

COMMISSION ON WIDENING ACCESS

CALL FOR EVIDENCE

JUNE 2015

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Background on the Commission

The recent Programme for Government sets out the Scottish Government's vision of a fairer, more equal Scotland. Central to that vision is the ambition that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of accessing higher education as a child born in one of our least deprived.

The Commission on Widening Access has been established to advise Ministers on how this ambition can be met.

The Commission is chaired by Dame Ruth Silver, a senior educationalist with a personal and professional commitment to access. Dame Ruth is joined by key figures from business, education, early years and student representatives.

The Commission has been asked to provide an interim report in autumn 2015, followed by a final report in spring 2016.

Call for Evidence

To achieve early progress, in the initial phase of its work the Commissioners have established three working groups, each focussed on a strategic theme:

1. Identification and removal of the barriers to access and retention
2. Identification and scaling up of best practice on their dismantling
3. The data and measures needed to support access and retention

This call for evidence mirrors robustly these three strategic themes. Below we set out in more detail the focus of each group and questions that they have identified to help inform their work.

1. Identification and removal of barriers to access and retention

This group will synthesise existing evidence around barriers to widening access and retention, and their removal, for those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. Within these groups, it will also seek to identify any specific barriers for those with different equality characteristics, particularly for those with a care experience.

2. The identification and scaling up of best practice

This group will identify best practice on supporting access to higher education across early years, schools, colleges, universities and employers. Based on this, it will support the Commission to make recommendations on how best practice can be scaled up and embedded within individual institutions as well as across the wider education and employment system.

3. Data and measures

This group will identify the data and information required to monitor and support improvements on widening access across all education providers, and the processes necessary to support this.

Its work will help the Commission to propose meaningful, evidence based targets for participation in higher education, as well as clear milestones to drive further and faster progress.

How to respond

Please respond to this call for evidence by completing the form at **Annex A** and then emailing or posting it to:

Email: Wideningaccess@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

Postal Address:

Secretariat to the Widening Access Commission
Higher Education and Learner Support Division
5 Atlantic Quay
150 Broomielaw
Glasgow
G2 8LU

The call for evidence will close at midnight on 20 July 2015. Responses should not exceed 1500 words.

Please provide your response in Microsoft Word format. It would be very helpful to include contact details in your response in case the Commission wishes to seek further evidence from you or your organisation.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

Responses will be reviewed by the Commission and its working groups after the closing date. They will be used to identify evidence and themes that the Commission should consider in its work. Responses may be published online or as part of Commission reports. It is therefore important to make clear if there is anything in your response which you consider to be confidential and would prefer not to be made public.

Help with queries

Questions about this call for evidence can be sent to:

Stephen O'Neill
Wideningaccess@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

ANNEX A

RESPONSE FORM

Name: Lucy Hunter Blackburn

Organisation: None

Role: Freelance researcher

Are you responding on behalf of this organisation? (Yes/No): N/a

Email: adventuresinevidence@gmail.com

Tel: 01312584493

Please provide evidence and views in relation to the questions and strategic themes on the next page.

Evidence should relate to widening access specifically for those from **socio-economically** deprived backgrounds.

Responses **should not exceed 1500 words.**

1. The identification and removal of barriers to access and retention

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What are the main barriers to accessing university and higher education in colleges for people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and those with care experience, and how can these be overcome?
- What more can be done specifically by colleges and universities, including institutions with the highest entry requirements, to generate a greater volume of successful applications from people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?
- What actions can be taken to support people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds who enter higher education to successfully complete their course?

Response

This response concentrates on the role of student support. The [annex](#) to this response provides the supporting detailed evidence.

The available evidence suggests that student funding plays a smaller part in determining participation in higher education by disadvantaged young people than is generally asserted in political, media and social discourse. Other factors, such as family attitudes, school attainment and subject choice and the extent of well-designed access work undertaken in schools, appear likely to have a much larger influence.

Elements of student funding which have been argued at various times to have an effect on participation are:

- **Tuition fees:** International and internal UK comparisons provide no evidence for a link between fee levels and access, particularly once the immediate costs of fees are covered by access to a state-supported loan.
- **Total debt (whether for fees or living costs):** Contrary to expectation, across the UK as debt has increased so has participation by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This does not rule out that some young students are deterred by debt and various studies emphasise the need to understand better which students are most debt averse. However, in general terms any deterrent effect is being outweighed by other factors. Participation by mature students, whose numbers are

falling in all parts of the UK, seems to be more sensitive to debt: but even for this group, other factors also seem likely to be having an effect.

