that we will be looking at going forward and poses questions – to all parts of the system – to help us shape and develop our final recommendations.

This interim report does not address any, additional barriers to access that exist for those from a care background. These issues will be examined in detail in the Commission's final report.

APPROACH TO THE TASK

In developing this report the Commission has gathered evidence from a wide range of sources. We issued a Call for Evidence in June, reviewed existing evidence and additionally commissioned a literature review on barriers to fair access. We have also held a series of consultation events and meetings across Scotland and have taken presentations from key stakeholders at Commission meetings including: students, care leavers, professional experts and practitioners. The Commission is committed to maintaining this engagement and will seek to reach an even wider set of stakeholders to inform our work going forward.

OUR PHILOSOPHY

There is consensus that equal access is an important objective but the Commission observes that this sometimes masks the reality that access is a divisive issue on which there exists a range of competing viewpoints. There is a need for a clear national vision of what the ultimate goal of access activity is and a coherent national strategy for how that vision is to be achieved. The Commission will seek to provide that strategy and vision for Scotland and as a first step has set out its beliefs on access:

- Equal access is fundamentally about fairness

- Equal access is a social good

- Equal access is compatible with academic excellence

- Equal access is an economic good

The inequality in higher education is unfair, damaging and unsustainable. Scotland has a moral, social and economic duty to achieve equality of access. This philosophy is the lens through which the Commission will view the remainder of its task.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR

- The increased prominence of the widening access agenda has led to a decade of prototyping and development of good practice. The Commission has seen some impressive and successful examples of good practice. However, despite some welcome progress, there remain very significant socioeconomic inequalities in Scottish higher education at both national and institutional level.

- Barriers to access exist at all stages of the education journey, from early years and school through to admissions and retention. There is, however, also evidence of good practice and progress in areas that could be expanded to drive forward equality of access. The key barriers and systemic issues that we have identified include:

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

- Early years attainment gap

- School attainment gap

- Low aspirations

- Lack of parental experience of HE

- Lack of quality advice and guidance in schools and in the family home

- Secondary school subject choice, including clear advice and guidance on the consequences of decisions

- Lack of quality advice and guidance on student finance

- Cultural barriers, e.g. the feeling of not fitting in

SYSTEMIC ISSUES

- Alignment of pathways between schools, colleges and universities

- Lack of evidence on types of access programmes that have most impact

- Need for more coherence and collaboration on outreach

- The need to expand and maximise the impact of contextual admissions

- The need to expand and maximise the impact of articulation pathways

- Admissions processes placing greater value on experiences more likely to be available to more affluent socioeconomic groups

- Inconsistent approach to using data to identify those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged

- The need for better data to support targets and monitor progress

- We have also observed that much of the widening access work in Scotland focusses on the 'deficit' in the *individual* and we believe that it is time to re-balance that focus. We need to consider what more the education system can do to remove barriers to access and to support those from deprived backgrounds to enter higher education.

- To meet the First Minister's challenge to eradicate inequality will therefore require change. In particular, it will require all parts of the education system and government – both local and national – to do more and to push harder.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

In this report we have focussed in detail on the main barriers to access and the key systemic issues which are impeding progress. We need to consider, in more detail, each of these areas. Below, we have listed the questions set out in the report on the areas that the Commission will consider in the second half of its work. We have moved from a 'Call for Evidence' to a 'Call for Judgement' and we want all those working on, supporting and participating in access to help us to address these questions to inform our thinking as we move towards our final recommendations. Our final report will also consider more overarching, strategic issues such as whether we have the necessary funding, research and regulatory arrangements in place to drive the step change that is needed.

Inequality in higher education is a complex problem and it is clear that Scotland has a long distance to travel to meet the ambition set by the First Minister. But there are good grounds for optimism. The Commission is convinced that if all parts of the system successfully play their part, then we can achieve equal access to higher education within a generation.

KEY AREAS THAT THE COMMISSION WILL CONSIDER

Early years

- Are there creative ways to coordinate and extend the best early years outreach models as part of a wider outreach strategy, for example through the establishment of regional hubs or partnerships?

- How can meaningful parental engagement be sustained throughout the educational journey, from early years onwards?

Aspiration, expectation and the importance of guidance

- How can we better support young people and their families to match their aspiration to the concrete steps needed to make them a reality?

- How can we develop the role of information and guidance in schools to support wider access for those from deprived communities?

- Can we identify best practice in relation to outreach activity focussed on raising aspiration, especially that which incorporates parental engagement?

Subject choice

- What factors are driving different subject choices for those from deprived backgrounds and how does this impact on access?

- Is there sufficient personalisation in the delivery of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) to ensure that all individuals have opportunities and choices to reach their potential?

- Will the alternative senior phase pathways being facilitated by CfE and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) lead to alternative pathways into higher education; and if not, will this in any way disadvantage those from more deprived backgrounds?

Current outreach activity

- Can we define the broad elements of an access programme which constitute best practice and secure, as far as is possible, maximum impact?

- Would it be feasible to have a national standard for access activity, possibly involving some form of quality assurance process such as kite marking and how might this work?

- Can we bring more coherence and collaboration to access work, for example through the establishment of regional hubs which plan and coordinate targeted, balanced outreach activity?

- How can more robust arrangements be put in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of access programmes at an individual, regional and national level?

Summer schools

- Is there scope to increase summer school places in Scotland to help widen access and how could this be achieved?

- Are there merits in developing a national or regional approach to summer school provision in Scotland to ensure that we provide a more coherent offer to learners across Scotland?

Contextual admissions

- Is there scope to scale up contextual admissions and how can we share best practice in this area?

- Can we identify a minimum entry threshold for disadvantaged students which more accurately reflects the demands of courses?

- How can better information be made available to students about the options contextualised admissions provide?

Articulation pathways

- How can we develop more robust information on the articulation landscape in Scotland?

- How can we expand the number of articulation agreements and the number of articulation places across institutions?

- What are the main reasons for the differing patterns of articulation across the sector?

- Is there scope to bring more uniformity in terms of the credit awarded by universities to students with HE qualifications achieved in colleges?

The importance of non-academic factors in admissions

- Is it possible to adapt elements of the present admissions system in a way that levels the playing field, for example by giving more value to the diverse qualities and experiences offered by different socioeconomic groups?

- Is there more that schools and universities can do to support more informed guidance, leading to better quality applications from applicants from deprived communities?

- Could outreach activity be adapted to facilitate work experience or other development opportunities that would enhance applications to higher education institutions?

- Is there evidence that shows the benefits of social diversity within an institution on the experiences of all of its members?

Financial barriers

- To what extent does student finance impact on wider access issues such as retention rates, student experience and degree outcomes?

- How can we ensure that accurate advice and guidance on student financial support is reaching those from deprived backgrounds?

Cultural barriers

- How can best practice to support access students in higher education be shared and embedded across the sector?

Data and evidence to support equal access

- What are the merits of different measures of deprivation to support access?

- Is there scope to share data and information across sectors to better support decisions about individuals, track their progress and provide appropriate support?

- What are the opportunities to build a stronger evidence base to support widening access activities and share information on what works, through both existing and new evidence?

- How can we develop meaningful measures and targets to support and monitor progress on access at a regional and national level?

02

IN THIS CHAPTER WE:

- **GIVE AN OVERVIEW OF THE PUBLIC POLICY LANDSCAPE, HIGHLIGHTING THE RELEVANCE OF KEY POLICY DEVELOPMENTS TO THE WORK OF THE COMMISSION.**

- **TRACK THE DEVELOPMENTS IN ACCESS POLICY AND ACTIVITY OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS.**

- **SET OUT IN DETAIL THE KEY DATA ON HOW SCOTLAND IS PERFORMING ON EQUAL ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION.**

POLICY LANDSCAPE

Given the long-term nature of the Government's ambition, and the range of factors that impact on access, it is important to set the work of the Commission in the context of wider developments in the public policy environment.

In this regard, the Commission is well timed in that it coincides with a whole range of strategically complementary educational, social justice and economic policies. For example, Scotland's Economic Strategy is founded on the principle that increasing competitiveness and tackling inequality are mutually supportive economic goals. Since access to higher education is one of the primary drivers of social mobility, as well as an effective means of tackling wider social inequalities, the importance of the Commission's work to supporting this economic model is clear.

Similarly, equal access also underpins Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and the work of the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) programme which aims to significantly reduce youth unemployment through preparing young people for the world of work and creating a world-class vocational education system. These ambitions are part of a wider effort to create a range of high quality post-school education and employment options that are taken up by young people making informed decisions about the pathways which best match their ambitions and talents.

As we shall see in more detail later in this report, there are also a number of policy developments with the potential to contribute more directly to advancing equal access. For example, the current Scottish Government's plans to expand funded early years provision – building upon the Early Years Framework, Equally Well and Achieving our Potential – and to close the school attainment gap have the potential to make powerful contributions to eliminating or at least mitigating some of the most important barriers to equal access to higher education.

It is clear that equal access is far from a standalone policy objective. Indeed, it is entirely consistent with an ethos in Scotland of fairness, inclusion and social justice. This is important because it means that fair access has never been more prominent and that the policy environment has never been more conducive to making progress.

But it is also important to recognise that equal access is far from a new issue. In order to understand more clearly the present position on access, and how much further we need to go, it is necessary first to reflect on the developments and policy decisions which have led us to where we are now.

A DECADE ON: NEW PROMINENCE AND PROGRESS

We take as our starting point the publication of the Scottish Funding Council's 2005 report *Learning for All*. While this report does not mark the beginning of access activity in Scotland, it was the first major root and branch review of access work, and its recommendations have been influential in shaping the developments we have seen since. It is interesting to note how many of the issues addressed in that report remain relevant in the present debate about equal access.

Over the 10 years since the report's publication the prominence of equal access as a social and political issue has grown markedly. This can at least partially be explained by the fallout from the global financial crisis which has brought issues of fairness and economic exclusion once again to the forefront of the public and political consciousness.

The increased prominence of widening access has been reflected in the education policies of successive Scottish Governments, culminating with the 2014/15 Programme for Government in which this Commission was announced and equal access was positioned as a cornerstone of the current Scottish Government's wider vision of a fairer, more socially just Scotland.

Since 2005, this enhanced priority has brought with it significant change in the widening access landscape:

- The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) fund a broad range of practitioner-led access programmes and initiatives, including five national programmes[1], as well as additional university places targeted on widening access.

- All university principals have publicly endorsed a statement affirming their commitment to achieving progress on equal access.

- Every higher education institution (HEI) in Scotland now offers its own bespoke portfolio of access programmes; typically comprising a mix of outreach, accredited summer schools and partnerships with local authorities, schools and colleges.

- The Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 introduced a new regulatory framework on access; strengthening the accountability of institutions through the introduction of statutory widening access agreements and new powers for the SFC to penalise poor performance.

- The Act also places duties on the SFC to review progress on widening access on a triennial basis and to have regard to widening access in the exercise of its functions.

- There is a welcome and increasing acceptance of the importance and educational legitimacy of using contextual data, such as uptake of free school meals, to provide a more holistic assessment of academic ability and, where appropriate, to make differential offers to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- There has been increasing recognition of the crucial and distinctive, role of colleges in delivering higher education and their potential to expand the pool of qualified applicants and enhance access to university through the expansion of articulation pathways.

The most important question of course is the extent to which this activity has delivered increased participation of those in our most deprived communities. We consider the evidence in detail in the next section.

---

1   The programmes are the Scottish Schools for Higher Education Programme, Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools, Aspire North, Focus West and Lift Off.

03

MEASURING DEPRIVATION

There are a number of different measures that can be used to track the progress of widening access at a national level. These include the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) published measures on parental education, socioeconomic classification and proportion of students from state school; the Higher Education Funding Council for England's Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) measure; and the Scottish Government's Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)[1].

For the purpose of this report, SIMD is used for much of the analyses presented. SIMD is a measure of deprivation that is used across the public sector in Scotland. It provides comparable data across higher education in colleges, as well as universities, and it allows comparisons with the wider Scottish population. The Commission is, however, aware of the need to establish the most robust and appropriate measures to identify those from deprived backgrounds, to measure national progress and to assist with decisions about individuals and the support they may need. The 'Data and Evidence to Support Access' Chapter of this report discusses this in more detail.

Annex E outlines some of the alternative measure available for national analyses and the latest trends based on these measures.

PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Scotland, traditionally, has a high rate of participation in higher education relative to other UK nations. In 2013/14, the Scottish HE Initial Participation Rate[i] for those aged between 16 and 30 was 55%,[2] compared to the English rate of 47%[3]. However, the rate is lower for those from the most deprived areas in Scotland, albeit progress has been made. In 2013/14 the participation rate for those from the most deprived areas in Scotland was 42% – up from 35% in 2006/07. There is no equivalent rate published for English participation.

Although participation is rising overall, there remain significant differences in the patterns of access across institutions and for different age groups.

