

# Universities Scotland submission of 21 August 2023

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

Universities Scotland believe that in aggregate across the sector, there are sufficient university places available to meet the aspirations of suitably qualified Scots-domiciled undergraduate learners. However, we recognise the acute pressures on some high-demand courses in some institutions which are especially popular with applicants, and we understand the disappointment when applicants are not successful in being accepted to their chosen course.

In Scottish policy terms “fair access” is most commonly associated with the widening access agenda. Universities Scotland proudly believes in and supports the fair access agenda, with significant progress made towards the 2030 target of 20% of entrants coming from the 20% most deprived communities as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). This submission will expand on these and related points.

### **Numbers of Scots-domiciled undergraduates accepted into Scottish universities remains high and stable**

UCAS data from SQA Results Day 2023 (with additional context in their media release) provides the latest snapshot of the current cycle of admissions but does not reflect the clearing process underway at the point of writing. These data show:

- 29,220 Scottish applicants had been accepted, compared to 29,630 at the same stage in the cycle in 2022 (-1.4%) and up from 27,880 in 2019 (+4.8%). Increased acceptances through clearing are expected to increase this number. UCAS advises that like-for-like comparisons are made with 2019 because of anomalies during the COVID years.
- 72% of Scottish applicants to UK universities, aged 19 and under, (18,780) have gained a place at their first-choice

university, up from 69% last year (18,680) and 65% in 2019 (15,670)

- This is against a backdrop of a lower number of total Scottish applicants (all ages) compared to last year: 43,270 down from 46,970 (-7.8%) last year and 46,330 in 2019 (-6.6%).

## **Applicant trends**

The "Report on Widening Access 2021-22" from SFC (Background table 1B) shows consistent year-on-year growth of Scots-domiciled students entering their first degree, with data sources assessing Scots-domiciled applicants and entrants to Scottish institutions showing a downward trend on total numbers. Combined, these lower numbers applying for a stable number of places has resulted in an increase in the percentage of applicants enrolling.

It is of critical importance that applicants and entrants are set up to succeed in their education journey. There will always be courses with such high demand for places that applicants who meet or exceed the entry requirements are not able to be recruited to their first-choice course. However, the data would indicate that Scots-domiciled applicants are not missing out on accessing Scottish universities.

Skills Development Scotland data shows that in 2022, the percentage of young adults (16-19) participating in education, training or employment was 92.4%. This indicates that within the post-school system, most young adults can access opportunities in the right place at the right time to meet their needs.

A number of actions taken to ameliorate the impact of the pandemic, made the data for academic years 2020-2022 exceptional. These include:

- Teacher-awarded grades meaning more learners were awarded high grades, so met or exceeded their conditions;
- Scottish Government funded additional places to ensure learners were able to progress;
- Some short-term fluctuations in demand and eligibility, concentrated in higher-tariff institutions.

While it is anticipated that this will rebalance now that Scotland has returned to pre-pandemic models of assessment, care should be taken

when drawing conclusions from data reviewing these two years' admissions cycles.

## **Commitment to Fair Access**

Universities Scotland welcomed and embraced the vision and ambition set out in the Commission on Widening Access's 2016 report "A blueprint for fairness". This report was accepted in full as a policy priority by the Scottish Government and has been used as the education system's guide to ensure that access to higher education is predicated on potential, recognising that education is arguably the most powerful tool to tackle socioeconomic inequality.

Figures published by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) show that 16.5% of university entrants in 21/22 were from the 20% most deprived communities in Scotland as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). While progress is being made on fair access, entrance to university continues to be strongest from applicants living in areas classed as least deprived according to SIMD, with 26.3% from the 20% least deprived postcodes.

However, it is Universities Scotland's position that a more nuanced measure is now required to identify deprivation and we have outlined some potential solutions. A measure that identifies an individual's socioeconomic circumstances would allow institutions a greater focus and greater accuracy in the targeting of additional support and contextual markers ensuring that support reaches the individuals who should benefit from this, rather than the current broad catch-all metric that covers everyone in a neighbourhood.

## **Funding Model**

Universities Scotland have been clear that there are substantive and chronic issues within the funding model of HE. However, in our view, if the funding model for Scottish higher education were to be reviewed, the priority should be to look at the unit of teaching resource per student, so that we can meet the increased post-pandemic needs that students have for educational and welfare support. Teaching funding supports the direct teaching and assessment of students, and also a wide range of learning support services, learning technology, welfare support and careers advice. Between 2014 and now, the amount of public funding

invested in each Scottish undergraduate has fallen by 27% in real terms while students' needs have increased.

The flat-cash budget settlement for academic year 2023/24 – with inflation running to double figures – represents a real-terms cut to the sector and effectively curtails the sector's ambitions.

Compounding that pressure, in May 2023, the Scottish Government announced a £20m cut to additional resource funding. Such significant reduction in funding to the sector has consequences including risking the world class reputation of the sector.

This would present significant challenge at any time, but more so when universities are supporting a cohort with two years of lost learning and social disruption due to the pandemic, students facing acute mental health challenges and strong correlations between those with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and mental health implications.

We believe that greater levels of public investment are required into Scottish HE to address these growing challenges, but any such investment should be prioritised in the unit of teaching resource per student, rather than an increase in funded places (given the data do not indicate a systemic problem in demand versus availability).

### **Student places and “displacement”**

Universities Scotland remain concerned that discussion on places is still a source of much confusion. Students from outside of Scotland, who pay fees to access their education, do not displace Scots-domiciled students. The number of places available for Scots-domiciled students is ring-fenced by SFC and SG, and institutions face strict penalties for under or over recruitment.

Reviewing the data, Universities Scotland is satisfied that pressure on places at a sector level is stable.

However, it is important to be clear that the recruitment of fee-paying rUK and international students effectively subsidises the education of Scots-domiciled students due to the declining unit of resource allocated to teaching. Without their fee contribution, the university sector would be unable to effectively support all students.