

Board of Management

Date of Meeting	Wednesday 27 March 2024
Paper No.	BoM4-N
Agenda Item	6.2
Subject of Paper	Commissioner for Widening Access: 2024 Annual Report
FOISA Status	Disclosable
Primary Contact	Michael Cross, Director Corporate Support
Date of production	March 2024
Action	For Noting

1. Recommendation

To note the briefing.

2. Purpose

To alert the Board to the publication by the Commissioner for Widening Access of his annual Report for 2024; to summarise the content of his report; to identify the policy background; and to highlight City's contribution to the widening access agenda.

3. Consultation

Not applicable.

4. Key Insights

In her 2014 Programme for Government, new First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, set an ambition that a child born today (i.e., in 2014) in one of Scotland's most deprived communities will, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities."

In the wake of that commitment, a Commission for Widening Access (CoWA) was established under the chair of Dame Ruth Silver; it published recommendations for action in its 'Blueprint

for Fairness' document, identifying four cornerstones to support equal access:

- Equal access is fundamentally about fairness
- Equal access is a social good
- Equal access is compatible with academic excellence
- Equal access is an economic good

Additionally, the CoWA recommended that a post of Fair Access Commissioner be created, with Professor Sir Peter Scott subsequently appointed in 2016. Prof Scott was subsequently succeeded in January 2023, by Prof John McKendrick. The Commissioner, whose role is (significantly) - independent of Government is charged with overseeing the pursuit of the 2030 target, working with partners across the Scottish education system. A central responsibility for the Commissioner is to deliver an Annual Report to Government on progress towards targets for fair access, recommended by the Commission and agreed by Ministers.

The Commissioner is also responsible for overseeing the work of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access. Acting as a focus for efforts by colleges and universities to promote fair access, and working closely with the Government, the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland, Colleges Scotland, NUS Scotland, University and College Union and others.

Prof McKendrick's report is his first as Commissioner, and the sixth report since the Scottish Government acted on the original CoWA recommendations. In it, he outlines that fair access is 'everybody's business' including universities, colleges, schools, government and the wider public sector. It is worth noting that, in pointing to a whole-system approach, Prof McKendrick is echoing the broader theme of tertiary coherence precisely identified in the Cumberford-Little Report. Fair access is not just about getting entrants into university, but enabling entrants to thrive in higher education and achieve positive outcomes after graduation.'

He also notes that 2023 was a year of renewal and an "exceptional year for thinking through the future of (higher) education in Scotland"; the range of policy reviews conducted in the past period, including the Government's proposed 'Purpose and Principles' for post-school education; the Withers Review of the skills landscape, and the Hayward report on Qualifications and Assessment. Each report recognises the fair access agenda but, equally, identifies subject-specific matters that need to be safeguarded.

Progress

The children to which the First Minister referred in 2014 are now in secondary school. An interim target 2021 target of 16% was met, with the next target in 2026 requiring 18% of entrants to higher education to be from the 20% most deprived areas. The report outlines a series of recommendations that need to be met to achieve that milestone whilst also reflecting on the challenges arising from the COVID pandemic, the cost of living crisis, and Scotland's wider fiscal position.

Looking Ahead: The Commissioner's priorities for 2024

1. To follow up on each of my recommendations and to report on progress in my next annual report.
2. To produce a second annual report, to be published as soon as is practicably possible after the release of the SFC's Report on Widening Access 2022-23.
3. To produce my first bi-annual report, ideally to be published at the start of 2025, i.e., halfway between annual reports, to provide a timely update on progress to promote fair access.
4. To engage with school leaders and universities in Scotland to explore whether inefficiencies in SCQF Level 7 can be addressed through system change and/or institutional practice.

5. To engage with Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland to better understand the prospects for increasing the proportion of HN students articulating with so-called 'Advanced Standing' into SCQF Level 8 and 9.
6. To examine retention rates for SIMD20 entrants, focusing on why these have not improved substantially since the introduction of the CoWA agenda.
7. To reflect on insight from the Student Finance and Wellbeing Survey commissioned by the Scottish Government, and the wider evidence base, to better understand how students' financial situation impacts on fair access.
8. To explore possibilities to enhance and promote regional intelligence, and to strengthen cross-institutional collaboration in regions to advance the fair access agenda.
9. To review the deployment of contextual admissions and Minimum Entry Requirements across Scottish HEIs to appraise whether the impact on fair access is optimal.
10. To engage with professional bodies, Programme leads, and Heads of Department (or equivalent) to promote shared responsibility for the fair access agenda in Scotland.