---

1   The SIMD uses an index of seven domains – employment income, health, education, geographic access to services, crime and housing – to produce a relative measure of deprivation in Scotland based on 6,505 small areas, called datazones, each containing around 350 households. The Index provides a relative ranking for each datazone, from 1 (most deprived) to 6,505 (least deprived). Further information at http://simd.scotland.gov.uk/publication-2012

2   Higher Education Students and Qualifiers at Scottish Institutions 2013-14: http://www.sfc.ac.uk/communications/Statisticalpublications/2015/SFCST042015.aspx

3   Participation Rates in Higher Education: Academic Years 2006/2007 – 2013/14 (Provisional): https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/458034/HEIPR_PUBLICATION_2013-14.pdf

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Over the 10 years since 2003/04, there has been steady progress on widening access in Scottish Higher Education Institutions, with the percentage of full-time first degree entrants from Scotland's 20% most deprived areas (SIMD20) increasing from 10.9% in 2003/04 to 13.7% in 2013/14, an increase of 2.8 percentage points (Figure 1). It is notable that much of this progress took place in 2013/14, following the introduction of additional funded places for access students at Higher Education Institutions.

FIGURE 1

Scottish domiciled full-time first degree entrants to Scottish HEIs – SIMD comparison – 10-year trend

Source: HESA
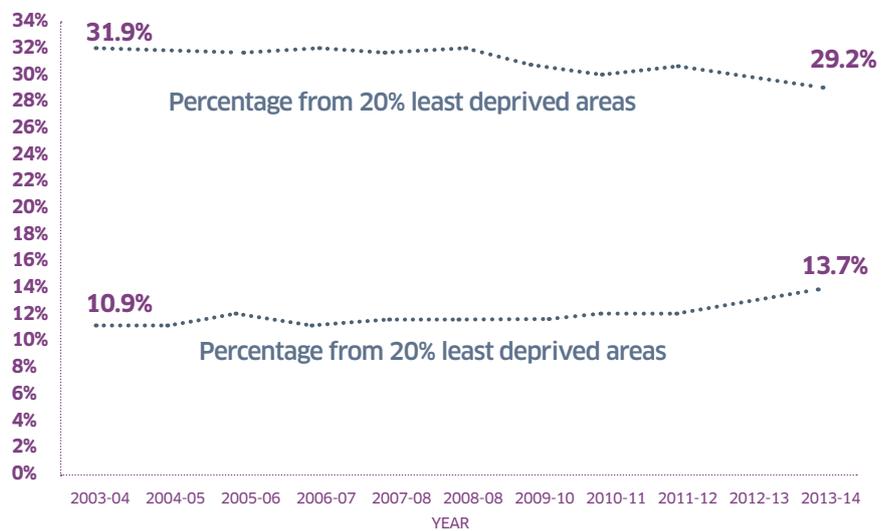
At the same time, there has been a 2.7 percentage point decrease in the proportion of entrants from Scotland's 20% least deprived communities, from 31.9% in 2003/04 to 29.2% in 2013/14.

This means that over the period the gap between Scotland's least and most deprived communities has narrowed from 20 percentage points to 15.5 percentage points. However, it remains the case that students from SIMD20 backgrounds are under-represented and those from the least deprived backgrounds are over-represented. During this period, the proportion of entrants from the 'middle' group (those entrants not from either of the 20% most deprived or 20% least deprived areas) has remained relatively constant at around 57%.

The proportional improvement in entrants from SIMD20 backgrounds is reflected in the number increasing by almost a third in the 10-year period, from 2,910 in 2003/04 to 3,855 in 2013/14.
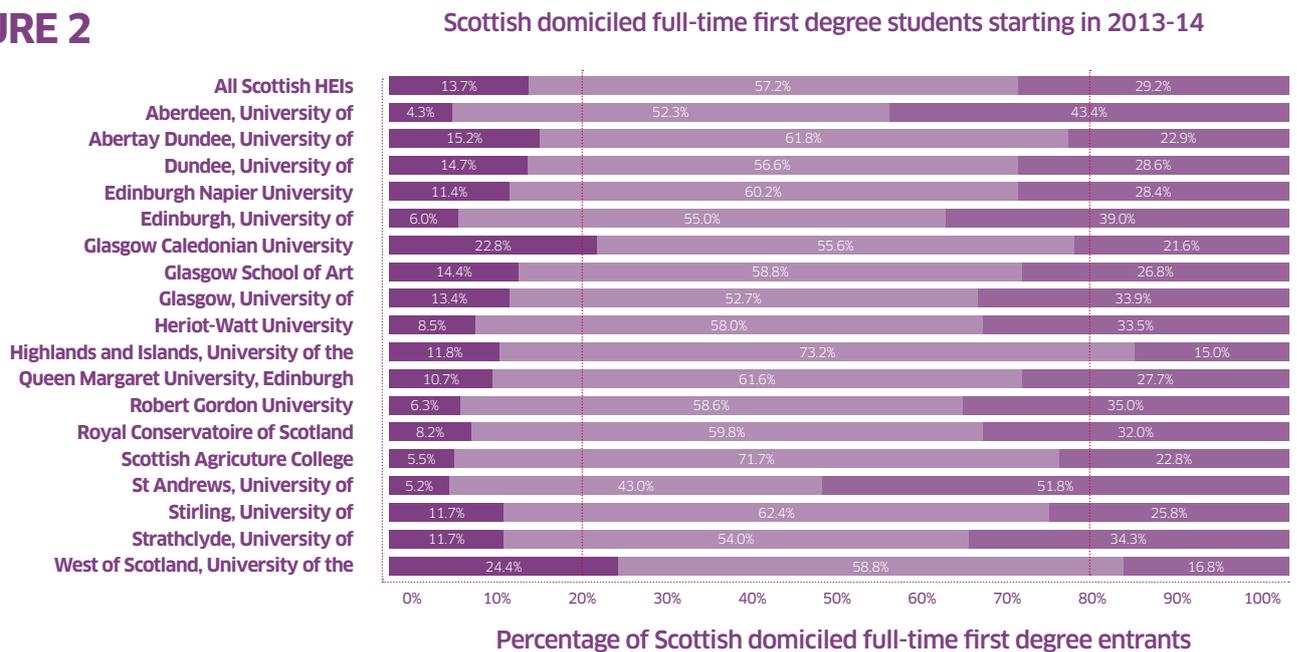
In contrast, the number of students from the least deprived backgrounds has not decreased but has remained relatively stable, despite a fall in the proportion of entrants they represent. This is due to the increase in the number of funded university places over this period, which has led to an overall increase in Scottish full-time first degree entrants.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

There are notable differences between institutions in the distribution of entrants from the different socioeconomic groups based on SIMD. In 2013/14 the percentage of entrants from SIMD20 backgrounds ranged from 4.3% to 24.4%, with only two institutions in which entrants from SIMD20 backgrounds were not under-represented (Figure 2).

In contrast, people from the least deprived backgrounds were over-represented at 16 of the 18 HEIs.

FIGURE 2

Scottish domiciled full-time first degree students starting in 2013-14

Institution	SIMD20	Middle	Least deprived
All Scottish HEIs	13.7%	57.2%	29.2%
Aberdeen, University of	4.3%	52.3%	43.4%
Abertay Dundee, University of	15.2%	61.8%	22.9%
Dundee, University of	14.7%	56.6%	28.6%
Edinburgh Napier University	11.4%	60.2%	28.4%
Edinburgh, University of	6.0%	55.0%	39.0%
Glasgow Caledonian University	22.8%	55.6%	21.6%
Glasgow School of Art	14.4%	58.8%	26.8%
Glasgow, University of	13.4%	52.7%	33.9%
Heriot-Watt University	8.5%	58.0%	33.5%
Highlands and Islands, University of the	11.8%	73.2%	15.0%
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	10.7%	61.6%	27.7%
Robert Gordon University	6.3%	58.6%	35.0%
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	8.2%	59.8%	32.0%
Scottish Agriculture College	5.5%	71.7%	22.8%
St Andrews, University of	5.2%	43.0%	51.8%
Stirling, University of	11.7%	62.4%	25.8%
Strathclyde, University of	11.7%	54.0%	34.3%
West of Scotland, University of the	24.4%	58.8%	16.8%

Percentage of Scottish domiciled full-time first degree entrants

Source: HESA

The institutions with lower representation of SIMD20 entrants are often, but not exclusively those that have the highest entry requirements in terms of school grades and in some cases those who recruit students from more rural areas. The impact of the admissions process and the school attainment gap on access is discussed in the 'Getting In' section of this report.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AGE GROUPS

It is also helpful to look at entrants under the age of 19, as this is the cohort of students most likely to be entering university directly from school.

Figure 3 below shows that the gap in participation between Scotland's most and least deprived communities is especially pronounced for young people. In 2013/14, 8.5% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish HEIs were from SIMD20 communities, compared with 35.3% from the least deprived communities, a gap of almost 27 percentage points.

In numerical terms, this means that in 2013/14 there were more than four times as many entrants from the least deprived communities as entrants from SIMD20 communities. In the most selective institutions these ratios are significantly larger.

FIGURE 3

Scottish domiciled full-time first degree students aged under 19 starting in 2013-14 – Percentage in SIMD 20 / Middle / SIMD 80 – by institution

HEI	SIMD 20%	Middle %	SIMD 80%	Total	SIMD 20 No	SIMD 80 No
Aberdeen, University of	3.7%	49.8%	46.5%	1,285	30	355
Abertay Dundee, University of	9.7%	62.0%	28.3%	505	40	120
Dundee, University of	11.6%	53.0%	35.4%	820	115	345
Edinburgh Napier University	6.0%	58.7%	35.2%	960	45	275
Edinburgh, University of	4.5%	54.5%	40.9%	1,580	80	730
Glasgow Caledonian University	12.8%	59.4%	27.9%	1,470	200	430
Glasgow School of Art	12.2%	57.3%	30.5%	90	10	25
Glasgow, University of	9.7%	51.5%	38.8%	1,955	195	780
Heriot-Watt University	5.5%	59.9%	34.6%	735	50	305
Highlands and Islands, University of the	10.7%	73.0%	16.4%	130	15	25
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	7.3%	64.0%	28.8%	420	25	100
Robert Gordon University	4.6%	56.5%	38.9%	1,160	50	410
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	4.5%	61.2%	34.3%	80	5	25
Scottish Agricultural College	3.8%	71.7%	24.5%	105	5	25
St Andrews, University of	4.2%	42.0%	53.8%	360	20	245
Stirling, University of	9.4%	60.6%	30.1%	785	95	300
Strathclyde, University of	7.9%	54.2%	37.9%	2,010	165	785
West of Scotland, University of the	17.5%	61.4%	21.1%	1,160	195	240
All Scottish HEIs	**8.5%**	**56.2%**	**35.3%**	**15,610**	**1,335**	**5,520**

We know that those from SIMD20 backgrounds are less likely than their counterparts from the least deprived backgrounds to enter higher education direct from school, with many students from a SIMD20 background first attending a college or returning to higher education following a period in employment. This underlines the importance of colleges to the widening access agenda.

COLLEGES

Colleges play a key role in delivering higher education in Scotland, with 17% of HE students studying at college in 2013/14, compared with 6% of HE students studying at college in England.

As noted above, many students from SIMD20 backgrounds begin their post-16 education journey in college. In 2013/14 29% of total college students, and 23% of HE college students, were from SIMD20 backgrounds (an increase of 3.5 percentage points since 2009/10).

These trends explain why articulation pathways between colleges and universities are regarded as such an important mechanism for widening access. The number of students articulating from college to university with either advanced standing (full credit) or advanced progression (partial credit) has increased by 21% from 3,584 in 2009/10 to 4,321 in 2013/14. We consider articulation pathways in more detail later in this report.

COMPARISONS WITH OTHER UK COUNTRIES

There is no single measure of deprivation that can be used to compare Scotland's progress on widening access with that of the other countries in the UK, with each country having its own index of deprivation. The Higher Education Funding Council for England has developed a UK categorisation showing higher education Participation of Local Areas (POLAR).

Although this is not a comprehensive measure of deprivation, it is often used to compare socioeconomic access across countries. There are, however, a number of difficulties with comparing Scotland to other UK countries on this measure.

Firstly, many higher education statistics published, for example by UCAS and HESA, focus on universities and exclude the relatively high proportion of higher education students in Scotland studying at colleges. Some have observed that the higher education activity that takes place in Scotland's colleges is more likely to be at a lower level of study. However, the figures from HESA and UCAS will include information on those studying foundation degrees in other UK countries, which is also a level below first degrees. Analysis of the HESA and UCAS population by POLAR would therefore distort the picture of access in Scotland when compared with other countries.

Secondly, Scotland's relatively high participation rates for higher education means that Scotland has, by definition, fewer UK low participation areas. Only 7.4% of Scottish wards are defined as low participation compared to 15.6% of English wards. For some years, HESA has not published POLAR analyses for Scotland due to the issues of comparability.