- Grant rather than loan: There is some recent research evidence that substituting grant for loan in living cost support may slightly increase participation by low-income students, which would be consistent with some in this group being relatively debt-averse.
- Total support for living costs: Again, there is some evidence that increasing living cost support in total, whether using grant or loan, slightly increases participation, which would be consistent with students from low incomes being otherwise deterred by an inability to meet upfront costs such as rent, food etc .

Issues for Scotland

(i) Largely loan-based living cost support

In Scotland, the system for supporting living costs is heavily dependent on the use of loans: at low incomes, students must borrow between £6,750 and £5,750 a year in order to obtain their full support, implying a total debt of between £23,000 and £27,000 over four years (more for those on 2+3 models). This model is not working for many of those for whom the most help is intended. Only two-thirds of the poorest young students borrow enough to obtain the government's "minimum income guarantee": most of the rest rely entirely on very limited amounts of grant (below £2,000 a year).

It is not clear how far non-borrowing students do not need all the help on offer, despite their very low declared family income, and how far they are not willing to use the student loan system, even if this causes severe hardship or makes participation unaffordable. As far as it is the latter, Scotland's large reliance on living cost loans will be having some effect on widening participation, not least among those groups least able to live at home (including many from rural areas and those from troubled or poorly-housed families). **The Commission should consider whether some improvement in grant is needed to address this.**

(ii) Information about loans

Debt aversion may be an absolutely unavoidable in some students. However, it is possible that the relatively large numbers of non-borrowing low-income students is partly a function of the poor quality of public debate and education about student loans in Scotland. The Scottish Government has greatly increased its reliance on student loans (now exceeding £0.5bn a year) while maintaining a rhetoric which discourages students from seeing these as a safe way of funding their higher education. For example, speaking on his last day in office, the previous First Minister said:

As somebody who had a modest upbringing in a council scheme in Linlithgow, whose parents in an atmosphere of both free education and **full grant**, scrimped and saved to send four children to university, **I know what a challenge and what would have happened with the imposition of large debt to people like myself.**

This contradiction between policy and rhetoric is unhelpful and those most likely to be damaged by it are those from low-income backgrounds who are deterred from entering

higher education because they are fearful of taking out a student loan or who attempt to rely entirely on grant to fund their studies, when they cannot rely on family support in cash or kind. **Assuming that the government has no plans to reduce its reliance on student loans, the Commission should address this point.**

(iii) Living cost support away from home

Living cost support for Scottish students living away from home is relatively low compared to the rest of the mainland UK for students at incomes between £17,000 (£19,000 from this autumn) and £45,000. This would empirically be expected to be having some impact on participation, again particularly among those less able to live at home. It may also be limiting the HE choices of lower-income students. A family income in the £20,000's remains relatively low. **The Commission should consider whether the support for students living away from home is adequate at incomes just above the threshold qualifying students for maximum support.**

(iv) Investment choices

In 2013-14, **every £1,000 per head of fee funding for students in the top half of the income distribution cost the same to the cash budget as the government's entire spending on grants** (£65m in each case). That figure may also be compared with the £25m per year (£100m over 4 years) recently announced by the Scottish Government for the "Scottish Attainment Challenge" fund. The Commission may also wish to examine how £65m compares with the total spending on access-related initiatives, if it has access to that information.

Given how budgeting works within government, it is very hard to believe that the political priority given to saving higher income students from incurring any debt at all for their fees has not had a knock-on effect on the funding available for more targeted investment in the education and support of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Commission's remit appears to take universal free tuition as a given: however, **it would do a great service to the access debate in Scotland if the Commission were at least to make a clear statement on whether it believes the present model of universal 100% cash funding for tuition in Scotland plays an active part in promoting wider access** (and if so, by what mechanism and on what evidence it bases that conclusion). Given the sums at stake, and the limited availability of cash resources to the Scottish Government, **the Commission should also assess the relative benefit in terms of widening access of cash funding the whole fee cost for all students compared to spending elsewhere in the education system.**

(v) Long-term equity

My research concentrates on the distribution of debt amongst students. In Scotland, the arrangements for student funding are unique in the UK in assuming the highest levels of student debt amongst the poorest students. This pattern is also reflected in actual borrowing, again uniquely in Scotland. Low-income students are more likely to borrow than those at higher incomes and on average will borrow more.

