

Robert Gordon University submission of 21 August 2023

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

Funded Places for Scottish-Domiciled Students

Scotland's universities are diverse, fulfilling a range of missions in support of the needs of the learners and communities which they serve. Our universities make a critical contribution to regional and national economic prosperity, including through developing the skilled workforce that Scotland requires now, and into the future.

The number of funded places for Scottish-domiciled students is ring-fenced by the cap on total funded numbers available. SFC funded places are protected for Scottish-domiciled students. Scottish-domiciled students are not in competition with rUK or international students for places at Scottish universities. Additionally, since AY2021-22, funded places that EU students would have previously been eligible for were 'freed-up' by the SFC to increase the number of places for Scottish-domiciled students.

Universities have the flexibility to deploy their non-controlled SFC funded places across their courses. As an important part of their obligations, universities will consider the regional and national labour market in order to match as best as they can, the supply of places for particular courses with labour market needs. Admission to some courses within institutions can, therefore, be highly competitive, where demand for places may far outstrip the availability of places.

The issues raised in the petition relate to the admissions' practice within the University of Edinburgh. UCAS figures released on 8th August 2023 show 72% of young Scottish applicants, aged 19 and under, gained a place at their first choice university, up from 69% last year. The SPICe briefing accompanying the petition shows that a total of ten universities in Scotland, including RGU offer the LLB programme. In RGU's case, entrants to our LLB programme span SIMD demographics, and entry is not restricted to learners from MD20 or MD40 postcodes.

The present funding system provides institutions with budgetary certainty within which they are able to plan course provision and allocate staff resource in line with expected demand while ensuring a high-quality student experience. There is not an issue of too few funded places. The SFC made available across the sector more than four thousand additional non-controlled funded places during AY2021-22 in part as a response to meet the increased demand arising from the use of teacher-assessed grades to determine SQA awards. Much of this demand was concentrated in higher-tariff institutions as a consequence of the number of A grades awarded increasing, while the number of B and C grades awarded decreased. RGU's enrolment of Scottish-domiciled undergraduates actually decreased as a result of students 'trading-up', and included fewer learners entering the college sector which, in turn, has affected our enrolment of articulating students from college. It is also notable that for AY2023-24, SFC reduced the number of non-controlled funded places by 1,000 FTEs in response to the under-recruitment of students across the sector, which provides further evidence that there is not an issue of there being too few places.

It is also worth noting that between AY2013-14 and 2017-18, SFC made available additional funded places for widening access that were targeted at ten of Scotland's 'most selective' universities. This was the position prior to the additional widening access places being 'mainstreamed' within universities core places from AY2018-19.

Widening Access to University

RGU is committed to widening access to university from among disadvantaged learners. The current measure of assessing universities' performance on widening access, based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation is, however, a crude one. It does not take account of the regional context within which universities operate. RGU has a strong focus on regional recruitment in a region with low numbers of MD20 school students. There are far fewer MD20 postcodes within the North East of Scotland compared to the central belt; less than 8% of Aberdeen City and 1.7% of Aberdeenshire postcodes are categorised as MD20. We are therefore reliant on attracting MD20 school leavers from outside the local area and, in the last five years, we have recruited approximately 75% of our MD20 entrants from beyond the region. It will remain extremely challenging for RGU to meet the institutional target that 10% of all Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants should come from MD20 postcodes as a result of the University's geographical location and the very competitive recruitment environment for MD20 students despite increased offer to study rates.

The previous Commissioner on Fair Access, Prof Sir Peter Scott advised that institutional targets based on SIMD are no longer fit-for-purpose. The University has repeatedly called upon the Scottish Government to accept and implement the Commissioner's recommendation where institutions would be able to develop a basket of indicators upon which progress on widening access can be assessed. The University is contributing to the short-life working group established by Scottish Government to review and assess the widening access measures used. As no single indicator is entirely satisfactory as a measure of disadvantage, applying a basket of measures would provide a more holistic and inclusive approach. This would have the benefit of enabling a broader range of learners to benefit from universities' support for widening access, while also providing a more comprehensive and agile approach to assessing and recognising institutions' progress towards fair access.

RGU undertakes a wide range of activity throughout Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and beyond to make HE accessible to a broad range of learners. We have introduced a distinct to RGU 'Hub' model of school engagement where University staff are embedded in around 25 regional schools, working directly on a sustained basis with teachers and learners, including those furthest from higher education, to support a positive journey to university.

RGU works in partnership with colleges from across Scotland to provide guaranteed progression pathways for students. In 2021-22, 346 students joined the University from colleges across Scotland. The University's sector leading partnership with North East Scotland College (NESCol) now has 60 course level agreements across all of our eleven schools. The University has developed a substantial number of Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) progression routes. We continue to enhance our engagement with this programme to promote HE to adult returners to education.