Responding to the CREID Sutton Trust Report

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An Opportunity for Action

• An outstanding piece of careful analysis which provides the kind of research based evidence which is needed to underpin policy

• Excellent timing following on from the publication of the Final Report from the Commission on Widening Access

• Provides an important contribution to the policy debate – Scottish Government and SFC take note!
Two Big Issues

• Focus on two big issues which emerge and policy implications
• The structure of the Scottish system of HEIs, and the impact of funding; implications for widening access
• the role of the college sector in widening access to higher education.
1. Structure of Scottish System of HEIs

- Scotland has proportionately more higher tariff institutions when compared with the rest of the UK (higher proportion of ancients and 1960s, and lower proportion of post 92s when compared with rest of UK).

- Even post-92 universities in Scotland are more socially selective than universities with similar profiles across the UK.

- Given the evidence that young people from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to achieve higher qualifications in secondary school, the profile of the Scottish university system is likely to mitigate against the inclusion of students from less advantaged backgrounds in comparison with other parts of the UK.
Funding Policy

• This report shows that the supply of university places in Scotland for Scottish students has not kept pace with demand.
• This is affecting students from the most deprived backgrounds most acutely, making it more difficult to gain access to a relatively limited number of places in a relatively high tariff system.
• Scottish Government funding policies result in student numbers being capped in Scotland, while the cap is being lifted in England and the system is expanding.
• These factors together increase the difficulties for students from less advantaged backgrounds seeking access to any HEI, and the opportunities to gain access to the more prestigious institutions in which students from more advantaged backgrounds are the predominant groups.
What can be done?

• SG initiative for additional ring-fenced places for socially disadvantaged students and those with HN qualifications was effective in terms of increasing participation by these groups, particularly in more selective institutions.

• But Scottish Government announced its intention to discontinue these places from 2016/17 onwards, although it subsequently indicated that the SFC should continue to fund this scheme

• What will be the longer term funding strategies of SG and SFC?
Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access (COWA)

- Recommends the establishment of Access Thresholds for all degree subjects against which applicants from the most deprived backgrounds would be assessed.
- For this to be successful it seems likely that additional funding will be needed.
  - It would be difficult to implement if middle class parents see their apparently better qualified children being excluded
  - High tariff universities likely to be reluctant to change admissions policies and practices with possible consequences for positions in international league tables
- The COWA report suggests that it is for the SG to determine the size of the HE system - how will the Scottish Government respond?
A general problem for mass higher education

• Trow’s prescient analysis of the transition from elite to mass systems of HE (1973) - Recognised the pressures for growth from an insatiable demand for HE ‘...it seems to me very unlikely that any advanced society can or will be able to stabilize the numbers going on to some form of higher education any time in the near future.’

• He also recognised the ability of the middle class use stratified HE systems as an effective way of preserving the more privileged position of their off-spring in mass HE systems

• Lucas (2001) Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) – argued that even at times of expansion the socially and economically advantaged maintain their positions by ensuring that they gain access to the most prestigious sectors of higher education, while the less advantaged are more likely to gain access to the less prestigious sectors.

• Policy can mitigate or exacerbate - so determined and well informed political action is required
2. Colleges and widening access to HE

- improved access for disadvantaged students has been met almost entirely by the expansion of sub-degree programmes in Scottish colleges – 90% of growth in Scottish higher education participation for disadvantaged students since 2006

- A positive story - but also disadvantages, which have a disproportionately large impact on those from less advantaged backgrounds.
Some problems with existing articulation arrangements

– Only half of articulating students receive full credit, and a very limited number in the ancient universities.

– This can means a six year degree

– Articulation pathways to the ancient universities, and even the 1960s universities are limited

– Relatively little attention has been paid to supporting articulating college students – particularly in ancient universities – can result in dropout

– Because most articulation routes are from college to post-92 universities, the choice of degree subjects available to this group of students is limited.
Underlying Issues

• Evolutionary rather than a planned development for HNs to be a key part of the HE system
• HNs were originally mainly vocational and predominantly part-time qualifications
• Ambiguity in current roles of HNs
• Some continue have a main role in providing vocational training, while for others their main role is in preparing students for transition to degrees
• There continue to be major difference in curriculum, approaches to learning and teaching and assessment.
• This result in a system which is not properly integrated and transition problems for many students.
What can be done

• Recognition of these issues and more effective action to improve the interface between college based HNs and university based degrees

• The COWA Report has recognised that
  – more needs to be done to ensure that all universities engage more positively in developing articulation links
  – the SFC should work with universities and colleges in developing new and more flexible models for articulation

• But to achieve this more effective leadership from SG and SFC is needed
The Commissioner for Fair Access

• A key recommendation in the COWA Report
• Can this be the solution?
• If established some key questions
• What powers and resources?
• How will she/he be able to influence the policies and practices of the key players:
  – Universities
  – Colleges
  – SQA
  – SFC
  – SG
A Challenge

• This report indicates the need for change

• The COWA report also recognises some of these challenges

• We have an opportunity to recognise these problems and respond to them

• Will the opportunity be taken?