In an attempt to draw some comparison across the four UK countries, Figure 4 shows how the ratio of UCAS entry rates for 18 year olds from POLAR 1 and POLAR 5 quintiles has changed since 2006. This still excludes the activity in colleges in Scotland, which will contribute to the relatively larger ratio seen for Scotland; however, it shows the progress made by each country to reduce the ratio.

FIGURE 4

Ratio of UCAS entry rates for 18 year olds from POLAR quintiles 1 and 5

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Change
Scotland	5.5	5.6	5.2	5.1	4.3	4.5	4.2	4.1	3.5	1.9
England	3.8	3.7	3.4	3.2	3.1	3.1	2.9	2.7	2.5	1.3
Northern Ireland	4.1	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.3	3.6	3.1	3.0	2.6	1.5
Wales	3.6	4.0	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.3	3.2	3.1	2.6	1.1

Source: UCAS

Since 2006, Scotland has made the largest progress to reduce the ratio of entry rates for those from low and high HE participation areas; however as at 2014 England had the lowest remaining ratio. In recent years there has been an increasing policy divergence between Scotland and England in terms of their approaches to widening access. Ahead of our final report we will review the arrangements supporting wider access both in England and elsewhere.

04

IN THIS SECTION WE:

- **BEGIN TO MAKE SENSE OF THE DATA PRESENTED IN THE PRECEDING SECTION.**

- **NOTE THE EXISTENCE OF SOME TENSIONS ON THE ISSUE OF EQUAL ACCESS.**

- **SET OUT THE COMMISSION'S PHILOSOPHY ON EQUAL ACCESS.**

TAKING STOCK OF WHERE WE ARE

The evidence in the preceding section shows that there has been steady progress over the last 10 years. This progress is to be welcomed and is testament to both the enhanced priority placed on equal access by all parts of the education system and the prioritisation of investment in this area.

However, the reality is that, whichever measure we use, there remain very significant socioeconomic inequalities in Scottish higher education at both national and institutional level. In short, Scotland has a long distance to travel if we are to meet the challenge set by the First Minister to eradicate the socioeconomic inequality in access to higher education.

But this does not mean that we should approach our task without optimism. As we shall see, there is strong evidence of innovative, well planned interventions that are positively influencing the lives of people right across Scotland.

Moreover, we observe that work on access is reaching a point of maturity. We can draw with confidence on at least ten years of professional experimentation and prototyping, meaning that the next generation of access work can build on those foundations to be even more innovative, targeted and effective than the last. The priority placed on early years and closing the attainment gap also has, in time, the potential to make a significant contribution to achieving our goal.

So there are good grounds for believing that socioeconomic equality is possible. But we must keep at the forefront of our minds that it is an extremely challenging objective and the evidence seems clear that the present approach alone will be insufficient to achieve it.

Success will therefore require change. In particular, it will require all parts of the education system, working with government, to do more and to push harder.

SURFACING TENSIONS

It is clear that delivering this step change will require the whole system to pull together in the same direction. In this regard, the Commission welcomes the undoubted consensus that fair access is an important objective. But we also observe that this sometimes masks the reality that access is a divisive issue on which there exist a range of tensions and opposing viewpoints.

Examples of these opposing viewpoints include:

• Whether admitting students with lower grades undermines academic excellence, or whether entry tariffs are primarily used as a sifting tool and do not necessarily reflect the demands of courses.

• Whether access simply levels a fundamentally unfair playing field or is instead perceived as a form of 'positive discrimination'.

• Whether the redistribution or displacement of students from more affluent socioeconomic groups that may result from equal access is just a necessary consequence of achieving equality, or whether it amounts to unfair exclusion.

These tensions are often unspoken. The Commission believes it is important to surface them because they have perhaps contributed to the fact that, despite the multitude of programmes and initiatives available, there exists no clear national vision of what the ultimate goal of access activity is and no coherent national strategy for how such a vision could be achieved.

Put simply, it is possible that progress is being hindered if, despite apparently shared objectives, different parts of the system fundamentally disagree both over the extent to which equal access is possible and over how it should be achieved.

In light of these tensions, and the consequent lack of strategic coherence on access, the Commission believes it is important for us be clear from the outset on where we stand on equal access, and why we believe there is an undeniable case for change.

05

EQUAL ACCESS IS FUNDAMENTALLY ABOUT FAIRNESS

Scotland's world-class university sector is a precious national asset, large parts of which, for Scottish and EU domiciled students, are financed by the public purse. Yet, as we have seen, the evidence is unequivocal that this national asset disproportionately benefits those in our most affluent communities. Conversely, people in our most deprived communities are much less likely to participate and are even less likely again to attend the most selective institutions.

The evidence shows that a higher education is a passport to a better life. Graduates benefit from higher wages, significantly improved health outcomes and a higher life expectancy. We believe that Scotland has a moral duty to ensure that these opportunities are distributed fairly.

Yet, unless we are prepared to accept the notion that Scotland's talent is concentrated in its most affluent communities, it is clear that, through accident of birth, a whole section of Scottish society has nothing like an equal opportunity to maximise their talent and reap the benefits of higher education.

We believe that this is fundamentally unfair and that the ultimate goal of widening access should be to eliminate socioeconomic inequality.

EQUAL ACCESS IS A SOCIAL GOOD

Equality of access is not just a passport to a better life for individuals; it is also a passport to a fairer, better Scotland.

There is strong evidence that parental experience of higher education is one of the most influential factors in determining the likelihood of a child entering university. This means that equal access is capable of transmitting the social and economic benefits of higher education between generations, breaking cycles of deprivation and contributing to a society that is healthier, wealthier and fairer.

EQUAL ACCESS IS COMPATIBLE WITH ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

It is sometimes suggested that admitting students from deprived backgrounds with lower grades could have a detrimental impact on the principle of academic excellence. We understand that Scotland's universities have first-class reputations that are founded on academic excellence and we wish to see this continue and grow.

However, there is increasingly strong evidence that with the right support, bright students from deprived backgrounds can enhance, rather than jeopardise, academic excellence.

We will return to this issue, and present more detailed evidence, later in this report.

EQUAL ACCESS IS AN ECONOMIC GOOD

Scotland is a small nation and in the context of the global shift towards increasingly knowledge based economies, it is clear that the one of the most precious economic resources of any nation is the talent of its people.

Yet the socioeconomic inequities in Scottish higher education mean that we are not exploiting the full potential of our talent pool and may therefore be failing to harness the economic potential of some of Scotland's finest minds.

CONCLUSION

For all of these reasons we believe that, whatever the root causes are, the present socioeconomic inequality in higher education is unfair, unsustainable and detrimental to Scotland as a whole. Scotland has a moral, social and economic duty to achieve equal access and we therefore strongly endorse the First Minister's position that doing so is a national imperative.

This philosophy is the lens through which we will view the remainder of the Commission's task and the yardstick against which we will measure the value of possible recommendations.

In the following chapter we begin to consider the key barriers to access, what is currently being done to tackle and dismantle these, and to signal where the Commission believes there may be opportunities to deliver further and faster progress.

06

IN THIS CHAPTER WE:

- **HIGHLIGHT THE IMPORTANCE TO EQUAL ACCESS OF THE EARLY YEARS AND THE SIGNIFICANT POTENTIAL OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN EARLY YEARS PROVIDERS AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS.**

- **EXAMINE THE IMPORTANCE OF RAISING ASPIRATION IN YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH QUALITY ADVICE AND GUIDANCE.**

- **PROVIDE SOME GENERAL REFLECTIONS ON CURRENT OUTREACH ACTIVITY AND ITS IMPACT.**

- **HIGHLIGHT THE IMPORTANCE OF SUMMER SCHOOLS AS A POWERFUL METHOD OF WIDENING ACCESS.**

INTRODUCTION

Many of the most important reasons for the socioeconomic inequality in higher education take root early in the educational journey. These barriers can continue to grow throughout primary and secondary school and, by the time of the senior phase of secondary school, have the effect of significantly restricting the pool of applicants to higher education from deprived communities.

To mitigate these barriers and to help grow the applicant pool, a great deal of collaborative work takes place across Scotland to provide advice and guidance, raise aspirations and improve attainment. Elements of this activity are driven by all parts of the education system, but especially by universities.

EARLY YEARS

When it comes to equal access, there is no such thing as an intervention that is too early. Indeed, several key barriers to access, such as lower school attainment, lower aspirations and the effect of parental guidance, often manifest in the very earliest stages of the educational journey.

For example, there is evidence that the seeds of the school attainment gap between Scotland's richest and poorest communities have been sown, and are already starting to take root, by the time children enter primary school. By age 5 there is already a gap of 6 to 13 months in problem-solving ability and 11 to 18 months in the use of expressive vocabulary.

EXPANDING EARLY YEARS PROVISION

There is broad agreement that perhaps the most powerful method of eradicating this early attainment gap is to increase investment in the availability, volume and quality of early learning and childcare.

The Commission therefore welcomes and endorses the priority being placed by the Scottish Government on expanding funded early years provision. It is critical that such provision takes account of the need for parental engagement and family learning. If successful, this work and investment has the potential to impact positively on a whole range of social problems, not least in supporting equal access to higher education. In recognition of the importance of this work to our objective, the Commission will follow progress in this area closely and will aim to develop final recommendations that complement it.

EARLY YEARS AND OUTREACH

Low aspirations are another barrier which begin early in the learner life cycle. We are therefore also very interested in the emerging collaborations between the early years, schools and higher education sectors to raise attainment and aspiration through sustained engagement with children, parents and teachers. There are several outstanding examples in this regard, with universities working closely with early years providers and schools to introduce young children, and crucially their parents, to the benefits of higher education as well as supporting improved attainment through new approaches to learning in family homes.

Many of these programmes are relatively new and for this reason it is at this stage difficult to know for sure what their impact will be in the longer term. But the Commission is clear that collaborations of this nature are innovative and could have the potential to develop expectations and improved attainment from the outset of a child's educational journey.

Universities in particular deserve credit here. Such activities are superb examples of the sector pro-actively tackling inequality and bringing to bear their substantial capacity for innovation to support other sectors in a shared endeavour to build a wider applicant pool.

NEXT STEPS

Areas we will explore further include:

- Are there creative ways to coordinate and extend the best early years outreach models as part of a wider outreach strategy, for example through the establishment of regional hubs or partnerships?

- How can meaningful parental engagement be sustained throughout the educational journey, from early years onwards?

CASE STUDY: THE CALEDONIAN CLUB

As the University for the Common Good, Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) is deeply committed to widening access to Higher Education. The University's Caledonian Club at its campuses in Glasgow, London and New York is the principal, but not the only way, the University works to achieve this strategic goal. The award-winning club was established in 2008, and allows children and their parents, to come into the University to work with staff and student mentors to learn and practice important life skills. Since its inception it has worked with over 11,000 Nursery, Primary and Secondary school children and nearly 3,000 of their parents, seeking to raise aspirations and create new and supportive learning opportunities, especially for those from the most challenging of backgrounds. The Club also positively engages with teachers from 16 partner schools, whose own attitudes to raising the aspirations of their pupils have been found by the University's research to be important.

Research in cross sectional and longitudinal studies using pre- and post-intervention monitoring and evaluation is ongoing but has so far demonstrated that pupils working with the club have higher levels of self-confidence, self-esteem and better communication skills. They are more likely to aspire to access further and higher education, and are more confident they can achieve these aims. Caledonian Club pupils also have a better understanding of what it means to go to university and the opportunities it offers.

ASPIRATION, EXPECTATION AND GUIDANCE

A lack of aspiration amongst people in deprived communities was one of the most frequently cited barriers in the Commission's call for evidence. The strength of this view is perhaps reflected in the fact that many access programmes have raising aspiration as a central focus.

Broadly speaking, the research evidence is supportive of this view. Studies have consistently shown that those from deprived backgrounds are less likely to express a desire to enter higher education than their more advantaged peers. For example, the Sutton Trust has presented evidence which shows that each year, across the UK, there are around 3,000 people with the grades commonly required for the most selective universities who either do not enter higher education at all, or who enter an institution whose entry requirements are significantly lower than their attainment. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the Sutton Trust 'applicant gap' and suggests that raising aspiration is not just about instilling a general desire to enter higher education, but also to pitch aspirations as high as possible by encouraging young people to apply to the most selective institutions and courses.

Most often these lower aspirations appear to be the product of cultural factors such as the influence of parents and peers with little experience of higher education or understanding of its benefits. There is also some evidence to suggest that young people in deprived communities are more likely to face parental and peer pressure to forgo higher education in favour of entering the labour market.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GUIDANCE

This evidence should be balanced by research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which argues that aspiration in deprived communities is often more nuanced than is commonly understood and cautions against drawing the conclusion there is any fundamental deficit in the aspirations of those in deprived communities.