1. Challenges

The report outlines five key issues: what is fair regarding fair access; whether fair access concerns more than entry to higher education; the substantive focus of fair access; whether promoting fair access for the most disadvantaged is at the expense of others; and clarification that Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is an indicator, rather than a measure of progress.

- Fairness – colleges are articulated here as offering bespoke pathways.
- Entry, experience & outcomes – maximising student experience regardless of financial circumstances and gathering data on progression beyond next level of studies.
- Focus – addressing socio-economic disadvantage is priority however remains interested in patterns of unequal participation.
- Displacement – progressive trends however still 1.6 times more entrants from least deprived (SIMD 80-100) compared to the most deprived (SIMD20) areas.
- Understanding SIMD - considered as an indicator of progress towards fair access rather than a measure of it. Commissioner is keen to explore alternative or a second indicator to sit alongside SIMD.

2. Considerations – City of Glasgow College

Amongst the recommendations in the annex to this paper is that the “The Scottish Government should consider strengthening the remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access to assume responsibility for advising on fair access to the whole of tertiary education.” This could have implications for the College, though it might also be an opportunity to outline progress on the five challenge areas given the proportion of SIMD areas in the Glasgow city region.

There is also an opportunity to engage and support data /evidence gathering as that appears a key focus going forward for the Commissioner. There is a significant network of intelligence in the Glasgow City Region with the Intelligence Hub and the college could support activity and alignment with fair access indicators. This could include drawing on the previous IPPR Scotland 'social impact' report.

3. Proposed Recommendations

- Opportunity to maintain and build on direct engagement with Commissioner for Fair Access and outline role of City of Glasgow College in widening access. Are there other indicators beyond SIMD that City would recommend to track access
- Monitor progress on the recommendation for expanding the Commissioners remit to cover all of tertiary education

5. Impact and Implications

The transition in First Minister from Ms Sturgeon to Mr Yousaf means that the CoWA agenda no longer has its origins at the very top of government. That said, the priority Ministers maintain to closing the attainment gap in school alongside the political provenance of the CoWA agenda means the SFC's outcome agreement regime is unlikely to depart from its current focus on focus.

Context

1. In presenting her first Programme for Government in 2014, then FM Nicola Sturgeon declared her ambition to “... *determine now that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities.*”
2. In the wake of that commitment, a Commission for Widening Access (CoWA) was established, chaired by Dame Ruth Silver; it published recommendations for action in its ‘*Blueprint for Fairness*’ document, identifying four ‘cornerstones’ to support equal access.
 - Equal access is fundamentally about fairness
 - Equal access is a social good
 - Equal access is compatible with academic excellence
 - Equal access is an economic good
3. Professor John H. McKendrick was appointed Commissioner for Fair Access in January 2023, succeeding Prof Sir Peter Scott, the Inaugural Commissioner. As with all such appointments (and consistent with the messages in the separate paper on ‘influencing’), we ensure all important appointments have early, introductory, sessions with the Principal, and City was the first college to host Prof McKendrick very early in his term; subsequently, he acted as keynote speaker in our most recent annual Learning and Teaching Conference focusing on ‘Inclusivity’ in education.
4. The post of Commissioner was a crucial part of Ms Sturgeon’s commitment that by 2030, 20% of Scottish-domiciled entrants to higher education should come from the 20% most deprived communities in Scotland. The Commissioner, whose role is (significantly) independent of Government is charged with overseeing the pursuit of that target, working with partners across the Scottish education system. Among the Commissioner’s responsibilities is the delivery of an Annual Report on progress towards targets for fair access, recommended by the Commission and agreed by Ministers.
5. The Commissioner is also responsible for overseeing the work of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access which acts as a focus for efforts by colleges and universities to promote fair access; and working closely with the Government, the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland, Colleges Scotland, NUS Scotland, University and College Union and others.
6. Prof McKendrick’s report is his first as Commissioner, and the sixth such report since the Scottish Government acted on CoWA’s recommendations. It outlines that fair access is ‘*everybody’s business*’ including universities, colleges, schools, government and the wider public sector; and that fair access is not just about getting entrants *into* university, but enabling entrants to *thrive in higher education* and achieve positive outcomes after graduation.’
7. The report also notes that 2023 was a year of renewal and an “*exceptional year for thinking through the future of (higher) education in Scotland*, through the range of policy reviews conducted in the past period, including the Government’s proposed ‘Purpose and Principles’ for post-school education; the Withers Review of the Skills Landscape, and the Hayward Report on Qualifications and assessment. Each report recognises the fair access agenda but, equally, identifies subject-specific matters to be safeguarded.

