

Michael Marra MSP submission of 14 March 2024

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

I am writing to thank you, Committee members and clerks for facilitating my appearance at the Committee's meeting on 6th March 2024.

I was pleased to have the opportunity to speak in support of my constituent, Caroline Gordon's petition PE2009: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK. The Committee's decision to keep this petition open is very welcome.

I thought it might be helpful for the Committee if I set out in writing my principal suggestions as to how the Committee might explore further the issues raised in the petition.

Requiring universities to publish how many Scottish-domiciled students were accepted to each course annually would mean that prospective applicants are better informed as to their chances of being accepted to a particular course. Applicants can apply to a maximum of five institutions in one academic year. Universities proactively publishing this data would allow applicants to optimise their chances of being accepted and prevent "wasted" applications.

The Commissioner for Fair Access wrote "I do not find evidence that a "large swathe of the Scottish population" has been "shut out of higher education"". I note that the data to substantiate that claim has not been made available. In particular, I think the Committee should take an interest in what data is available about Scottish students going south of the border for undergraduate degrees as they have been unable to secure a place at a Scottish university.

Could the Committee write to the Commissioner for Fair Access and the Scottish Government requesting this data? The Scottish Government should hold that data and, I believe, should make it available in the interests of transparency.

The Commissioner for Fair Access also acknowledged that his submission did not address “the most substantial concern raised by the petition, i.e. the funding of universities and possible unintended consequences as a result of pursuing access.” The Commissioner indicated his intention to review funding arrangements in more detail in his second year in post. I think it would be worthwhile for the Committee to be kept updated of the outcome of this work by the Commissioner’s office.

I trust that the Committee will find these suggestions helpful, and I look forward to working with members as the Committee continues its consideration of this important petition.