They found that the aspirations of young people and their parents are very often both high and realistic. The problem is that these realistic aspirations are often not supported by a clear, accurate understanding of the steps and choices necessary to convert that aspiration into reality. The upshot is that high aspirations, however realistic, matter very little if they are not underpinned by sustained, relevant and up to date advice and guidance.

In this regard, this study, along with many others, highlights the very strong influence of parents, finding a clear alignment between what parents said they wanted for their children and what those young people aspired to. There is also evidence which suggests that the aspirations of teachers for their pupils can have a similarly powerful influence. This may suggest that outreach activity with a focus on raising aspiration will be most effective where it pro-actively targets engagement not just with young people, but also with the parents and teachers who are their primary influencers and advisers.

At the same time, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation also observes that deprived communities are not, as is sometimes assumed, identical in terms of their attitudes, aspirations and beliefs. In other words, place matters and there are often significant differences in levels of aspiration between specific schools, families and ethnicities in the same area. Drawing all of this evidence together, it seems reasonable to conclude that low aspiration is neither a fait accompli nor a necessary product of a deprived background. Instead, aspiration may be the product of the environment, expectation and advice that surrounds young people, especially in relation to informed advice and guidance from teachers and parents.

NEXT STEPS

Overall, the evidence suggests that while cultivating aspiration is extremely important, it is a barrier which is perhaps more nuanced than is often assumed. In particular, it is possible that behaviours often attributed to lower aspiration may sometimes instead be driven by a lack of quality advice and guidance that frustrates the translation of aspirations into reality.

AREAS WE WILL EXPLORE FURTHER INCLUDE:

- How can we better support young people and their families to match their aspiration to the concrete steps needed to make them a reality?

- How can we develop the role of information and guidance in schools to support wider access for those from deprived communities?

- Can we identify best practice in relation to outreach activity focussed on raising aspiration, especially that which incorporates parental engagement?

CASE STUDY: MCR PATHWAYS

MCR Pathways is a schools-based mentoring programme to support those in, or on the edges of, the care system to realise their full potential through education. Founded by social entrepreneur Iain MacRitchie in 2007 and developed in one school over 5 years, the programme now supports 300 young people aged between 13 to 18 in eight Glasgow schools, with a city-wide expansion plan and national ambition. It is a pioneering partnership of the MCR Foundation and Glasgow City Council dedicated to closing the school attainment gap and a radical improvement in the quantity and quality of positive post school destinations. The MCR Pathways vision is that disadvantaged young people will have the same educational outcomes, career opportunities and life chances as any other young person.

MCR recruits, trains and supports high quality mentors who meet young people weekly for a minimum of a year. Building relationships, confidence and self-esteem are the prerequisite to helping young people find, grow and use their talents. Subsequent pathways and career tasters help effective school transitions to higher education, further education, employment and re-engage those who are disillusioned. Results over the 7 years have been exceptional with post 16 return to school rates in the first school increasing from 4% to 67% in 2014 and critically, for this report, the number of young people going on to further and higher education rising from 19% to 63% in 2014. The results are being mirrored in the first scale up to six schools with the 2015 return to school rates for mentored young people of 79% compared to non-mentored of 27% and the national average of 15%. Seventy-three per cent of leavers went on to further and higher education versus the 45% national figure.

SCHOOL SUBJECT CHOICE

There is some evidence to suggest that the subjects a pupil studies at school varies by their socioeconomic background, with those from more deprived areas studying, on average, fewer of the subjects identified by Russell Group universities as those which currently facilitate access to higher education (i.e. English, Maths, Languages, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography and History).

There are a number of reasons why pupils from more deprived backgrounds may study fewer of these subjects. One reason may simply be that the pupil's prior attainment in the subject may not be high enough for them to embark on further study at a higher level. Thus, the variation in subjects studied by those from a different socioeconomic background may in fact be a reflection of the gap in attainment early in their studies.

A second reason could be that pupils are not aware of the importance of these subjects in terms of accessing their preferred career or institution, perhaps due to limited advice and guidance from family, peers or guidance professionals. Finally, the pupil may have the ability to study these subjects and the knowledge of their importance in accessing some higher education institutions, but is committed to pursuing an alternative career path for which other subjects or qualifications are considered more useful.

It is not clear how much any one of these factors explains the difference in subject choice between the most and least deprived pupils. However, while some institutions give more weight to these subjects, we need to understand more about the link between subject choice and deprivation as this could be limiting options for future higher education study for those from more deprived areas.

That said, the question has also been raised about the validity of the importance placed on specific subjects by some institutions. It is clear that some of subjects will be required by those wishing to study particular degrees, e.g. medicine requires an applicant to have studied chemistry; however, there are many other Highers which indicate the academic calibre of applicants that are not included on the this list. There are also some Highers that are not accepted at all as entry qualifications by some institutions.

ALIGNMENT BETWEEN SECTORS

More generally, we have heard questions about how the changing school curriculum and the entry requirements for some universities fit together. Curriculum for Excellence introduced, among other things, more breadth of experience and flexibility on learning pathways. Furthermore, the introduction of 'Developing the Young Workforce' will provide opportunities for school pupils to study more vocational qualifications as well as Highers in the senior phase of school (S4 to S6). Alongside this, it is also the case that some higher education institutions continue to ask for five Highers at one sitting in their entry requirements.

It is vital that the wider choice introduced in the school curriculum facilitates rather than impedes progress to higher education for those who want and have the ability, to apply. Key to this is the 'personalisation' element of Curriculum for Excellence, particularly in schools where the majority of students go down one post-16 pathway, while some in the school may wish to choose another. It is crucial that the school offers the flexibility to enable each individual to reach their potential. Creative school timetabling, appropriate information and guidance and teacher aspiration all play a part in this.

But universities must also look at what more they can do to adapt to changes in the school curriculum. Universities in Scotland have stated their commitment to fair admissions policies and emphasise that their policies will allow equal consideration of candidates who possess the necessary knowledge and skills base irrespective of what routes they may have taken through the Senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence. Yet, as discussed in the articulation section of this report, some higher national qualifications do not appear to be valued by some institutions in the way we would expect given their credit rating.

What is not clear is whether the alternative senior phase pathways being facilitated by CfE and DYW will lead to alternative pathways into higher education; and if not, whether this will in any way disadvantage those from more deprived backgrounds.

AREAS WE WILL EXPLORE FURTHER INCLUDE:

- What factors are driving different subject choices for those from deprived backgrounds and how does this impact on access?

- Is there sufficient personalisation in the delivery of Curriculum for Excellence to ensure that all individuals have opportunities and choices to reach their potential?

- Are the alternative senior phase pathways being facilitated by CfE and DYW leading to alternative pathways into higher education; and if not, will this in any way disadvantage those from more deprived backgrounds?

CASE STUDY – QMU ACADEMIES PARTNERSHIP

The South East Scotland Academies Partnership is an initiative for young people aged 15-18 focussing on developing their education, skills, aspirations and employability. It is a collaborative project led by Queen Margaret University with Edinburgh College, Borders College, West Lothian College and over 40 schools in the local authorities of East Lothian, Midlothian, City of Edinburgh, Scottish Borders and West Lothian. Important too is the inclusion of industry partners.

The key objective is to provide pupils with learning and skills development in school, college, university and work environments, thus smoothing transitions across the learner journey and removing barriers to continuing education. It is a 1- or 2-year programme with entry at S5. The Academies facilitate completion of an HNC, or equivalent qualification, while still at school, providing access in some cases to level 2 of specified degree programmes at QMU.

The project was originally established as a pilot in 2012/13 with one Academy in Hospitality and Tourism for 34 young people from three schools in the most disadvantaged areas of East Lothian. In 2013/14 funding from the SFC facilitated three further Academies in Health and Social Care, Creative Industries and Food Science and Nutrition. In 2013/14 the four Academies recruited 170 young people onto the programme and in 2014/15 over 350 young people were recruited with a similar number in 2015/16.

The Academies focus on priority employment sectors and aim to inform young people about the range of jobs and the nature of the work involved, ultimately encouraging more positive destination choices across the full spectrum including universities.

Evaluation is ongoing but shows that participating young people gain confidence, re-engage with education and are more likely to apply to enter FE and HE.

CURRENT OUTREACH ACTIVITY: GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

In terms of volume of activity, outreach is an area in which Scottish access activity appears particularly strong. Every institution in Scotland has invested in developing its own bespoke portfolio of programmes and initiatives, typically involving engagement with early years providers, schools, parents and young people, as well as programmes which provide special entry routes such as summer schools. The SFC also invests £28m every year in widening access, funding a range of activity including five national programmes and investment in additional places focussed on widening access.

As is noted elsewhere in this report, the Commission observes that much of this activity is innovative and executed by practitioners who care passionately about equal access. We have also spoken to many young people who speak in glowing terms about the impact these programmes have had on their educational journey and wider lives.

LIMITED NATIONAL IMPACT?

However, the Commission has also observed that, despite these undoubted positives, the reality is that the cumulative impact of these programmes on advancing equal access is unclear. Given the marginal nature of progress over the last decade, it is tempting to conclude, at least at a national level, that current outreach activity may be having a limited impact on overall participation. It is notable too that a significant proportion of the progress which has been made was delivered in a single academic year (2013/14). That this academic year coincided with the injection of additional funded places, and the first full year of outcome agreements, may suggest that it was these factors, rather than effective outreach, which has driven progress.
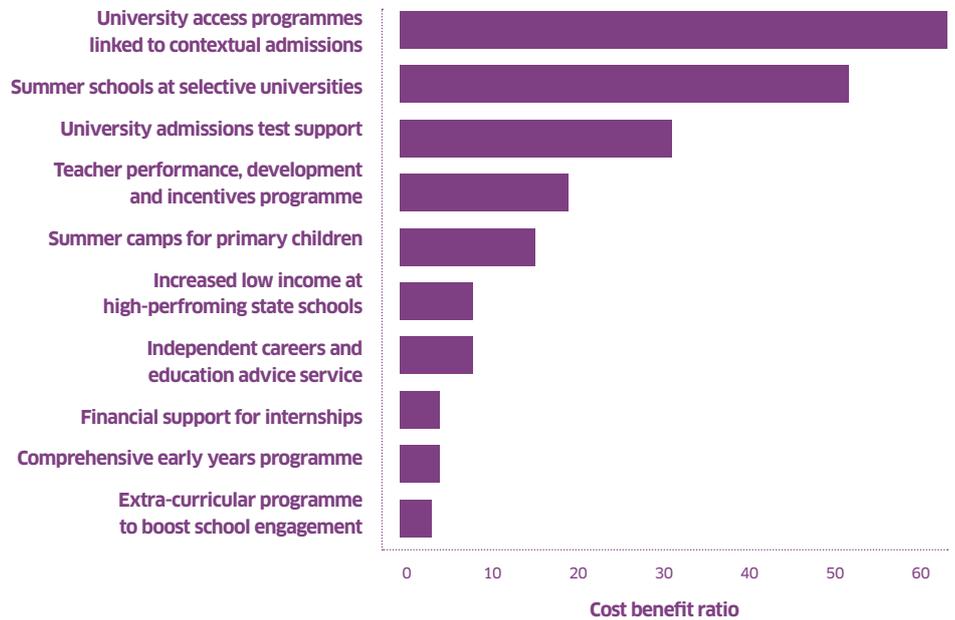
THE NEED FOR ROBUST MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The problem we face is that it is very difficult to know for sure either way. This is because there is very little in the way of robust monitoring or formal evaluation of institutional access programmes across Scotland. This lack of quantitative evidence means that it is currently almost impossible to form a clear view about what does and does not work.

Consequently, it is also very difficult to make informed judgments on how best to invest and ensure appropriate return on the significant sums of public and institutional resources that are being spent on access programmes. Here, we note that the SFC is looking to remedy this through its Impact for Access fund and we look forward to reviewing its initial findings from its funded projects.

OUTREACH WITH ENTRY ROUTES: THE WAY FORWARD?

Despite the lack of evidence specific to Scottish programmes there is some, albeit more general, evidence which may be instructive here. Figure 5 below shows the outcome of research commissioned by the Sutton Trust on the cost benefit ratio of various forms of outreach activity.

FIGURE 5

	Cost benefit ratio
University access programmes linked to contextual admissions	
Summer schools at selective universities	
University admissions test support	
Teacher performance, development and incentives programme	
Summer camps for primary children	
Increased low income at high-perfroming state schools	
Independent careers and education advice service	
Financial support for internships	
Comprehensive early years programme	
Extra-curricular programme to boost school engagement	

Though not all of the activities listed are relevant to Scotland, it is still notable that by a considerable margin, the programmes which were rated as most effective, such as summer schools and programmes linked to contextual admissions, are those which provide a clear pathway to admission. This may suggest that outreach activity which, for example, focusses solely on raising aspiration, without also offering a clear route to fulfilling those aspirations, is likely to have a limited impact.

