Commission on Widening Access

- This paper summarises the final report of the Commission on Widening Access and provides an overview of the reaction to the report to date. It asks the committee to consider the report’s recommendations.

- The paper provides a list of all the recommendations and pulls out SFC specific recommendations for discussion including the proposed targets to equalise intake from the 20% most deprived communities. There are also a set of funding recommendations for the SFC including how to encourage more access activity from the core rather than strategic funding.

- Press coverage on the Commission’s report has been largely positive but the recommendations on an access threshold have been the most controversial of all the recommendations posed. This recommendation would require universities to set access thresholds for all degree programmes against which learners from the most deprived backgrounds should be assessed. These access thresholds would be separate to standard entrance requirements and set as ambitiously as possible, at a level which accurately reflects the minimum academic standard and subject knowledge necessary to successfully complete a degree programme.

Recommendations

- There are no recommendations for the Committee as we are awaiting a formal response to the report from the Scottish Government. The SFC executive would however find it helpful to hear the AIC’s views on the report. It would also be particularly helpful to hear the AIC’s views on the SFC specific recommendations (these are highlighted in Annex A).

Financial implications

- There are no financial implications in this paper.
Commission on Widening Access

Purpose

1. This paper summarises the final report of the Commission on Widening Access and provides an overview of the reaction to the report to date. It asks the committee to consider the report’s recommendations.

Background

2. The final report, named the *Blueprint for Fairness*, was published on 14 March 2016, a summary of the report and a list of its 34 recommendations is provided in Annex A.

3. At a Scottish Parliament Debate on 17 March, the First Minister immediately accepted recommendation 32—“to maintain the urgency and focus that are needed so that by 2030 students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent 20 per cent of entrants to higher education.”

4. The SFC executive have analysed the phased approached towards achieving that ambition and feel that this is achievable within the timescale allocated. This is particularly the case when considered alongside recommendation 27 in the report which states that “the SFC should make more extensive use of their existing regulatory powers, where appropriate, to drive greater progress. The Scottish Government should ensure that it provides the SFC with the necessary mandate to take this action.”

5. On 21st March the First Minister also:
   - Accepted two of the three recommendations on care experience (recommendation 21 and 22). She said the Government from 2017/18 will ensure that young people who have experience of care, and who meet the minimum entry standards, will be offered a place at university and will receive a full bursary, currently £7,625; and
   - Endorsed the recommendations (recommendation 7) which call for a network of academic bridging programmes to be developed across the country. She stated that these schemes, similar to summer schools, would allow disadvantaged learners between school and college and university to showcase their potential, top-up their attainment and boost their chances of admission.

6. Furthermore, on the 11th April the Education Minister announced that if re-elected they would support recommendation 1 of the report which was to appoint an Access Commissioner.

7. We now await a full response from Ministers to the report and further guidance.
on our role in its implementation.

What are the implications of the report for the SFC?

8. The SFC executive is supportive of the final report and it has been helpful being involved in the secretariat as the report was developed by Scottish Government officials. The report quite deliberately takes a system approach to addressing the remit it was set and therefore not all the recommendations are directed at the SFC or indeed the university sector. We estimate that 14 of the 34 recommendations have a direct implication on our current approach to access at the SFC. These recommendations have been shaded in Annex A.

9. The key recommendation for us and for our outcome agreement approach is recommendation 32 which seeks to equalise the intake of students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds in both the college and university sector by 2030. The college sector outperforms the university sector in this area and as a sector there is not an issue of underrepresentation from the 20% most deprived backgrounds.

10. The recommendation helpfully provides phased elements to this with the first milestones relating to the university sector being:

   • By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 16% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish HEIs as a whole.

   • By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10% of full-time first degree entrants to every individual Scottish university.

11. The graph below outlines our progress in relation to the first bullet for the university sector as a whole.

![Graph](image)
12. This outlines that since 2011-12 (the year before the OA approach) there has been a 1.6% increase in entrants from SIMD20, this compares to a 0.3% increase in the previous three year period and represents an increase of 865 entrants.

