

REVIEW OF COLLEGE REGIONALISATION

Written evidence from the Commissioner for Fair Access

Introduction

I was appointed Commissioner for Fair Access in January 2017 by the Scottish Government following a recommendation in final report of the Commission on Widening Access published the previous year. My main responsibility is to report on progress towards meeting the Government's targets for increasing participation from socially deprived communities, which were suggested by the Commission, and to comment generally and make recommendations on access issues. I am independent from the Government.

I discharge this responsibility in the following ways:

- Annual Reports to the Government: I have written four regular reports and also a special report on the impact of Covid. My fifth, and final, Annual Report will be published later this month.
- Discussion Documents: These are on a range of topics including disability, retention and outcomes, disability and league tables. They bring together the most up-to-date figures and a commentary by me as Commissioner.
- Scottish Framework for Fair Access: Another recommendation by the Commission on Widening Access was that a Framework for Fair Access should be established to report on the evaluation of access initiatives and to spread good practice. This was finally done in June 2019.

In addition when invited I give speeches, attend conferences and write articles to support my work. Full details are available on the Commissioner's website (which is now separate from that of the Scottish Government): <https://www.commissionerforfairaccess.scot>

The role of colleges in fair access

Colleges play a key role in delivering fair access. They do so in the following ways:

1. They work closely with schools, offering partnerships that make it possible to combine academic and vocational courses. These ease the transition from school to post-school study, initially in further education but also potentially in higher education, especially for students from more socially disadvantaged backgrounds.
2. They play a key role in delivering higher education programmes, principally Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNCs and HNDs). While in England less than 10 per cent of higher education is delivered by further education colleges (and HNs have become a threatened species), in Scotland more than a quarter (27 per cent) of higher education is delivered by Colleges (and HNs are flourishing). The social base of College students is much wider than that of students at Higher Education Institutions. More than a quarter (25.3 per cent) of HE entrants to Colleges in 2020-21 came from the 20-per-cent most deprived communities in Scotland (SIMD20), compared with 16.7 per cent of entrants to full-time first-degree courses.
3. HNs delivered by Colleges have a dual function.
 - First, they are free-standing advanced vocational qualifications that are well understood and continue to be highly regarded by employers.
 - Second, they offer the possibility of students transferring on to first-degree courses in universities - 'articulation' - in the majority of cases with 'advanced standing', ie HN

graduates enter the second, or even third, year because they receive credit for what they have already achieved. Currently 58 per cent of 'articulating' students are granted 'advanced standing'. The Scottish Funding Council has set a target of 75 per cent. In my Annual Reports I have argued that smoother 'articulation' is key to fair access. Four out of 10 SIMD20 entrants to universities come via this college route.

College regionalisation

Any reorganisation that strengthens Colleges is likely to benefit fair access to higher education. Regionalisation has reduced the number of colleges from 41 to 26, producing larger institutions that are more comprehensive, more resilient and more self-confident. In my view, this strengthening of the Colleges has allowed them to continue to play a key role in fair access, both as providers of advanced vocational qualifications and as sources of 'articulating' entrants to universities. In the absence of this strengthening there would be a risk that their role in higher education could have been reduced (even to the vestigial status it has south of the Border).

In 10 of the 13 regions there is now only one college - with two in Lanarkshire, three in Glasgow and 8 in the Highlands and Islands (although here they are make up the University of the Highlands and Islands [UHI]). This rationalisation has helped to simplify partnerships between Colleges and Universities. Because good relationships, and trust, are key to promoting smoother 'articulation', this has contributed to fair access.

However, the regional geography that makes sense for Colleges as providers of locally based further education (and, arguably, free-standing higher education courses) may not make such good sense in the wider context of partnerships between Colleges and Universities. Inevitably these partnerships cross regional boundaries. For example, the three universities in Edinburgh should, and do, not confine their partnerships to those with Edinburgh College. Put simply, the geography of Colleges and the geography of Universities do not match.

Specific questions

What has worked well in the college sector in the years following regionalisation?

The establishment of larger Colleges has strengthened their management capacity, contributed to greater efficiency and increased their standing. This has protected their position as key providers of higher education, as well as further education, which has promoted fair access because of their wider social base - for the reasons given above.

How might the sector further improve in the years ahead?

The scope for further rationalisation is limited. Colleges would benefit from a period of organisational stability. It is also important that Colleges receive adequate and equitable funding. These conditions would allow them to continue their role with regard to fair access.

How might Colleges adapt in the light of current challenges such as those resulting from Covid-19?

Colleges responded quickly and imaginatively to the Covid-19 pandemic. For my special report on the impact of Covid-19 on fair access I wrote to all Colleges and Universities, and held (virtual) meetings with several. I was impressed by the efforts made by Colleges, and especially by College staff, to help their students in the most difficult circumstances. However, the impact of Covid-19 was far-reaching, and is still unfolding. The attainment gap in schools, mental health among students (and staff), financial hardship and other issues will continue to reverberate - and could well be exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.

What should be the priorities of the College sector in the years ahead?

Colleges should continue to provide high-quality further and higher education focused on meeting the individual needs of their students as well as the skill demands of employers. They should work together with employers and with universities within a better integrated system of tertiary education and training (ranging from on-the-job training to postgraduate degrees), such has had been envisaged in the Learner Journey: 16-24 initiative.

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