THE NEED FOR COHERENCE AND JOINED-UP WORKING

Finally, there is the issue of coherence. A great deal of access activity takes place right across Scotland, driven by all parts of the education system. We repeat again that this work is both welcome and commendable.

But the difficulty, which is reflected in all strands of the evidence so far gathered by the Commission, is that these programmes are frequently idiosyncratic, institutionally based and delivered on a small scale. We have heard from a number of teachers and young people who have stated that the large number and variety of programmes, delivered through multiple providers, has the effect of creating a cluttered landscape, which is very difficult and time consuming for young people and their primary influencers to effectively navigate. This suggests the need for more joined-up, collaborative working.

NEXT STEPS

Areas we will explore further include:

• Can we define the broad elements of an access programme which constitute best practice and secure, as far is possible, maximum impact?

• Would it be feasible to have a national standard for access activity, possibly involving some form of quality assurance process such as kite marking?

• Can we bring more coherence and collaboration to access work, for example through the establishment of regional hubs which plan and coordinate targeted, balanced outreach activity?

• How can more robust arrangements be put in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of access programmes at an individual, regional and national level?

SUMMER SCHOOLS

As Figure 5 above shows, there is good evidence that university summer schools are, by a considerable distance, one of the most powerful forms of outreach activity. This is likely because they often offer a clear pathway to entry, as well as addressing a wide range of barriers to access by offering a potent mixture of social, cultural and academic experiences.

By offering a realistic social and academic simulation of what student life is like, summer schools are effective in raising the aspirations, skills and self-belief of participants from deprived backgrounds. Similarly, by introducing participants to potential classmates from similar backgrounds, they also begin to break down shared cultural barriers such as the common preconception that certain universities are elitist or that university 'is not for the likes of me'.

Summer schools also offer more practical advice and support which can improve participants' chances of accessing a place, for example on preparing applications and accessing the various streams of student funding. We have also seen examples of summer schools which extend outreach beyond prospective students to target the involvement of parents with no prior experience of higher education. Such approaches break down cultural barriers by introducing parents to the reality of life at university and the benefits it is capable of delivering for their child. As we have seen, this is important since the aspirations and expectations of parents have an extremely powerful influence on the ambitions of their children.

The very best summer schools go beyond outreach to offer an experience that is academically rigorous. This has the dual benefit of offering participants a taste of the academic demands they will face and enabling institutions to more accurately judge academic ability, based on the evidence of how successfully participants cope with the institution's curriculum and standards. It is therefore clear that for both participants and institutions, summer schools act as an extremely effective trial run.

The injection of this academic rigour also allows institutions to create new access pathways by rewarding successful completion with either academic credit or by lowering the typical entry tariff. The Commission believes that this approach strikes an innovative balance between offering students from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to showcase their academic potential, and the practice of institutions to select on the basis of academic excellence.

MAXIMISING IMPACT

The Commission believes there is a great deal to admire in the existing provision of summer schools in Scotland and we welcome the expansion and development that seen in recent years.

However, we believe there remains scope for increasing their impact even further, for example by extending the availability of places and exploring options for a more coherent summer school offer across the country. We also note that the academic credit awarded by specific summer schools is recognised only by the awarding institution. This raises the question of whether there is scope for credit to be transferrable across the sector, creating flexibility and additional pathways for applicants.

NEXT STEPS

Areas we will explore include:

- Is there scope to increase summer school places in Scotland to help widen access across the sector and how could this be achieved?

- Are there merits in developing a national or regional approach to summer school provision in Scotland to ensure that we provide a more coherent offer to learners across Scotland?

- Could academic credit awarded by a particular summer school to be more widely recognised across the sector?

CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW SUMMER SCHOOL

The University of Glasgow Summer School has been running for 30 years. Providing a taste of university life, the 6-week programme prepares applicants from widening participation (WP) backgrounds for the transition into Higher Education and offers an alternative route of entry via admissions progression agreements. Applicants receive offers of entry adjusted from the standard tariff, contextually based upon their educational and individual circumstances (i.e. low progression school attended, SIMD40 postcode resident, care experienced), and conditional upon successful completion of summer school.

Students study two of 19 academic subjects, dependent on their intended degree course. Based on Year 1 course content and taught by academic staff, each subject has 40 contact hours. A third Study Skills course is taken, comprising 30 contact hours. Students receive a Student Profile upon completion, which indicates performance and potential for successful HE study.

The quality of preparation of summer school: the academic rigour of subjects studied; the formation of peer networks pre-Year 1, and familiarisation with campus life and university conventions, impacts heavily on the retention of WP students who participate. Research shows that students who completed summer school performed as well as or better than their student peers, who progressed to the university via more traditional routes.

Dependent upon circumstance, participants receive free accommodation or travel expenses, enabling WP target students to participate without prohibitive travel/accommodation costs. Summer school has proven over time to be an effective means of enabling talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter HE and of preparing them to be successful students once there.

The summer school is a multi-exit programme. In 2015, 266 of 293 students completed summer school. Fifty-five returned to school for S6, with intentions to apply to HE for 2016 entry. One hundred and ninety-nine of the remaining 211 entered HE in university or college in 2015 (158 to the University of Glasgow, 41 elsewhere) with 11 unknown and one entering work.

09

IN THIS CHAPTER WE:

- **EXPLAIN THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SCHOOL ATTAINMENT GAP IN CONTRIBUTING TO THE PRESENT SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION.**

- **EXPLORE THE REASONS WHY SUCH EMPHASIS IS PLACED ON SCHOOL ATTAINMENT IN UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS.**

- **EXAMINE THE POTENTIAL OF CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS AND ARTICULATION PATHWAYS TO SUPPORT EQUAL ACCESS AND EXPLORE HOW THEIR IMPACT CAN BE MAXIMISED.**

- **EXAMINE THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-EDUCATIONAL FACTORS IN THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS IN EXPLAINING THE PRESENT SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION.**

INTRODUCTION

It is fair to say that, as things stand, the large majority of access programmes focus on expanding the applicant pool by supporting and developing individuals to successfully access places within the context of existing admissions requirements and processes.

But the Commission believes that if Scotland is serious about equal access, then we must also be prepared to switch our focus from perceived deficits in individuals to more fundamental, systemic change. With that in mind, in this chapter we begin to examine whether there are elements of the existing arrangements for the evaluation and selection of applicants that might unintentionally be obstructing or impeding equal access.

THE SCHOOL ATTAINMENT GAP: WHY IT MATTERS

School attainment is the principal measure used by Scottish higher education institutions to evaluate and select applicants. For this reason, it is the single most important factor in determining whether an applicant will be offered a place at university.

Given this selection model, it follows that the gap in school attainment between pupils in Scotland's most and least deprived communities is one of the most significant reasons for the present inequality.

To illustrate the scale of the challenge, in 2013/14 school leavers from Scotland's 20% least deprived communities were almost three times more likely as those from the 20% most deprived communities to leave school with three Highers.

The effect of this gap is that there is a substantially smaller pool of applicants from deprived backgrounds with the grades necessary to meet current university entry requirements, especially in the most selective institutions.

The Scottish Government has identified closing the school attainment gap as a key priority. Indeed, the First Minister recently described doing so as arguably the single most important objective in the latest Programme for Government.

The Commission strongly endorses this action given the fundamental importance of closing the attainment gap, and recognises the potential contribution these policy interventions could make, if successful, to increasing the applicant pool and achieving equal access. For that reason we intend to follow developments in this area closely and will explore whether it is possible to develop final recommendations which can complement this work, with a view to maximising the impact of closing the attainment gap on supporting equal access.

NEXT STEPS

- The Commission will stay in close contact with those working on school attainment policy and will consider how best colleges and universities can support this work through access programmes and initiatives. We will also consider whether we can develop final recommendations which can maximise the impact of this work on supporting equal access.

SCHOOL ATTAINMENT AND ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Given its very prominent role in explaining the present inequalities, it is worth briefly reflecting on why universities place such emphasis on the attainment of school qualifications.

Traditionally, this is explained by the pursuit of academic excellence, the core principle underpinning admissions to Scottish universities. In simple terms, the import of this principle is that the purpose of university admissions is to recruit the brightest and best students. The recruitment process therefore places a premium on achievement in school as the most reliable indicator of academic talent.

Broadly speaking, there is little doubt that this approach is legitimate. Academic excellence is a cornerstone of our higher education sector's success and global reputation. It is also the case that there is a correlation between academic success in school and the degree classifications later achieved at university. It is clear then, that a prominent role for school attainment in the evaluation and selection of applicants is justified.

WHY CONTEXT MATTERS AS MUCH AS GRADES

But that is not where this story ends. There is an increasingly compelling evidence base which shows that pupils who achieve modestly lower grades in more challenging circumstances consistently operate to the same, or an even better, academic standard than their more advantaged, higher attaining peers. This suggests that the applicant pool may be unnecessarily, and unfairly, narrowed by an over reliance on pure attainment, measured in terms of grades, as the primary measure of academic ability.

For example, a study at the University of Bristol showed that over the course of a 3-year degree students from state schools with lower attainment caught up and then academically surpassed their higher attaining peers from private schools.

More recently, research conducted at St Andrews University has found that students from a more challenging school context are more likely to graduate with a first or 2:1 than those with identical grades from a school performing above the national average.

These findings are backed by more practical evidence. The Scottish universities who have used contextual indicators to lower entry tariffs for students with lower attainment from disadvantaged backgrounds report little or no evidence of a drop off in academic standards. Indeed, as the case study below shows, St Andrews has proven that, with the right support, it is possible for an attainment gap of up to four grades to be overcome without any detrimental impact on academic standards.

There is also strong international evidence. The Ivy League Universities, amongst the finest in the world, go to extensive lengths to take account of contextual factors, with school attainment forming only one component of a much wider, holistic process for the evaluation and recruitment of the best talent. For example, Ivy League Institutions are more likely to offer a place to an applicant whose grades rank highly in an underperforming school cohort than an applicant who achieved similar or better grades in a more favourable context.

Harvard University also argue strongly that admissions should not be approached as a series of independent judgements. Instead, they deliberately plan socioeconomically diverse student cohorts to enrich the quality of the educational experience for all students. In other words, they believe that wider access is a pre-requisite of academic excellence rather than something which undermines it.

Focussing purely on grades, in isolation from the context in which they are achieved, is an inadequate selection device which fails to identify the best talent. As is repeatedly made clear in the academic literature, it also serves to replicate social inequalities manifesting earlier in the educational journey and can unfairly discriminate against bright applicants from deprived communities.

The Commission observes that the evidence here makes sense. It stands to reason that a pupil who achieves good grades in a more challenging context, without the advantages commonly associated with a more affluent background, might be especially bright and well-motivated. It is therefore not surprising that such individuals flourish when they are placed in a world-class learning environment.

CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS

The good news is that this evidence base is already beginning to drive change. Indeed, Scottish universities are at the forefront of both the research and practical application of contextual admissions, with many now routinely taking account of key contextual indicators such as school performance, parental experience of higher education and uptake of free school meals. This process can sometimes lead to a lowering of entry requirements for students from deprived backgrounds.

BEING AMBITIOUS, BUT REALISTIC

The growing use of contextual admissions is an extremely important development in the journey towards equal access which can only serve to broaden the applicant pool and make the admissions process fairer.

Though contextual admissions can certainly make a significant difference, it is important not to overstate their potential – they are unlikely to be a silver-bullet solution. While a marked gap in school attainment remains, even if entry tariffs were reduced significantly the applicant pool would still be unlikely to be deep enough to secure equality.

However, this caveat does not mean that we should lessen our focus on contextual admissions. On the contrary it makes it all the more important to ensure that their impact is maximised. In this context, we must remember that the use of contextual admissions remains in its infancy and for that reason their impact remains some way short of optimal.

For example, the Commission notes that not all institutions operate a formal contextual admissions policy. Broadly speaking, those who do not often tend to be those with the highest representation of students from deprived backgrounds. This may suggest that contextual admissions are being perceived as a solution for institutions with particularly acute difficulties in recruiting from deprived communities.

While this is certainly an important function of contextual admissions, the evidence is clear that they are also a more accurate way of identifying the best talent. It is therefore worth exploring whether all universities should develop a robust contextual admissions policy. The benefit to equal access is that the participation of students from disadvantaged communities in these institutions would likely grow even stronger, potentially drawing in students who would otherwise be left outside the system.

There is also considerable variance across the sector in terms of both the specific contextual indicators used and in the nature of how these are applied in the recruitment of students. It is true that different institutions operate in different contexts and we would not therefore expect contextual policies to be uniform across the sector. But even accounting for this, it is difficult to imagine that such different approaches can all represent best practice.

A MINIMUM ENTRY THRESHOLD?

We also need to understand more about how far contextual policies can feasibly adjust entry requirements without jeopardising academic excellence. This is important because the more entry tariffs can be legitimately adjusted, the wider the applicant pool will become.