13. The graph below demonstrates the activity for SIMD20 and HE in the college sector which demonstrates that the college sector already exceeds 20%. In addition to this, since the OA approach there has been a 2% increase in activity. During this time there has been an 8,228 SUMs reduction in HE SUMs but a 5,430 increase in HE SUMs for those from the 10% most deprived backgrounds.
14. The next graph outlines where each institution sits in relation to the 10% minimum intake. This data relates to 2014-15.

15. The published technical paper that supported this recommendation suggested that four out of the five institutions (namely: Aberdeen; Edinburgh; RGU and St Andrews) who currently deliver below 10% from the 20% most deprived postcodes could and should deliver more. How, we intend to implement this in our 2017-18 Outcome Agreement Guidance is provided in a separate paper on the agenda.

16. Overall the work of the SFC and sectors to drive forward progress in access was praised but it was felt that more could be done to co-ordinate activity (see recommendation 7) and to promote seamless, understood and guaranteed pathways for students. It was felt that achieving this could maximise our impact and could achieve change faster.

17. It is possible, given the FM’s endorsement, that the recommendation on bridging programmes which asks the SFC to work with others to expand these programmes across Scotland to meet need will be one of the earlier recommendations we are asked to respond to. It is perhaps worth outlining that, we are aware that at least one institution feels very strongly that bridging programmes should not be used to gain access to multiple universities as they need to be designed to enable guaranteed entry and build confidence to access
a particular university. It is also probably worth outlining that this recommendation would require an initial assessment of demand for such programmes and may require financial incentives or support to encourage growth of this activity.

18. We are particularly supportive of the **articulation recommendations** (recommendations 8 to 10) and suggest, that further to the AIC discussion on articulation at our last meeting, that this is already in progress including consideration of how we can extend articulation into other areas such as apprenticeships.

19. During the expert groups that supported the evolution of the recommendations in the report, the secretariat were particularly struck by feedback from institutions which suggested inconsistent approaches to personal statements within applications ranging from in-depth analysis to completely ignoring their content. We are therefore very supportive of recommendation 14 which asks us to undertake an independent review of the processes – such as personal statements and interviews – that are used to **evaluate non-academic factors** in applications, with the aim of assessing whether, and to what extent, they unfairly disadvantage access applicants.

20. The report also has two recommendations for us in relationship to how we use and report on **access measures** (see recommendations 30 and 31). We agree with these recommendations and feel that this is being taken forward through our triennial review and impact for access programmes of work. We are also keen to work with and build on the Universities Scotland work to identify additional access measures and feel that the work we have commissioned with the University of Durham on contextualised admissions will greatly improve our understanding of the use and effectiveness of contextualised data.

21. During our forthcoming access workshop we are keen to seek the AIC’s view on how we should report on access and specifically the evolution of Learning for All. It is the SFC executive’s view that perhaps our Learning for All publication should now be replaced by the triennial review and a key focus of that review should be our progress on the requested implementation of the Commission on Widening Access.

22. Finally the report outlines a set of **funding recommendations** for the SFC (see recommendation 24 to 26). In relation to reviewing our funds to deliver the implementation of the Commission’s recommendations we feel that this is in hand through our normal review process. However, **we would be keen to seek the AIC’s view on recommendation 25 and 26** which asks the SFC to monitor how institution spend from core funding is being used to support access through the Outcome Agreement process and states that by 2021, the SFC, in consultation with the Scottish Government, should explore options for more
targeted funding models to better support the recruitment and retention of greater numbers of access students.

**Reactions to the report to date**

23. The report received positive press coverage when it was released and it seems to have been warmly received by most stakeholders. Most of this focused on the recommendations in relation to admissions (recommendations 11 and 12). Our partners in relation to our national ambition for care experienced students have also been particularly positive about the report and the subsequent FM announcement to accept recommendations 21 and 22.

