

Commissioner for Fair Access submission of 21 August 2023

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

Thank you for affording me opportunity to reflect on Petition PE2009 (Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK). I note that: this petition was published on February 28th, 2023; has (at the time of writing) 4551 signatories; was the subject of a SPICe briefing; was considered by the Scottish Government on March 29th, to which in turn the petitioner responded on April 19th; and was considered at the Committee meeting of May 17th.

First and foremost, I welcome the interest shown by the petitioner (and the signatories) in fair access to Scottish universities for residents in Scotland. I firmly believe in the importance of widening access to higher education for individual students, the families and communities from which students are drawn, all institutions that deliver higher education in Scotland (including colleges), and wider society.

The petition refers to the particular circumstances of entry to nine courses at the University of Edinburgh in 2022/23 (in which no student without a deprivation 'flag' was permitted entry), asserting that this situation has arisen as a result of a "poor business model" and "lack of funding", with the consequence that a "large swathe of the Scottish population" has been "shut out of Higher Education" (in Scotland).

The concerns raised by the petitioner (and championed by Michael Marra MSP) are not unreasonable. I note that both concur that widening access is laudable, but express concern at unintended consequences of pursuing this goal within the current funding model for higher education in Scotland. I will be encouraging higher education in Scotland to make further progress in widening access, and therefore it is important that the concerns raised by the petitioner are acknowledged.

Although it may not be sufficient to fully address the concerns of the petitioner and signatories, I note three actions that, in my opinion, partly address their concerns.

First, it is my understanding that the University of Edinburgh has adjusted the way in which it utilises 'access data' in reaching decisions on admissions, which would mean that it is less likely that every successful Scottish domiciled applicant to the courses which were a cause of the petitioner's concern in 2022/23 will have a widening access background.

Second, as noted in SPICe briefing, the Scottish Government has convened a working group of stakeholders and experts to review the criteria that are used to measure 'deprivation'. This group is due to report before the end of 2023.

Third, I intend to review the ways in which Scottish HEIs are using access measures in my annual report (which will be published later this year).

None of the above directly addresses the most substantial concern raised by the petitioner, i.e., the funding of universities and possible unintended consequences as a result of pursuing fair access. I intend to review funding arrangements in greater detail in my second year in post, not least as this will enable me to draw on insight from the Student Income and Expenditure Survey that the Scottish Government has commissioned the National Centre for Social Research to undertake.

I would make a few final observations. I do not find evidence that a "large swathe of the Scottish population" has been "shut out of higher education", or that the current funding arrangements have led to many Scottish domiciled students having to pursue higher education, at personal financial cost, elsewhere in the UK. It is most unfortunate when applicants are unable to secure a place on a course at an institution of their choosing: it is important to acknowledge that for many years in many courses in many institutions, some applicants have been unable to realise their preferences. In promoting fair access to higher education, I am mindful of supply and demand, and will make recommendations where I consider the current system falls short of what is optimal.