The evidence we have encountered suggests that institutions will typically adjust entry tariffs by around one or two grades. However, as we have seen, St Andrews has proven that, with the provision of strong support, it is possible to adjust tariffs by a substantially higher margin without impinging upon academic standards.

Here, we must also take account of the fact that average entry requirements have substantially increased over the last decade or so. Considering this alongside the experience of St Andrews raises the question of whether entry tariffs are truly being set in relation to the academic standards required to successfully complete courses, or whether they are primarily used as a tool for sifting applications in the context of a limited number of places. If the latter is the case, then this may suggest that it is possible to broaden the applicant pool by identifying a minimum entry threshold for disadvantaged students which more accurately reflects the demands of degree programmes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSPARENCY

The Commission has also noted a lack of evidence on the extent to which contextualised offers are being made on a significant scale. It is therefore difficult to form a clear view of exactly how many disadvantaged students are being admitted through contextual policies and the extent to which we can expect such policies to drive progress.

This relates to a wider theme about transparency. On some institutional websites it is unclear to prospective applicants if and how contextual indicators will be applied to applications, and what the likelihood is that this will result in an offer below the minimum entry requirements. This is important because if prospective students do not understand this they may never apply.

These issues may be explained by the fact that contextual admissions are a controversial issue. We are aware of universities who have been publicly criticised for their use of contextual indicators and this clearly makes it very difficult for them to be open about their use. The Commission is clear that this criticism is unfair and often centres on the misconception that higher grades automatically equal higher talent, irrespective of the circumstances in which those grades were achieved.

But as we have seen, there is clear evidence to suggest that even if there were perfect socioeconomic equality in Scottish higher education, there would remain a compelling argument in favour of contextual admissions as the most accurate way of identifying the brightest and best academic talent.

Transparency over contextual admissions is in everyone's interest. Applicants would have a clearer, and fairer, understanding of their chances of entry. Institutions would benefit from sharing best practice, thereby developing systems which truly identify the best talent. Policymakers would also benefit by having a clearer understanding of the potential of contextual admissions to drive progress on equal access.

NEXT STEPS

The evidence presented in the two previous sections raises important questions about the extent to which universities are fairly evaluating the academic talent of applicants from our most deprived communities.

Areas that we will explore further include:

- The current volume of students entering higher education through a contextual offer

- The data and processes being used by different institutions

- Could better information be made available to students about the options contextualised admissions provide?

- Is there scope to scale up contextual admissions and share best practice in this area?

- Can we identify a minimum entry threshold for disadvantaged students which more accurately reflects the demands of courses?

CASE STUDY: ST ANDREWS – PATHWAYS TO PHYSICS AND ASTRONOMY

Studying Physics and Astronomy at St Andrews has become so popular that the standard asking rates are AAAA (Highers) in order to keep numbers down to the permitted level. The department was concerned that this high asking rate might reduce the number of students from less advantaged backgrounds. St Andrews University routinely uses contextualised data in admissions, but the department recognised that a dedicated entry route could achieve more.

Students from a widening participation background can join standard degree programmes but with a modified (Gateway) entry year, which has a lower asking rate for entry, typically BBBB. Students may apply directly to the Gateway programme, or they may be considered for this entry route from an application to standard programmes. Applicants and their guests are invited to St Andrews to discuss the programme.

In their year of entry these students do about half their credits on traditional modules integrated with the rest of the intake, and about half their time on strongly tutored modules designed for this entry cohort. These modules develop technical and soft skills, and provide wider support for students' study and the transition to university. Success in the Gateway year allows progression to the second year of the standard degree programmes in Physics, Astrophysics, and joint degrees with Mathematics. The early Gateway cohorts are now recent BSc and MPhys graduates, including the first to progress to PhD studies.

THE ROLE OF COLLEGES IN SCOTTISH HIGHER EDUCATION

So far this chapter has focussed on students entering university direct from school. But this is not the only route. A distinctive and respected feature of Scottish higher education is the prominent role of colleges in delivering HE programmes[1] and in supporting students into degree level study at university. Illustrating the scale of their contribution, in 2013/14 17% of all Scottish domiciled students studying an HE level programme were enrolled at a college.

THE BENEFITS OF ARTICULATION PATHWAYS

Articulation pathways are the most effective and efficient mechanism for supporting this progression between college and university. Typically, articulation pathways involve collaboration between institutions to ensure that course curriculum is closely aligned. This alignment can enable students with an HNC to enter a degree programme in second year and those with an HND to enter in third year.

The benefits are clear. Students get full recognition for prior achievement and a prestigious qualification at the end of each successful year. Universities benefit from students who already have experience of HE level study and who are familiar with the curriculum. The public purse also benefits in that it avoids the cost of learners continuing to study at the same level for a number of years.

ARTICULATION AND EQUAL ACCESS: REPLENISHING THE APPLICANT POOL

Beyond these significant educational and financial benefits, articulation pathways are also regarded as a powerful mechanism for advancing equal access. This is a theme which came through very strongly in all strands of the evidence so far gathered by the Commission.

This is explained by the fact that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely than their more advantaged counterparts to begin higher education in college rather than university. To illustrate, in 2013/14 nearly 29% of all college students and 22% of HE college students were from Scotland's 20% most deprived communities.

Moreover, in the same year 4,515 students from Scotland's most deprived communities qualified with an HNC or HND. The point here is that colleges have the potential to play a powerful role in replenishing the shallow applicant pool resulting from the school attainment gap. It is clear that this potential can be most effectively exploited through the availability of reliable, well-designed articulation routes from college to university.

1   Typically Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs)

MAXIMISING IMPACT

Overall, articulation is a real success story of Scottish higher education. The total number of students articulating from college to university with either advanced standing (full credit awarded) or advanced progression (partial credit awarded) has increased by 21%, from 3,584 in 2009/10 to 4,321 in 2013/14. Of this number around 25% were from Scotland's 20% most deprived communities.

However, similar to the position with contextual admissions, the full potential of articulation as a tool for widening access is yet to be realised.

For example there is significant variance across the university sector in terms of the extent to which different institutions engage with articulation pathways. As Figure 6 below shows, in some universities, such as the post-92 institutions, articulation pathways are commonplace and represent a key component of their recruitment strategy. In others, most notably the ancient institutions, articulation is much less common.

FIGURE 6

Numbers of Scottish domiciled students with HN qualifications entering degree programmes at Scottish universities in 2013/14, from SIMD20 only

Category of Institution	Progression (Begin in first year)	Advanced Progression (Partial credit awarded)	Advanced Standing (Full credit awarded)	Total
Ancients	91	10	12	113
New universities	197	34	77	309
Post-92s	448	49	791	1288
Specialised HEIs	10	1	8	19
All Scottish HEIs	746	94	888	1729

N.B. Two students could not be categorised. Excludes Open University.
Source: National Articulation Database. SIMD 2009 was used in compiling the National Articulation Database

Moreover, there is significant variance in the level of credit which an HN qualification 'buys' with different universities. Figure 6 shows a clear trend that in the more selective institutions a large majority of those admitted with HN qualifications begin in first year. Effectively this means that these students, despite having already achieved an HE qualification, must start from scratch. In the case of students with an HND, this means remaining at the same level of study for up to a further 2 years. Here, the possible academic and financial duplication is clear.

It is also interesting to note the discrepancy between the strong emphasis placed on the attainment of Highers compared with the seemingly lower value placed on HN qualifications. In many respects this is counter-intuitive given that HNC/Ds are HE qualifications and therefore by definition represent a higher level of study than Highers. This raises a question about whether a rather narrow set of success criteria are dominating university admissions.

This evidence has led some researchers to argue that this two-tiered approach to articulation is contributing to a social stratification of higher education. As things stand, students from deprived backgrounds who enter university through the college appear at a significant disadvantage to those who enter through more traditional routes, especially in terms of the most selective institutions and courses.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the Commission believes that articulation is an area which would benefit from further discussion. It may be that are very good reasons why some universities appear to place a lower academic premium on attainment in college. For example, if there are difficulties with aligning curricula in a way that ensures sufficient prior knowledge to enter a degree programme, or if there is evidence which legitimises any concerns over academic standards.

If this is the case then we need to have a clear understanding of what these issues are in order that they can be addressed and the potential of articulation maximised.

NEXT STEPS

Areas we wish to explore further include:

- The need for robust information on the articulation landscape in Scotland including the pattern of articulation pathways across institutions; the curriculum areas most commonly covered and the level of credit an HNC/D 'buys'.

- Is there scope to expand the number of articulation agreements and the number of articulation places across institutions?

- What are the main reasons for the differing patterns of articulation across the sector?

- Is there scope to bring more uniformity in terms of the credit awarded by universities to students with HE qualifications achieved in colleges?

ARTICULATION PATHWAYS AT ROBERT GORDON UNIVERSITY

The partnership between Robert Gordon University and the North East Scotland College provides guaranteed places at university for young people who might not otherwise have gained access to university. Through regional planning over 30 routes into study are supported by the partnership which enables around 400 learners each year to access university having begun their journey at college. All students studying on HNC/D routes at North East Scotland College are eligible to become Associate Students of Robert Gordon University and the guaranteed places scheme enables joint marketing of routes to young people in a way which makes the opportunities available clear and accessible.

CASE STUDY – SCOTT CHRISTIE

After finishing school, Scott studied an HND at Aberdeen College (now the North East Scotland College) which, on completion, allowed him to enter RGU straight into year three. Scott graduated from RGU and was awarded a first-class degree in BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science.

"I didn't have the grades to go straight to university after I left school so I studied an HND in Sports Coaching and was offered a place in third year at RGU. Being able to go to university via college has been life changing and without that opportunity I would not be where I am today."

Scott went on to continue his studies to achieve his aim to become a PE teacher and accepted a place to study for a postgraduate degree in Physical Education at Edinburgh University.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-ACADEMIC FACTORS IN ADMISSIONS

There is little doubt that a combination of closing the school attainment gap, optimising the use of contextual admissions and extending articulation pathways would bring us significantly closer to achieving equality of access. But it would not take us all the way over the line. In fact, even if there were no school attainment gap at all, socioeconomic inequality in higher education would persist.

This conclusion is drawn from a strong body of evidence which shows that even in circumstances where disadvantaged applicants achieve very similar or even identical grades, their more advantaged peers remain significantly more likely to be offered a place.

This phenomenon is primarily explained by the importance of non-academic factors in the admissions process such as the personal statement, interviews, work experience and extra-curricular activities. More particularly, it is explained by the fact that applicants from more advantaged backgrounds are able to draw on financial, educational and parental resources which enable them to more skilfully and successfully prepare for and navigate the admissions process than their more disadvantaged counterparts.

Access to these resources mean that advantaged applicants typically possess a broader range of soft skills such as appearing socially confident, understanding how to draft a quality personal statement and the ability to perform well at interview. Such applicants are able to accumulate these skills in part because they are more likely to benefit from better informed advice and guidance from schools and parents who have experience of higher education and have a good understanding of how to successfully navigate the admissions process.

In addition, more affluent applicants typically list more work and better experience than their less advantaged peers. Moreover, this experience often differs significantly in stature. Applicants from advantaged backgrounds are far more likely to list prestigious placements, unpaid internships and work-shadowing opportunities that are often facilitated by parental networks. Disadvantaged students are of course much less likely to have access to such opportunities, or to be able to afford unpaid roles and are therefore much more likely to list more common experiences such as part-time jobs.

Similarly, there is evidence that applicants from more advantaged backgrounds have a much better understanding of, and access to, the extra-curricular activities which hold

the most weight in the admissions process, typically listing activities which signify greater levels of social and cultural capital such as pursuing Duke of Edinburgh awards and playing musical instruments.

Research commissioned by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC) has described these cumulative advantages as the 'little extra something' which more advantaged applicants have over their disadvantaged peers, in addition to higher school attainment.

This evidence raises the question of whether it is fair that activities and experiences which are broadly exclusive to more affluent socioeconomic groups appear to carry such weight in the admissions process. This question is particularly salient when set in the context of the evidence presented throughout this report that it is those from disadvantaged backgrounds who face the most adversity, and who must therefore demonstrate the tenacity to overcome a whole range of barriers on their journey into higher education. There is therefore a strong case that admissions processes should place more equal weight on the significant personal qualities inherent in successfully making that journey.

These considerations lead us to wonder whether the non-academic elements of the admissions process could be adapted in a way that levels the playing field whilst potentially benefiting the social and experiential mix of the institution as a whole. For example this could mean placing more equal value on the diverse range of personal qualities and experiences which different socioeconomic groups bring to the table.

There are examples of exceptional practice in this regard. For precisely the reasons stated above, the Ivy League Universities avoid personal statements which require applicants to list experiences and achievements. Instead applicants prepare a 'diversity statement' in which they are asked to reflect upon how they would contribute to the diversity of the institution and the personal qualities they would add value to the programme of study and their classmates.

In a similar vein, research commissioned by the Sutton Trust has proposed that the playing field could be levelled by limiting applicants to listing only work-related activity and one extra-curricular activity.