24. The recommendations in the report in relation to admission processes and access thresholds (recommendations 11 and 12) are perhaps the most controversial recommendations as they ask for separate admission processes for those from the most deprived communities to enable them to access universities on the achievement of the grades needed to complete the course as opposed to the grades used to filter down applications which are often inflated due to the demand for places. This was the subject of a Call Kaye debate following the publication of the report and anecdotally the SFC have received feedback from institutions questioning the practicality of how this would operate, we are also aware that this has been discussed at a Universities Scotland meeting.

25. We have still to receive a formal Scottish Government response to the report so it is not possible at this stage to predict if this recommendation will move into an implementation phase. However, the SFC executive is keen to consider how we move towards a more systematic, consistent and evidenced approach towards contextualised admissions and recommendation 5 specifically tasks the SFC to have a stronger role in this area. We are currently funding the University of Durham to assess the current contextualised admission landscape in Scotland and to provide advice on how more consistency could be achieved. Universities Scotland have received a presentation on this work and have requested that they be involved in the evolving recommendations.

**Next steps**

26. Following the election, Ministers will outline their response to the report which will enable us to begin to implement the supported recommendations. This will likely include a Ministerial guidance letter.

**Risk assessment**

27. There are no risks associated with this paper at this stage.
Equality and diversity assessment

28. There are no equality and diversity issues associated with this paper at this stage.

Financial implications

29. There are no financial considerations to be taken account of in this paper.

Recommendations

30. The Committee is invited to discuss the Blueprint for Fairness and its recommendations. We are particularly interested in views on the SFC relevant recommendations which have been shaded in Annex A.

31. We would also like to seek the Committee’s views on the funding recommendations (24 to 26) particularly in relation to how to be more impactful from our core resource in relation to our access ambitions.

Publication

32. This paper will be published on the Council website.

Further information

33. Contact: Fiona Burns, tel: 0131 313 6517, email: fburns@sfc.ac.uk.
Annex A: Summary of the Blueprint for Fairness

A Blueprint for Fairness – The final report of the Commission on Widening Access

Published Monday 14 March 2016

Purpose

To advise Government on how to achieve ambition that every child, irrespective of socioeconomic background, should have an equal chance of accessing higher education

Key points

“Access is a whole system problem and it will require system wide change to solve it”
- The report identifies a number of areas where early learning providers, schools, colleges and universities need to work more closely together to deliver the best provision for learners

The “time is ripe for a more coordinated, collaborative and comprehensive approach”

“It is also time to rebalance the focus from the perceived deficit in the individual to what more the system can do to support disadvantaged learners to succeed”

The report makes 34 recommendations which if implemented should make a “significant dent in disadvantage; improving life chances and social mobility in Scotland”. These are set out in full at the end of this document

Recommendations include:

- The appointment of a Commissioner for Fair Access to provide leadership, a voice for disadvantaged learners and a challenge to all parts of the education system and Government. They will also be responsible for coordinating the development of a more substantial evidence base on issues most pertinent to fair access; and will publish annually a report to Ministers outlining their views on progress towards equal access in Scotland to inform policy development at national, regional and institutional level (recommendation 1)

- By 2018 the Commissioner (working with experts) should publish a Scottish Framework for Fair Access which will provide Scotland with an authoritative, evidence based framework to guide future access work
and set the benchmark for access interventions going forward - public funding for access (including specific and core funding) should focus on programmes that are consistent with this Framework (recommendations 2 and 3)

- Seeks to build on existing good practice, with recommendations including expanding bridging programmes (recommendation 7) and articulation pathways (recommendations 8-10)

- New admissions thresholds for students from the most deprived backgrounds (recommendations 11 and 12)

- Entitlements to the offer of a place and full bursary for students with care experience who meet admissions thresholds (recommendations 21 and 22)

- A series of targets should be set to ensure that, by 2030, students from the 20% most deprived areas make up 20% of Higher Education entrants (recommendation 32)

Recommendations

Commissioner for Fair Access

Recommendation 1: The Scottish Government should appoint a Commissioner for Fair Access by the end of 2016 to:

- lead cohesive and system wide efforts to drive fair access in Scotland; acting as an advocate for access for disadvantaged learners and holding to account those with a role to play in achieving equal access.
- coordinate and prioritise the development of a more substantial evidence base on the issues most pertinent to fair access, including the commissioning and publication of independent research. The Scottish Government should ensure an appropriate annual budget is made available to support this work.
- publish, annually, a report to Ministers outlining the Commissioner’s views on progress towards equal access in Scotland to inform development of effective policy at national, regional and institutional level.

