FUTURES

NOT

BACKGROUNDs
Knowing that education is the most powerful weapon there is to break Scotland’s cycle of deprivation and in so doing, transform lives, dismantle barriers and increase fairness, you will understand why I relished the opportunity to chair Scotland’s Independent Commission on Widening Access. In conjunction with experts from all parts of the Education system, we worked hard and swiftly to produce a radical set of recommendations in a Blueprint for Fair Access for March this year to challenge Government, schools, colleges, universities and others for the problem of underrepresentation of talented learners from disadvantaged communities belongs to the whole system.

Scotland has an exciting opportunity to overcome this but only if all involved in the whole system play their best professional part.

I know that Scotland has a genuine appetite for radical, realistic change. There is, impressively, a solid and creative foundation in widening access here in Scotland but the Commission’s recommendations require every partner in the system to do differently, go deeper to ensure all in our community have every opportunity to succeed. It will take a whole system giving its best towards this aim.

Scotland’s 19 higher education institutions have already started that process in well chosen, strategic areas with pleasing speed. I have shared in some of their thinking since March and have found the Principals to be highly motivated, open to challenge, ambitious, realistic and prepared to take new and different approaches in their institutions, in partnership with each other and others to deliver the developmental change in access and participation we all want to see.

The three actions Universities Scotland has set out in Futures not Backgrounds are a strong start. Taking a hard look at admissions, bridging programmes and articulation between college and university marks a very positive response in three key areas which link closely to many of our recommendations. They will need to build on this and I understand that Principals are starting the work on more detailed plans and will be engaging with partners and stakeholders over the second half of this year.

The Commission clearly laid much responsibility on the profession itself to step up to the mark on fairness and it is therefore encouraging to witness the early leadership and determination that Principals have shown in response to the Blueprint. Where actions clearly sit with universities, or with others, it is right that those organisations be expected and empowered to lead on those actions for it cannot be overstated how much is invested in getting this right over the next 14 years to 2030.

I believe wholeheartedly that the most powerful, genuine and lasting change will come from within and I am encouraged by the wide support the report has received.

I set out a vision to 2030. It is undoubtedly ambitious and it needs to be: it is also undoubtedly achievable.

All involved in Scotland’s education must seize this opportunity, ensure that it is for all and must start now.

July 2016
We want Scotland to be recognised as the nation that solved the attainment gap and the challenge of widening participation to higher education. We want a fully diverse and inclusive student population in our universities; one that reflects every aspect of the communities, country and world that they are part of. This is for everyone’s benefit. We believe it is achievable. It comes down to a belief that higher education should be and can be about people’s futures, not backgrounds.

The attainment gap and widening participation in higher education are top priorities in Scotland, as they should be. We see this priority shared across all political parties and all parts of the education sector.

A Blueprint for Fair Access, produced by the Commission on Widening Access, has given Scotland a set of recommendations to take forward. The Commission was clear that we will be successful in changing things if action is taken at all levels of education and by all relevant partners and stakeholders. We support that.

Higher education institutions are key partners. We are committed to being bold in the actions we take, individually and in partnership, to meet these challenges.

We have been discussing this as a sector. Some actions sit firmly within our responsibility and we believe there are actions that universities can start work on now. We outline our early thinking in three of these broad areas over the next few pages. There are other recommendations that we can work with other organisations to support, or that higher education will need support to deliver.

Scotland will have a Commissioner for Widening Access in due course, who will take forward work to develop a Framework for Fair Access. We see this Framework as a vitally important part of delivery and think it should be developed collaboratively with Scottish Government and universities. It should also build on the evidence base to provide a detailed and coherent policy plan. We’d like the Framework to take a broader perspective to widening participation than the Commission was able to, so that it includes mature, part-time and postgraduate students.

This document summarises an initial set of actions for higher education institutions to deliver. Our intention is to keep discussing the Blueprint in our sector and with other stakeholders, including the Commissioner, over the coming months to build a more complete and detailed plan of action.

We have identified three areas within the Blueprint that we believe higher education institutions can start work on straight away. These actions address many of the recommendations in the report. We have identified an additional action that we see as important to the scope of the work the Commissioner will take forward.

Our intention is to keep discussing the Blueprint in our sector and with other stakeholders, including the Commissioner, over the coming months to build a more complete and detailed plan of action.
Early action to be delivered by universities

1. Admissions: A system of admissions that does more to level the playing field for applicants

University leaders will review their admissions policies and procedures to ensure that they provide more opportunities to recognise and reward the talent and potential of applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We recognise that it is important to identify, and value, an applicant’s potential as well as their attainment. It is also important to acknowledge, within the admissions process, that not everyone has had access to the same opportunities in life by the point of their application. There are ways of doing both of these things through use of contextual admissions.

