

Report reveals 'shocking' gap in access to university

BY KIRSTEEN PATERSON

THE higher education gap in Scotland is twice as bad as that in England and a commissioner must be appointed urgently to reduce the inequality, a report has found.

Published today, the Access in Scotland report provides new analysis of official data showing young people from the five wealthiest areas are four times more likely to enter university than those in the bottom five. The equivalent figure in England is 2.4 times. The Sutton Trust, which aims to improve social mobility through education, is urging the "speedy appointment" of an independent Commissioner for Fair Access.

The call echoes recommendations made by the Commission on Widening Access, established by Nicola Sturgeon in 2014 to work out a blueprint on closing the gap.

On Wednesday the First Minister announced this will go ahead as part of a major package aimed at driving up attainment for all.

Today Sir Peter Lampl, chairman of the Sutton Trust, says the report findings prove just how necessary this is. He said: "Scotland faces a shocking access gap and it is vital

that the government appoints a strong independent commissioner without delay.

"There is good practice in Scottish universities on access, but we need a really strong push if talent is not to be wasted. It is vital that access to higher education improves to the best universities and that there is a role for clearer contextual admissions."

Led by Professor Sheila Riddell of Edinburgh University, the report found 90 per cent of growth in higher education places for disadvantaged students in the last ten years has been provided by colleges, not universities.

Although Scots are more likely than their English counterparts to enter some form of higher education, they are less likely to be able to go straight to university and many of those that do so through such 'articulation' often have to repeat at least one year.

However, disadvantaged Scottish students are more likely to enter a leading "higher tariff" university like Aberdeen, Glasgow or St Andrews than those in England and Scottish Government moves to award 720 additional places to such institutions

for those from the most deprived areas was judged "particularly important".

But based on a social class measure rather than neighbourhood data, the report suggests that there has been "no narrowing of the gap" between those students from managerial and professional family backgrounds and those from working class family backgrounds in Scotland since 1996. Riddell said: "Despite free tuition, the Scottish university sector has much work to do in order to realise the goal of fair access. The supply of university places in Scotland has not kept pace with rising demand, with detrimental consequences for less advantaged students. The growing tendency of students from privileged backgrounds to occupy the lion's share of places in Scottish ancient universities is also noted."

Umbrella group Universities Scotland said: "What is clear from the Sutton Trust's analysis is that England's policy of uncapped places has made it easier to get into university and this has helped access."



Peter Lampl said the 'shocking access gap' must be addressed urgently