Identifying and Sharing Good Practice

Recommendation 2: By 2018, the Commissioner for Fair Access, working with experts, should publish a Scottish Framework for Fair Access. This authoritative,
evidence based framework should identify the most impactful forms of access activity at each stage of the learner journey, from early learning through to higher education and provide best practice guidelines on its delivery and evaluation.

**Recommendation 3:** Public funding for access programmes – either through specific external funding or funding from core budgets – should focus on programmes that are consistent with the Scottish Framework for Fair Access.

**Coordinating the Delivery of What Works**

**Recommendation 4:** Universities, colleges, local authorities, schools, SFC funded access programmes and early years providers should work together to deliver a coordinated approach to access which removes duplication and provides a coherent and comprehensive offer to learners.

**Flexible Transitions**

**Recommendation 5:** Universities should ensure their admissions processes and entry requirements are based on a strong educational rationale and are not unnecessarily prescriptive, to the detriment of learners who take advantage of the availability of a more flexible range of pathways. This should be monitored by the SFC through the outcome agreement process.

**Recommendation 6:** The Scottish Government, working with key stakeholders, should ensure the key transitions phases around SCQF levels 6 to 8 are better used to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with the qualifications and experiences required to support fair access.

**Bridging Programmes**

**Recommendation 7:** The Scottish Funding Council, working with professionals, should develop a model of how bridging programmes can be expanded nationally to match need.

**Articulation**

**Recommendation 8:** The SFC should seek more demanding articulation targets from those universities that have not traditionally been significant players in articulation.

**Recommendation 9:** Universities colleges and the SFC should closely monitor the expansion of articulation to ensure it continues to support disadvantaged learners to progress to degree level study. Should this not be the case, a
proportion of articulation places should be prioritised for disadvantaged learners.

**Recommendation 10:** The Scottish Funding Council, working with universities and colleges, should explore more efficient, flexible and learner centred models of articulation which provide learners with the choice of a broader range of institutions and courses.

**Access Thresholds for Admissions**

**Recommendation 11:** By 2019 all universities should set access thresholds for all degree programmes against which learners from the most deprived backgrounds should be assessed. These access thresholds should be separate to standard entrance requirements and set as ambitiously as possible, at a level which accurately reflects the minimum academic standard and subject knowledge necessary to successfully complete a degree programme.

**Recommendation 12:** All universities should be as open and transparent as possible over their use of access thresholds and wider contextual admissions policies. In particular, they should seek to maximise applications from disadvantaged learners by proactively promoting the access thresholds to the relevant schools, pupils, parents, local authorities and teachers.

**University Rankings**

**Recommendation 13:** The Commissioner for Fair Access, should engage with those compiling key university rankings to ensure greater priority is given to socioeconomic diversity within the rankings and to ensure that institutions who take the actions necessary to achieve fair access are not penalised.

**Non-Academic Factors in Admissions**

**Recommendation 14:** The SFC should undertake an independent review of the processes – such as personal statements and interviews – that are used to evaluate non-academic factors in applications, with the aim of assessing whether, and to what extent, they unfairly disadvantage access applicants.

**Early Years**

**Recommendation 15:** Universities and colleges should increase engagement with our youngest children and their families as part of the provision of a coordinated package of support for those in our most deprived communities in line with Recommendation 4.

**School Attainment**
**Recommendation 16:** Universities, working with schools, should take greater responsibility for the development of the pool of applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds by delivering academically based programmes to support highly able learners, who are at risk of not fulfilling their academic potential.

**Information, Advice and Guidance**

**Recommendation 17:** SDS and schools should work together to provide a more coordinated, tailored offer of information, advice and guidance to disadvantaged learners at key transition phases throughout their education.