The Scottish Government tends to respond to any criticism of debt distribution in Scotland by quoting the Student Loans Company's figures for final average borrowing across the UK. These figures are misleading, concealing that since 2013 low-income degree students in Scotland face much the same level of debt as their counterparts in the other devolved

administrations, and in some cases more, while students from higher incomes in Scotland have the lowest debt of any group in the UK and in many cases are still able to leave university with no debt at all.

The Scottish arrangements are building up a regressive sharing of student debt in the Scottish graduate population. Those who started with least will end up owing the government most. This has implications for social justice in the long-term and the embedding of inequality over the generations. Those least able to rely on family help through immediate support or inheritance are those who will also have to forego the most from their salaries in future, reducing their relative capacity to pay for housing, pensions, childcare or other costs. This is simply unfair. It is not a widening access issue as such. **But it raises the question of whether the cost of widening access is expected to be covered disproportionately by deductions from the future earnings of those from poorer backgrounds. The Commission should consider this point.**

2. The identification and scaling up of best practice

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What can be learned from Scottish access programmes, across the education system and early years, about best practice in relation to improving access, retention and successful completion?
- What new programmes might be introduced in Scotland, drawing on experiences in the rest of the UK and other countries, that have had proven success in improving access, retention and successful completion for people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?
- Which widening access programmes, initiatives and curriculum components, with a proven record of success, have the potential to be scaled up nationally?

Research undertaken in England suggests that locally-provided additional institutional bursaries are not especially effective in supporting wider access: see [An interim report: Do bursaries have an effect on retention rates](#) (OFFA publication 2014/02) and [Have bursaries influenced choices between universities?](#) (OFFA publication 2010/06). OFFA is currently undertaking further research in this area, following the changes introduced in 2012.

More generally, OFFA has invested in considerable amounts of research into widening access good practice, which the Commission should systematically review.

3. The data and measures needed to support access and retention

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What evidence or data is required to effectively measure Scotland's progress on widening access to higher education at both a national and institutional level?
- What evidence or data should be considered as part of the admissions process for students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?
- Do we have enough evidence on the effectiveness of existing widening access programmes and initiatives and, if not, what else do we need to do to build a robust evidence base in this area?

The figures collected by SAAS on the take up of student support should be used much more to monitor changes in the student population and student behaviour, particularly at low incomes. The SAAS data is particularly useful because by definition it covers all those students benefitting from government support in HE, whether at university or college.

The figures currently published do not:

- distinguish between the poorest and the most well-off students in the income-related table;
- provide data on the take up of the "minimum income guarantee" - figures on this have had to be obtained through further questions;
- more generally, provide data on the take-up of grants, fees and loans, and total living costs support, by different levels of grant entitlement.

Also, more use could be made of systematic analysis of changing trends in grant take-up. For example, the total number of students on income-related grants fell between 2012-13 and 2014-15 by 1.9%, from 51,515 to 50,560. It would be useful to see this trend analysed and explained.

The Commission should consider how more use could be made of SAAS data by government and how more information could be published as standard.

4. Any other comments

The timing and relatively short period for this evidence gathering exercise is likely to mean that many people with a useful perspective will have been unaware of it or unable to respond in time. It is welcome that the Commission has taken steps to ensure that its interim report can be informed by evidence from this exercise. However, to be sure of tapping existing expertise properly, it would be good if the Commission were to undertake a further evidence gathering exercise on a longer timetable which did not overlap with the school holidays.

The closing date for responses to this call for evidence is 20 July 2015

Please provide your response in Microsoft Word format. **Responses should not exceed 1500 words.**

Is there any part of your response which you would prefer not to be made public? [YES/NO]

If yes please indicate in the box below:

Please email or post the completed response form to:

Email: Wideningaccess@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

Postal Address:

Secretariat to the Widening Access Commission
Higher Education and Learner Support Division
5 Atlantic Quay
150 Broomielaw
Glasgow
G2 8LU

The Commission thanks you for your response.