Contextual admissions are already used extensively across the university sector in Scotland. Contextual admissions enable institutions to offer places to applicants with the greatest potential to succeed in higher education in the context of difficulties they may have experienced, not simply on the basis of their exam results alone. In some cases institutions have been applying context to their admissions decisions for more than a decade. In other cases this is more recent.

We believe that judgements about adjusted offers are best made by admissions professionals, using their experience and knowledge to take full account of an individual’s circumstances, their potential and their commitment to the course that they have shown. Every applicant is an individual and these important factors make the difference between a student who does or does not thrive at university. We think this has a better chance of success than a uniform application of access thresholds for a certain group of applicants based primarily on a single measure of disadvantage. This would limit consideration of the applicant as an individual and limit the scope for professional judgement.

Link to the Blueprint: This action relates to several of the Blueprint recommendations including:

Recommendation 5 (flexible admissions), 11 and 12 (access thresholds), 14 (non-academic factors in admissions), 21 (supporting those with care experience), 31 (measures to identify access learners), 32 (targets).

2. Making bridging and other access programmes transferable across Scotland

There are a great many access programmes and bridging programmes in place across Scotland. Some are to provide support from one transition to the next whether that is from school to university or college to university. Some provide a ‘top-up’ or second chance for people who did not quite make the attainment level to get into university. They are a way of providing confidence, for the student and the university, that the candidate has what it takes to do well in university and to get them off to a good start in their course.

There is scope to improve how transferable these access programmes are so that learners can move more freely between them and progress to different institutions having taken part in one. This would mean that people’s opportunities are not limited by where they live and what they can, or cannot, access close to home.

Collaborating more on access programmes may bring other advantages too, including simplifying the widening access landscape making it more easily understood and easier to navigate. It may increase the number of opportunities we can offer to students or possibly reduce the cost of running these programmes through greater economies of scale.

Principals will take this forward, working with expert practitioners in the sector and those leading existing access programmes and in consultation with teachers and others.

Link to the Blueprint: This action relates to several of the Blueprint recommendations including:

Recommendation 4 (coordinating delivery of what works), 7 (bridging programmes), 16 (school attainment), 32 (targets).

As part of their reviews, universities will:

1. Identify and share best practice in the use of contextual admissions. This will include identifying where it is possible to achieve more consistency in their use across institutions.
2. Consider how to make the use of contextual admissions better understood by potential applicants, their parents, guardians, teachers and others. We hope this will dispel perceptions some people hold that higher education is an unattainable goal. We hope it will support aspirations, inform decision-making and encourage more applications from all backgrounds.
3. Look at how applicants from deprived backgrounds and care-experienced learners are identified in admissions.
4. Consider how and where it is appropriate to make adjusted offers to applicants who have markers of deprivation or underrepresentation.

There is scope to improve how transferable these access programmes are so that learners can move more freely between them and progress to different institutions having taken part in one.
3. Building on articulation from college

Articulation from college is a fast-growing route into university that offers an alternative from the more conventional route from school via an application through UCAS.

Articulation is the term used to describe someone progressing from college with a Higher National qualification (either at Certificate or Diploma level) into year 2 or 3 of an undergraduate degree programme at university.

Last year over 4,000 students started university through articulation routes and were given full or partial credit for their HN qualification. It is still a relatively new route and is unique to Scotland. Full credit for an HNC means direct entry into second year of university and direct entry into third year with an HND.

It can work really well, and does so for a great number of students and the associated colleges and universities. However, Higher National qualifications were originally created as qualifications for employment, not for further study. They are now considered to be ‘dual purpose’ qualifications but there are big differences in the curricula and learning styles between HNs and undergraduate degrees as well as some differences at subject level. This means that, for the purpose of articulation, there is not necessarily a straight read-across when moving from one institution to the other, which takes considerable work from colleges and universities to get the ‘fit’ right to ensure smooth transitions for students.

There are two specific things we can do here:

- At the moment, where credit is given for the HN qualification 82 per cent of students get full credit. However, that still leaves some receiving only partial credit and some students progress with no credit given for their HN qualification. It is important to consider that where no credit is given this can be for a variety of reasons including student choice.

  Universities see scope to improve on the number of students given full credit for their prior study and reducing the number who receive no credit at all. We are committed to addressing this.