NEXT STEPS

Areas we will explore further include:

- Is it possible to adapt elements of the present admissions system in a way that levels the playing field, for example by giving more value to the diverse qualities and experiences offered by different socioeconomic groups?

- Is there more that schools and universities can do to support more informed guidance, leading to better quality applications from applicants from deprived communities?

- Could outreach activity be adapted to facilitate work experience or other development opportunities that would enhance applications to higher education institutions?

- Is there evidence that shows the benefits of social diversity within an institution on the experiences of all of its members?

12

IN THIS CHAPTER WE:

- **EXAMINE THE EXTENT TO WHICH STUDENT FINANCE IMPACTS ON THE PARTICIPATION AND RETENTION OF THOSE FROM DEPRIVED BACKGROUNDS.**

- **HIGHLIGHT THE IMPORTANCE OF OVERCOMING CULTURAL BARRIERS TO SUPPORT BETTER RETENTION RATES.**

INTRODUCTION

Equal access is not just about ensuring more people from deprived communities get a place. It is just as important to ensure they maximise the value of their experience in higher education, successfully graduate and progress to positive labour market outcomes.

In this context, it is important to recognise that for many students from deprived backgrounds, barriers are not simply cast off and left at the university gates. Many students continue to face barriers throughout their university experience, which results in the lower average retention rates for students from our most deprived communities. In 2012/13 the retention rate for SIMD20 students at HEIs was 87% compared with a rate of 91.3% for all students.

In this section we begin to examine some of the most significant barriers of this kind.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

One of the issues most commonly cited as a barrier to equal access is the cost of higher education and the lack of financial support available to students from deprived backgrounds. Interestingly, this common view does not appear to be particularly well supported by research evidence. Repeated studies have found little evidence to suggest that financial barriers play a strong role in preventing students from deprived areas entering university.

Though it may seem almost counter-intuitive, the strength of this evidence is such that both the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) have recommended that institutions in England should rebalance funding generous bursaries for disadvantaged students in favour of increasing investment in the most powerful forms of outreach activity such as summer schools and contextual admissions policies.

However, there are wider issues around student finance which mean that it remains relevant to the Commission's work. Currently, students from low income households can access maintenance support through a combination of bursary and loans. However, recent research at the University of Edinburgh has found that young people in Scotland, and especially those from deprived backgrounds, are more debt averse than their peers in England. Indeed, the majority of young people interviewed for the study regarded loans as a 'last resort'. This aversion was found to be primarily based on misconceptions about student debt such as over estimating interest rates, impact on credit ratings and not understanding that student loans are repaid only after a certain income threshold is reached. Often these attitudes and misconceptions reflected the views of parents, once again highlighting the importance to equal access of effective parental engagement.

While this aversion to debt does not appear to be a significant barrier to entry overall, it may impact significantly on the kind of choices made by students. For example, there is evidence that debt aversion is a key factor in young people's decision to live at home. Again, Scottish students are more likely to choose to remain at home than their English peers.

Students from the North of England were also found to be far more likely to base their decisions about institutions and courses on educational criteria. In contrast, Scottish students may be more likely to select an institution and course which they perceive as being affordable, with educational factors a secondary consideration.

The Commission is therefore concerned that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland may well be making less than optimal decisions about their future because they do not have access to accurate, detailed advice and guidance on student finance.

We also need to understand more about the potential impact of student finance on wider access issues. For example, the extent to which student finance influences retention rates, degree classifications and the ability of students to take full advantage of the higher education experience.

NEXT STEPS

Areas we will explore further include:

- To what extent does student finance impact on wider access issues such as retention rates, student experience and degree outcomes?

- How can we ensure that balanced, accurate advice and guidance on student financial support is reaching those with deprived backgrounds?

CULTURAL BARRIERS

There is evidence that even after gaining a place, many students from deprived communities face personal and psychological barriers such as feeling culturally at odds with institutional culture and the social class of the other students, particularly in the most selective institutions. Put simply, students from disadvantaged backgrounds often feel that they do not 'fit in' and may not be able to afford to engage with university life in the same way as wealthier peers.

Similarly, there is evidence of a link between student retention and the ability to develop a sense of belonging. This means that forming friendships and integrating into social groups early on is key to successful integration into the student lifestyle. There is evidence that such cultural barriers are more pronounced in the most selective universities.

There is an interesting intersection here between these cultural barriers and the financial barriers described elsewhere. As we have seen, Scottish students from more deprived backgrounds are more likely to remain at home while studying. This means that they are likely to spend less time with peers, thereby limiting the opportunity to make friends; potentially exacerbating any feeling of alienation and increasing the risk of drop-out.

Institutions are increasingly aware of these cultural barriers and in response are offering increased support such as mentoring, monitoring and the promotion of counselling and mental health services.

There is also good evidence that pre-admission outreach activity (especially summer schools) which involves sustained contact with institutions and a cohort of potential classmates can mitigate cultural barriers. Such activities are especially effective where the outreach is followed up with sustained contact. For example, the University of Durham's Sutton Trust Summer School provides group e-mentoring and generally stays in touch with potential students through a range of simple mechanisms such as sending birthday cards.

In our engagement activities a number of students have also commented that mentoring was helpful in overcoming this feeling of not fitting in, especially where the mentor is from a similar social background to the mentee.

There is also some evidence that simple strategies, such as the use of mandatory group work on courses, can have a positive impact on social integration and may therefore mitigate any risks to retention.

A repeat motif in the evidence is the need to build on these approaches through better tracking of students to identify key points of risk and to flag individuals for whom more intensive and personalised support may be appropriate.

Similarly, evidence highlights the need to ensure staff, including academics, are trained to be aware of the particular challenges faced by young people from deprived backgrounds, and to understand how these can be mitigated.

Finally, it is important to note that we have heard repeatedly from young people in disadvantaged backgrounds that they have no interest in being seen to be treated differently.

Addressing cultural barriers is important, but it must be approached in a way which supports rather than stigmatises people.

NEXT STEPS

The evidence is that while cultural barriers are important they are not insurmountable. There is increasing recognition in universities of the need to identify and deliver support to those who need it. There is therefore a great deal of good practice on which to build.

Ahead of our final report the Commission will therefore explore:

- How best practice to support access students in higher education be shared and embedded across the sector?

13

INTRODUCTION

The role of data and evidence to support access is an area that has been raised repeatedly within the Commission and through our consultation with stakeholders thus far. There is a clear consensus about the importance of data and the role that data and evidence can play in supporting work to widen access to higher education. However, many discussions on the use of data and evidence quickly turn into debates about the merits of different measures and the deficiencies within the current system. At times, it has seemed that the debate about how we measure access appears to preclude the discussion on what can actually be done to widen access.

The issues raised in our discussions include:

- there is no national systematic approach to the sharing of data across sectors and within sectors, which limits the data available for use at key points of transition for the learner;

- there is an inconsistent approach to the use of data, including data that is used to identify those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, i.e. how we identify and measure socioeconomic disadvantage varies considerably;

- there is no coherent approach to the development of evidence, i.e. more could be done to recognise the role of qualitative and quantitative data to support access and to develop our understanding of what works.

When considering this area, the Commission identified three main purposes for which data and evidence are needed to support access:

1. Real time data and information is required:

   a. to support decisions about individuals, e.g. to incorporate contextual information into the application process;

   b. to track individuals through school, college and university to ensure that they are provided with the support that they may need at key transition stages and when studying within the higher education sector.

2. Robust data and evidence is required to evaluate interventions, not just locally to support delivery, but also nationally to share and develop information on what works.

3. Data and evidence is also needed regionally and nationally to support targets and to provide a coherent picture of progress on widening access, e.g. to compare the performance of different student cohorts in order to understand the nature of systemic barriers and where further improvement is needed.

WHO IS A WIDENING ACCESS STUDENT?

Cutting across all these areas is a debate about the merits of different measures of deprivation, with a variety of measures currently being used to support and monitor access activity.

Most people we have spoken to recognise the role that area-based measures, such as SIMD, can play in measuring progress on access, and that SIMD is the most robust national measure of deprivation available in Scotland. However, they have also highlighted the limitations of an area-based measure in assessing individual circumstance and the fact that a wider basket of measures may be more suitable to provide a fuller picture of deprivation, particularly when making decisions about individuals and tailoring support to their needs.

It may be that no one measure is suitable for all of the purposes outlined above. The Commission will consider as part of its work the different indicators available to measure socioeconomic disadvantages and their most appropriate use.

REAL TIME DATA FOR DECISION MAKING AND INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT

The Commission has heard about the difficulties faced when sharing key information across different sectors and particularly between schools and higher education institutions. Where data is made available it is often through a specific arrangement between individual institutions and the data that is shared is not always available at the level of detail required. A more systematic approach to sharing data across sectors could better support an individual's needs throughout their education journey. Data held by schools or local authorities could provide real-time data for post-16 education providers to assist with decision about applications and about the support needed for individuals at key transition stages or when within the higher education sector.

ROBUST DATA AND EVIDENCE TO EVALUATE WHAT WORKS

It is clear that evaluating access initiatives can be challenging due to the complexities of the factors that influence an individual's educational achievement and choices. This challenge is not unique to Scotland and is seen in other countries that have sought to evaluate access initiatives and programmes. However, many feel that the current evidence on the effectiveness of widening access programmes is insufficient and that we could do more to develop a stronger evidence base to help identify and share best practice and to ensure that resources are targeted at activities that have the greatest impact.

A related concern is that we are not making the best use of the information that we do have, i.e. that information is not being shared for use across sectors and data is not being linked and utilised to its full potential to provide relevant analyses. The Commission has raised a number of questions for which we just do not have the evidence to answer; however, there are also some question where the analysis is possible but has not been undertaken to date. As part of the work to build a stronger evidence base consideration must be given to what more can be done with the data that we do have.

DATA TO SUPPORT TARGETS AND MONITOR PROGRESS

The Government's Programme for Scotland 2014-15 announced the intention to introduce a target for participation in higher education. To fulfil its remit the Commission will propose a short- and long-term target for participation in higher education and clear milestones to achieve the Scottish Government's ambition of equality of access to higher education within a generation.

Scotland does not currently have a national target for participation in higher education; however, Outcome Agreements do contain a number of measures to monitor progress on access for individual institutions.

The Commission will therefore consider the current Outcome Agreement process and measures along with evidence on indicators of deprivation and examples of best practice to develop targets for Scotland.

There is a recognition of the tension that exists between the need for national measures to monitor progress in the context of the wider population and the complexities that sit below this; both in terms of the factors influencing individual choices and abilities, and the differing populations that institutions serve. The Commission will consider how best to marry the two so that meaningful measures and targets can be introduced nationally, and perhaps regionally, to drive further and faster progress to widen access while recognising the complexities involved.

NEXT STEPS

The Commission recognises the key role that data and evidence can play in supporting work to widen access to higher education but that more can be done to improve our use of data and to develop our evidence. The Commission provides an ideal opportunity to bottom out some of the long-running debates on the merits and deficiencies of widening access data and to provide a clear direction for the development of information systems and evidence going forward.

Areas that the Commission would like to explore further include:

- The merits of different measures of deprivation, i.e. the advantages and limitations of each measure; how much they overlap in their identification of deprivation; and the feasibility of their use for the key purposes outlined above

- Is there scope to share data and information across sectors to better support decisions about individuals, track their progress and provide appropriate support?

- What are the opportunities to build a stronger evidence base to support widening access activities and share information on what works, through both existing and new evidence?

- How can we develop meaningful measures and targets to support and monitor progress on access at a regional and national level?

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW: TRACKING OF ACCESS STUDENTS TO ENABLE TARGETED INTERVENTION

The University of Glasgow (UoG) employs a unified Student Admissions and Records system (MyCampus) to target, track and support applicants from widening participation (WP) backgrounds. This enables intervention at key stages: pre-entry and application; admission and transition; on-course, to support student success, retention and sense of institutional belonging.

WP targeting criteria (e.g. low progression schools, SIMD postcodes, care experience, pre-entry programmes for school leavers and adult returners) are entered into MyCampus, allowing applicants to be automatically flagged to Admissions Officers and given offers of entry, contextualised by their educational background and personal circumstances. Student Profiles from the academically rigorous pre-entry programmes are utilised, and enhanced by verifiable datasets of WP markers relating to schools and individuals. All flagged WP applicants are invited to apply for Talent Scholarships or Care Leaver Bursaries worth £1,000+ per year.

All flagged new students are invited to a pre-Year 1 Local Student Orientation event. They meet students, academic, welfare and support staff and the Chief Adviser of Studies from their area of study. This is followed up by e-mails at pressure points during Year 1, offering advice and reminders of where to seek support. Offers of employment as mentors on the pre-entry programmes are made.

The WP flag on MyCampus is visible to Chief Advisers of Study, allowing appropriately experienced staff to be matched with and provide support for students with multiple WP markers and potentially at risk of withdrawal.

