

Edinburgh Napier University submission of 18 August 2023

PE2009/D: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

We would like to express our thanks to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for giving us the opportunity to provide our views on Petition PE2009.

Our response is based on the following understanding of the petition:

- We understand that the key concern of the petitioner relates to the funding model of Scottish higher education and how this may be affecting questions of fair access. We assumed that the focus of this petition relates to undergraduate education and have responded accordingly.
- The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to encourage the Scottish Government to ensure fair access to Scottish institutions for Scottish and Rest of UK residents by reviewing business models and Scottish Government funding arrangements.

In the first instance, we believe it is important to clarify the following:

- **A note regarding the current allocation of places and intake targets:** The overall number of Scottish domiciled students we take in each year is set by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) which provides universities with yearly intake targets that they have to meet.¹ Universities receive funding for each place they are allocated and, with the exception of “controlled subjects” – such as medicine, nursing – are responsible for the allocation of places to courses as they see fit. In addition, the Scottish Government has a target that by 2030, 20% of full-time first-degree Scottish domiciled entrants to universities in Scotland should come from the 20% most deprived communities in Scotland as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD 20). Alongside all universities in Scotland, Edinburgh Napier University has targets in

¹ See this [link](#) for the 2023/4 Scottish Funding Council final university allocations and funded places.

place as outlined in our [Outcome Agreement](#) to contribute towards this target. We also recognise a wider basket on measures as part of our strategy to widen access to the University to students from a widening participation background².

- **Regarding the review of business models and funding arrangements:** The Scottish Government is in the process of undertaking reforms of the tertiary education system, through the review of purpose and principles for post-school education, research and skills.³ This includes considerations of how higher education qualifications will be funded in the future. In this respect, the Scottish Government is already in the process of looking into the future funding models of higher education. The level of public funding invested in teaching and research in Scotland's universities has been eroded over many years and the Scottish Government has acknowledged that "despite the financial sustainability of individual components or institutions, that much of the ecosystem as currently configured is no longer financially sustainable."⁴
- **It is important to define what fair access means in the context of this petition:** questions of fair access in higher education typically refer to ensuring that applicants from more deprived backgrounds have the ability to access higher education, for instance through the use of contextual entry criteria. In the case of this petition however, the background note indicates that concerns may relate to students in Scotland who were not from a deprived background and who may have been prevented from accessing higher education. The call of the petition aims to ensure fair access to Scottish universities for residents from Scotland and the rest of the UK. However, it is not clear what "fair access" refers to in this instance. The Scottish Government has made a longstanding commitment to fund Scottish undergraduate degrees for Scotland-based students. Students based in the Rest of the UK studying in Scotland are required to pay tuition fees directly or through the take-up of a loan. Therefore, under the current system, residency

² More information on widening participation backgrounds is accessible on our website [here](#).

³ Scottish Government (2023), Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills – Initial Priorities. [Link](#).

⁴ Scottish Government (2023), Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills: interim purpose and principles. [Link](#).

plays an important criterion in admissions decisions, including the number of places that are available on a given course. A decision to potentially change this system would rest within the Scottish Government's competence.

In response to the petition:

- All of our Scotland-based undergraduate courses are open to Scottish-based students to apply, whether they are from a deprived background or not. The intake targets universities have to meet mean that the total number of funded places that universities can allocate is finite and dependent on Scottish Government budget decisions and policy priorities. In that respect, it can be described as an upper cap on the overall number of higher education places. Students from the rest of the UK and international are not subject to Scottish Government intake targets, except for controlled subjects where different rules may apply.
- Edinburgh Napier University does not recognise the scenario presented in the background note, where all places for a particular degree programme for Scottish-domiciled students in a given academic year were filled by students from a widening participation background. It may be the case specifically during the Clearing period⁵ that, for certain courses which have either met their target for Scottish-domiciled students, or are very close to meeting target, the University remains open for Scottish-domiciled widening participation students only. Edinburgh Napier University believes that it is right that students from more deprived backgrounds can benefit from contextual admissions policies that facilitates their access to higher education to mitigate additional difficulties or factors they may have faced.
- As we have highlighted in our submissions to the Scottish Government as part of reform consultations, we do believe that the current funding allocations for teaching in Scottish higher education is unsustainable and has been eroded over many years. However, the primary issue relates to the funding allocated per student, rather than the total amount of places being funded. We

⁵ More information about UCAS and Clearing is accessible [here](#).

remain hopeful that the trajectory of the reforms proposed will lead to more sustainability in the funding of Scottish higher education.

I hope that this response will be helpful to the committee, and we remain available for any questions or follow-up that may be required.