

# Commissioner for Fair Access submission of 22 March 2024

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

Thank you for affording me opportunity to reflect further on Petition PE2009 (Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK), specifically “... *whether, in the interest of greater transparency, data from each university on how many Scottish-domiciled students are accepted onto each course annually could be published. It was suggested that prospective students could use this information when deciding where to apply, optimising their chances of being accepted to a Scottish university.*”

I also note the Committee’s response to the Petition: “*The Committee is aware that students have a limited number of applications when applying to universities and has heard that in a small number of cases, prospective students may apply to a university where there is no possibility of access for them based on evidence from previous years*”.

In principle and in general, I am strongly in favour of greater transparency and making more effective use of existing data. In my first annual report, I make several recommendations and outline priority actions to this effect. For example, recommendation 10 asks for disaggregation of data by pathway, recommendation 11 asks for disaggregation of data to understand the impact of SFC’s Access to High Demand Professions programme, and priority action 6 advises that I intend to scrutinise retention rates.

However, I would not endorse the specific recommendation outlined above.

First, it is unhelpful and inaccurate to assert that “*prospective students may apply to a university where there is no possibility of access for them based on evidence from previous years*” (emphasis added). Even the catalyst for this petition – entrance to some specific courses at the University of Edinburgh in academic year 2021/22 – is an exception, and is atypical for that institution and for the courses in question.

Second, the number of students accepted on to courses varies markedly within and across institutions. A low count of entrants does not necessarily imply that it is more difficult to gain entry, just as a high count of entrants does not necessarily imply that it is easier to gain entry. Providing data on acceptances, without broader context, may be misleading and counter-productive in addressing the problem this recommendation seeks to address.

If data on numbers accepted on to courses is to be made available, it would be necessary to contextualise this with data on number of applications. It would also be necessary to take account of acceptances that do not lead to registrations (as the application-to-acceptance rate, may be higher than the application-to-registration rate in many instances – as a result of some students receiving multiple offers and having to reject some).

It should be acknowledged that, to their credit, in recent years, Scottish HEIs have improved the transparency of what is required to gain entry to specific courses in their institution. Nevertheless, prospective students need guidance to enable them to understand the array of opportunities that are available to them.

I would welcome developments that improve the information available to applicants that would enable them to make fully informed decisions. However, I am not convinced that the recommendation of publishing *data from each university on how many Scottish-domiciled students are accepted onto each course annually* is required.