- We want to work with our college partners to increase both the number of articulation routes between courses and the number of students using them. In doing so we will diversify opportunity and improve the contribution articulation makes to widening access. This should also mean developing new routes to a broader number of institutions. This will require closer partnerships between colleges and universities to develop the curriculum in a way that works for the student that can be delivered in both sectors.

  We also feel it will be helpful to monitor the use of articulation routes from college to university, by markers of underrepresentation including SIMD20. It will be useful to grow the proportion of students articulating from underrepresented backgrounds over the period to 2030 and track this to progress in widening access in our universities.

  Link to Blueprint: This action relates to several of the Blueprint recommendations including:

  Recommendation 4 (coordinating the delivery of what works), 5 and 6 (flexible transitions), 8, 9 and 10 (articulation).

4. An inclusive definition of underrepresentation

We want to look as broadly as possible at who should be the subject of widening access priorities. The Blueprint sets out a 14-year plan with milestones to 2030. Scotland cannot afford to wait until 2030 to get it right for groups of underrepresented students who do not fit into the SIMD20 category.

We remain concerned that many learners who experience various forms of deprivation do not come from the postcode areas that are identified as the most deprived communities. For example, those in care often do not live in deprived areas as a result of their foster families and residential homes being located elsewhere. Half of recipients for free school meals live outwith SIMD20 postcode areas.

We remain concerned that many learners who experience various forms of deprivation do not come from the postcode areas that are identified as the most deprived communities.

We understand why the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation is the focus at the moment. It suffers from a number of widely acknowledged weaknesses but it has the advantage of being used across school, college and university levels of education. However, it is still no substitute for the development of more sensitive ways of measuring individual disadvantage.

Students with protected characteristics and mature students need to be given full consideration in the new Framework and by the Commissioner. There are access issues in part-time learning and at postgraduate level too.

Link to Blueprint:

This action relates to several of the Blueprint recommendations including:

Recommendation 4 (coordinating the delivery of what works), 26 (funding), 29 and 30 (better use of data to support fair access), 31 (measures to identify access learners).
The Blueprint makes a number of other recommendations that will require close joint working between the sector, Scottish Government and Scottish Funding Council, drawing in wider partners where appropriate. Universities Scotland want to give a clear message that we are ready to play a full part in this.

We see the following as the priorities:

- A need to define the remit of the proposed Commissioner for Fair Access. The remit should include the responsibility to look holistically across schools, colleges and universities to widen access to higher education. The Commissioner needs to have the stature and independence to challenge and support all parts of the education sector and to challenge and support the Scottish Government.

- That the development of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access takes an evidence-based approach with appropriate input and actions from schools, colleges, universities and the Scottish Government.

- Development of a Unique Learner Number (ULN) in Scotland (recommendation 29). This would help to support widening participation by making it possible to track individual learner journeys through the education system from early years to university and beyond. For example, ULNs can be used to analyse progression rates from schools, from further education through into higher education. Improved analysis of progression statistics will support the development of more effective widening participation initiatives, more effective approaches to measuring the impact of initiatives, and improved student support services.

- The Commission’s targets for progress are intentionally ambitious. We understand this. Continuing with an evidence-based approach, we would like to see the following things taken into consideration when it comes to the targets and milestones in recommendation 32:
  i. The relationship between the pace of change in narrowing the ‘attainment gap’ at school-age and those of school-leaving age and the pace of change in university admissions.
  ii. As we succeed with our work to widen participation we will see the demand for places rising. Scottish-domiciled applicants already face more competition for places at Scottish higher education institutions than applicants in the rest of the UK for places at other UK universities. We think it would be helpful to consider additional, fully-funded places. It will be important for the Scottish Government and Scottish Funding Council to run detailed analysis and modelling of the potential impact on availability of places.
  iii. The need for widening access to be resourced adequately at all levels of education. Universities want to ensure the necessary resources are committed to support underrepresented students before, during and after they enter university. We want all students to experience a world-class Scottish higher education now and in the future.
Scotland’s university leaders are keen to make the fullest possible contribution to the widening access priorities identified in *A Blueprint for Fairness* as part of joined-up action across education and government.

We expect to bring forward more detailed plans linked to the recommendations later in the year.

We look forward to working with partners to achieve this.

The Commission’s recommendations require every partner in the system to do differently, go deeper to ensure all in our community have every opportunity to succeed. It will take a whole system giving its best towards this aim. Scotland’s 19 higher education institutions have already started that process in well chosen, strategic areas with pleasing speed.