Flagging of potentially at risk WP students thus allows monitoring and tracking to target intervention and, support student performance and analyse the effectiveness of student support. A key element of this approach is that, although the students receive targeted support, the flagging is not visible to their peers avoiding any potential stigmatisation of the individual student.

14

In this first phase of our work the Commission has learned a great deal about the scale of the access challenge facing Scotland. Our conclusion is that while there is clearly some distance to travel, there are good grounds for moving forward with confidence. In this report we have identified clear scope for progress on a whole range of fronts. It is therefore not difficult to imagine a future which is significantly better.

If successful, the work being taken forward to extend funded early years provision and to close the school attainment gap have the potential to make a big difference. So too can maximising the impact of contextual admissions and articulation pathways, and bringing more balance to the value placed on non-academic factors in the admissions system.

Similarly, the more evidence that we have on the type of access programmes which truly work, the more impact we can secure for the substantial institutional and public investment in widening access. Better quality advice and guidance in both schools and the family home also has a critical role to play. It is important that young people not only grow and maintain high aspirations, but that they also have a clear understanding of the steps and choices necessary to convert those aspirations into reality.

All of these things can make a difference. But alone, none of them is sufficient to achieve our objective. The Commission has learned that there is no silver-bullet solution to inequality in higher education. It is a problem whose causes and effects run right throughout the education system and beyond into wider social policy.

In short, equal access is only possible if we make significant progress on all of the issues identified in this report. That means that all parts of the system, including early years providers, schools, colleges, universities, the SFC and the Scottish Government, must work together in a strategic and coherent manner.

As we celebrate throughout this report, there is a great deal of very good work going on in Scotland. But given the evidence it seems fair to conclude that access work in Scotland is less than the sum of its parts. This may be explained by the fact that Scotland does not have a coherent national strategy on access, with clearly defined milestones, targets and objectives.

In light of this, our final report the Commission will also consider the role of funding for access in driving progress and whether Scotland has in place the necessary strategic, research and regulatory arrangements to drive the step change that is needed.

In short, what Scotland may lack is a blueprint for fairness. In addition to the specific matters identified in this report, it is this which we shall consider in our final report.

NEXT STEPS

We have stated that this interim report should be primarily regarded as a mechanism for dialogue and in it we have posed challenging questions to all parts of the system. The Commission is clear that the most effective way of answering these questions, and developing solutions that work, is through close collaboration with partners.

To that end, we are currently in the process of developing mechanisms for securing this engagement, including through a series of topical expert groups drawing on the knowledge and expertise of stakeholders. We are also looking at ways we can continue to engage closely with learners, including with the groups who will be considered in more detail in the final report, such as mature learners and care leavers.

Achieving equal access will require a sustained, whole system effort. It is therefore right that partners are closely engaged in developing the solutions that they will require to implement. By approaching our work in this way, the Commission hopes to be able to begin building the system-wide coalition that is necessary to achieve our objective.

15

COMMISSION MEMBERSHIP

- Dame Ruth Silver, Chair
- Jean Carwood-Edwards, Chief Executive, Early Years Scotland
- Russell Gunson, Director, IPPR Scotland (Institute of Public Policy Research)
- Ali Jarvis, Interim Chair, Glasgow Colleges' Regional Board
- Gerry Lyons, Headteacher, St Andrews Secondary School, Glasgow
- Helen Martin, Assistant Secretary, Scottish Trades Union Congress
- Maureen McKenna, Executive Director of Education, Glasgow City Council
- Liz McIntyre, Principal, Borders College
- Professor Anton Muscatelli, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of Glasgow
- Conor Ryan, Sutton Trust
- Vonnie Sandlan, President, NUS Scotland
- Caroline Stuart, Oracle Ltd.
- Professor Petra Wend, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

COMMISSION ON WIDENING ACCESS – REMIT

The Government's ambition is that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities.

To achieve this, Scotland requires:

- A shared understanding of the barriers to accessing higher education, and their removal, for those from the most deprived communities and households, based on reliable and comprehensive evidence.

- A clear target to achieve equality of access and an understanding of the actions required to meet that ambition.

- A culture of partnership between early years, schools, colleges, universities, employers and the government, where each recognises the part that it can play in eradicating the inequality in access to higher education and works in partnership with others to achieve this.

Building upon the Government's commitment to free tuition fees for higher education, the introductions of Curriculum for Excellence, school attainment policy, reforms to the Post-16 education system and Developing the Young Workforce programme, it is proposed that the Commission on Widening Access will:

- synthesise existing evidence around barriers to widening access and retention, and their effective removal, for those from deprived backgrounds and, within this, identify any specific barriers for those with different equality characteristics or those from a care background;

- propose both a short and long-term target for participation in higher education and clear milestones, to drive further and faster progress to widen access;

- identify best practice on widening access across early years, schools, colleges, universities and employers, and make recommendations as to how best practice on access and retention can be scaled up and embedded, within the work of individual institutions, across the wider education and employment system; and

- identify the data and information required to monitor and support improvements on widening access across all education providers, and recommend the processes necessary to support this.

In addition to formal meetings of the Commission, it will use a number of events and visits to meet with those who have direct experience of the barriers to widening access, whether from a personal or professional perspective, including: school pupils, parents, graduates, widening access professionals and community groups. The Commission may also enlist the help of a number of expert advisors to support its work.

The Commission is expected to draw preliminary conclusions and recommendations in autumn 2015, with a final report, to Government and institutions, by spring 2016.

APPROACH TO EVIDENCE AND ENGAGEMENT

In developing this report the Commission has gathered evidence from a wide range of sources. A summary of this activity is set out below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature on the barriers to fair access was commissioned from Dr Mark Murphy and Professor Chris Chapman of the University of Glasgow.

CALL FOR EVIDENCE

During the summer, the Commission issued a formal Call for Evidence on the barriers to access, best practice and the data and measures required to drive progress. A total of 75 responses were received. A full analysis of the responses has been published alongside this report and is available at the Commission's website (www.commissiononwideningaccess.co.uk).

CONSULTATION EVENTS AND MEETINGS

The Commission has held a series of consultation events across Scotland. These events involved roundtable discussions with senior access and admissions staff, university and college principals, secondary and primary school head teachers, access students, school pupils and lecturers.

Separately, the Commission has met with a wide range of individuals and organisations with an interest and expertise in widening access. A full list of consultees is at Annex D. It is the Commission's intention to organise more of these events in the lead-up to the publication of the final report.

PRESENTATIONS

At its formal meetings, the Commission has benefited from presentations from key stakeholders, including students, care leavers, professional experts and practitioners.

FUTURE ENGAGEMENT

Collaboration with stakeholders is a key part of the Commission's approach. Going forward, the Commission is keen to maintain this approach and to reach an even wider set of stakeholders. With that in mind the Commission is currently making plans for its engagement programme in the lead-up to the publication of the final report.

CONSULTEES

Dr Thomas Brown (St Andrews University)

Jane Brumpton (Early Years Scotland)

Annette Bruton (Principal, Edinburgh College)

Kevin Browne (Who Cares? Scotland)

Professor Frank Coton (University of Glasgow)

Shona Cormack (Robert Gordon University)

John Davidson (North East Scotland College)

Vincent Docherty (Aberdeenshire Council)

Bob Doris (MSP)

Heather Dunk (Principal, Ayrshire College)

James Dunphy (Robert Gordon University)

Professor Les Ebdon (Office for Fair Access)

Naomi Eisenstadt (Scottish Government's Independent Adviser on Poverty and Inequality)

Leslie Evans (Scottish Government)

Colin Ferguson (Durham University)

Kenneth Ferguson (Robertson Trust)

Pamela Forbes (University of St Andrews)

Professor Pamela Gillies (Principal, Glasgow Caledonian University)

Iain Gray (MSP)

Professor Vicky Gunn (Royal Conservatoire)

Hugh Hall (Strathclyde University)

Douglas Hamilton (RS MacDonald Trust)

Professor John Harper (Robert Gordon University)

Neil Hendry (Head Teacher, Northfield Academy)

Kathleen Hood (University of Edinburgh)

Lucy Blackburn Hunter (University of Edinburgh)

Irene Johnson (Headteacher, Thornton Primary School)

Mike Johnson (St Andrews University)

Dr Laurence Lasselle (St Andrews University)

Willie Mackie (Chair, Ayrshire College)

Iain MacRitchie (MCR Holdings)

Joanne Martin (Medical student)

Liam McArthur (MSP)

Ray McCown (Edinburgh College)

Professor Sir Jim McDonald (Principal, Strathclyde University)

Dr Stephanie McKendry (Strathclyde University)

Professor Sir Jim McDonald (Principal, Strathclyde University)

Gerard McKernan (Glasgow City Council)

Sarah Minty (University of Edinburgh)

Claire Motion (PhD student, St Andrews University)

Dr Ann Mullen (St Andrews University)

Anne O'Grady (Chester Nursery School)

Dr Veena O'Halloran (Strathclyde University)

Sir Tim O'Shea (Principal, University of Edinburgh)

Professor Lindsay Paterson (University of Edinburgh)

Walter Patterson (Colleges Scotland)

Pupils of Cumnock Academy

Pupils of Grange Academy, Kilmarnock

Pupils of Northfield Academy, Aberdeen

Professor Louise Richardson (Principal, St Andrews University)

Professor Sheila Riddell (University of Edinburgh)

Mary Scanlon (MSP)

Professor Jeffrey Sharkey (Principal, Royal Conservatoire)

Students of Ayrshire College

Bill Scott-Watson (Scottish Government)

Alastair Sim (Universities Scotland)

Elaine Sinclair (Robert Gordon University)

Shona Struthers (Colleges Scotland)

Professor Graham Turnbull (St Andrews University)

Mr Grant Whytlock (Head Teacher, Buckhaven High School)

Dr Mary Wingrave (University of Glasgow)

Sir Ian Wood (The Wood Group)

Lee Worden (Head of Access, Durham University)

Peter Wright (Fife Education Authority)

Shilla Zwizwai (Care leaver)

MEASURES TO ASSESS NATIONAL PROGRESS ON WIDENING ACCESS

There are a number of different measures that can be used to measure the progress of widening access at a national level in addition to the Scottish Government's Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). These include the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) published measures on parental education, socioeconomic classification and proportion of students from state school. The Higher Education Funding Council for England's POLAR Participation of Local Areas (POLAR).

Below is an outline of each of these measures and the latest trends available for Scotland.

PARENTAL EDUCATION (UNIVERSITIES ONLY)

The measure on parental education relates to the percentage of students whose parents have higher education qualifications. This information is known for around 85% of students. This measure is based on self-reporting. The percentage of Scottish domiciled full-time first degree entrants to Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) whose parents have higher education qualifications has risen steadily from 34.5% in 2007-08 to 52.1% in 2013-14. However, this increase will also reflect historical increases in participation in higher education.

SOCIOECONOMIC CLASSIFICATION (UNIVERSITIES ONLY)

Socioeconomic classification relates to the occupation of the student's parent, step-parent or guardian who earns the most. For students aged 21 or over, this is based on their own occupation. The seven employment categories for this variable can be grouped into 'Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations' (categories 1 to 3) and 'other' (categories 4 to 7) – i.e. non-professional occupations. This excludes students whose parents are classified as having never work or long-term unemployed, not classified or unknown. Again, there is the issue of coverage as data for this variable is missing for around 20% of the population. This measures is based on self-reporting. For Scottish domiciled full-time first degree entrants aged under 21, the percentage from 'Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations' has remained relatively stable at around 58% over a ten year period. However, at individual HEI level, latest figures range from 42% to 71%.

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO ATTENDED A STATE SCHOOL (UNIVERSITIES ONLY)

The measure relating to the percentage of students who attended state school is relevant as state school pupils are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than pupils from independent schools. Around 5% of Scottish pupils attend independent schools which means we can use this to monitor the level of overrepresentation of students from independent schools in higher education. This measure is a fairly reliable statistic as it is linked to an individual and the level of missing data is relatively low. In the 3 years that this figure has been published, it has remained the same at 88%. This relates to UK domiciled young full-time undergraduate entrants to Scottish HEIs, and will therefore be impacted on by the status of the non-Scottish students who come to study in Scotland. The latest figures vary at individual HEI level from 59% to 99%.

PARTICIPATION OF LOCAL AREAS (POLAR)

HESA also publish performance based on the POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) classification. This looks at how likely young people are to participate in higher education across the UK and uses postcode data to identify low participation areas. However, although POLAR data is available for the whole of the UK, HESA do not publish POLAR analyses for Scottish-domiciled students. This is mainly due to the relatively high number of students in Scotland taking part in higher education in colleges, which would not be captured in HESA's figures for Higher Education Institutions. Also, as noted earlier in the report, the relatively high participation rates for higher education mean that Scotland has, by definition, fewer UK low participation areas. Only 7.4% of Scottish Wards are defined as low participation compared to 15.6% of English wards.