**Access to Key Subjects**

**Recommendation 18:** Universities, colleges and local authorities should work together to provide access to a range of Higher and Advanced Higher subjects, which ensures that those from disadvantaged backgrounds or living in rural areas are not restricted in their ability to access higher education by the subject choices available to them.

**Financial Support for Learners**

**Recommendation 19:** The Commissioner for Fair Access should commission research, within three months of appointment, to assess how student finance impacts on the participation of disadvantaged learners in higher education.

**Recommendation 20:** Disadvantaged learners and their parents, should be provided with clear, accurate information on both the availability of student finance and the conditions for repayment. This should be taken forward by the bodies identified in Recommendation 17 and the Student Awards Agency Scotland.

**Supporting those with Care Experience**

**Recommendation 21:** By 2017, those with a care experience, who meet the access threshold should be entitled to the offer of a place at a Scottish university. Entitlement should also apply to those with a care experience who have had to take a break from higher education and wish to return. Learners should be assessed against minimum entry level in 2017 and 2018 and the access threshold thereafter.

**Recommendation 22:** The Scottish Government should replace student living costs loans with a non-repayable bursary and provide a more flexible package of student support for learners with a care experience from academic year 2017/18.
**Recommendation 23:** The Scottish Government should develop an approach to allow those with a care experience to be identified from early years to post-school and on to employment to enable additional support, for example, a marker or a flag. Young people with care experience must be included in the development of how this would be used and shared.

**Funding**

**Recommendation 24:** The SFC should review the best use of its funds, specifically the Access and Retention Fund, to deliver the implementation of the Commission’s recommendations.

**Recommendation 25:** The SFC should monitor how institution spend from core funding is being used to support access through the Outcome Agreement process.

**Recommendation 26:** By 2021, the SFC, in consultation with the Scottish Government, should explore options for more targeted funding models to better support the recruitment and retention of greater numbers of access students.

**Regulation**

**Recommendation 27:** The SFC should make more extensive use of their existing regulatory powers, where appropriate, to drive greater progress. The Scottish Government should ensure that it provides the SFC with the necessary mandate to take this action.

**Recommendation 28:** The Scottish Government should ensure that objectives relating to fair access are embedded in the regulatory frameworks of other agencies/public bodies with a role to play in advancing equal access.

**Better Use of Data to Support Fair Access**

**Recommendation 29:** The Scottish Government should improve mechanisms to track learners and share data to support fair access. Specifically, the Government should

- lead the work necessary to develop and implement the use of a unique learner number to be used to track learners’ progress from early learning, throughout education and onwards into employment.

- review data access arrangements to provide a national process for the provision of information to practitioners and policy makers working on
fair access. This review should consider access to and sharing of data held by local authorities, schools, UCAS and SAAS.

**Recommendation 30:** The Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Government should enhance the analyses and publication of data on fair access.

**Measures to Identify Access Learners**

**Recommendation 31:** The Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council, working with key stakeholders, should develop a consistent and robust set of measures to identify access students by 2018.

**Targets**

**Recommendation 32:** The Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council should implement the following targets to drive forward the delivery of equal access in Scotland:

To realise the First Minister’s ambition of equality of access to higher education in Scotland:

- By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to higher education. Equality of access should be seen in both the college sector and the university sector.

To drive progress toward this goal:

- By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 16% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish HEIs as a whole.
- By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10% of full-time first degree entrants to every individual Scottish university.
- By 2026, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 18% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities as a whole.
- In 2022, the target of 10% for individual Scottish universities should be reviewed and a higher level target should be considered for the subsequent years.

**Agenda for the Future**

**Recommendation 33:** The Commissioner for Fair Access should:

- consider what further work is required to support equal access for other groups of learners and within specific degree subjects.
• consider what further work is required to support equal outcomes after study for those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with a care experience.

**Final recommendation**

**Recommendation 34:** The Scottish Government should report on progress against the recommendations it accepts from this report, 12 months after issuing its response. Thereafter, progress towards equal access should be reported on annually by the Commissioner for Fair Access.