Progress

8. The Report judges progress on fair access to HE in Scotland in Scotland to justify a qualified celebration, with much already achieved. In particular:
 - The interim 2021 target 2021 (of 16%) was achieved in advance (in 2019/20) and has continued to be met or exceeded in 2020/21 and 2021/22;
 - There is now a record number of entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds, with the highest ever number of entrants (5,595) from Scotland's most deprived areas in 2021/22; and
 - there has been steady progress in increasing the number of entrants from deprived backgrounds, with the number of CoWA "Core Target entrants" increasing in each of the last five years; and there has been a 45% increase in the CoWA core target group since 2013-14 (from 3,850 to 5,595 in 2021-22).

9. Prof McKendrick also notes that a "*sense of collective purpose*" has been developed": each of Scotland's HEIs has made some progress in promoting fair access; there are examples of promising practice to found in each Scottish HEI; and a "*dense ecosystem of support*" has developed over time.

10. That said, there are ways in which each of these successes could be enhanced, with Prof McKendrick noting that:
 - progress toward the next Interim Target has stalled. There has been a net increase in the CoWA Core Target of just 0.1 percentage points in the last two years, with regression of 0.2 percentage points in the last year (16.4%, 16.7% and 16.5% in the last three years). In addition, several HEIs indicated in their latest Outcome Agreements that the proportion of CoWA Core Target entrants have fallen in 2023/24.
 - each Scottish HEI could enhance the contribution it makes to the CoWA Core Target; there is a need to examine whether the ecosystem of support is delivering all that it can; and there is a need for more robust evaluation to determine the extent to which promising interventions are impactful interventions.

11. The national target for fair access requires that, by 2030, students from the 20% most deprived areas should represent 20% of entrants to higher education. Currently, 16.5% of entrants to higher education are from the 20% most deprived areas. An interim 2021 target of 16% was met early, with the next target falling in 2026 when 18% of entrants to HE should be from the 20% most deprived areas. Prof McKendrick outlines a series of recommendations that need to be met to achieve that milestone whilst also reflecting on the challenges arising from the COVID pandemic, the emerging cost of living crisis, and the Scottish fiscal position.

12. What does this mean for City?

At the sectoral level, the Report makes clear that are central contributors to the CoWA agenda, colleges offering bespoke pathways, to university and, more generally, in tackling socio-economic disadvantage. Nonetheless, Prof McKendrick flags his interest in exploring further patterns of unequal participation; in maximising student experience regardless of financial circumstances; and in gathering data on progression beyond next level of studies. Additionally, while the overall trend is consistent with the original policy aim, those from the least deprived areas (SIMD 80-100) are 1.6 times more likely to enter university. Prof Mc Kendrick also notes need for understanding the limits of SIMD, placing it as *indicator of progress towards fair access* rather than *a measure of it*; he is therefore keen to explore alternative or an additional indicator(s) to sit alongside SIMD.

13. How is City performing?

- We delivered 39,841 credits for SIMD 10% learners, against a target of 40,000 credits.
- 19% (4,083) of our students were from the SIMD10% most deprived postcodes; 3,155 of these were from Glasgow City.

- 16-19-year-olds continue to comprise most of our enrolments, but the proportion fell by 10pp this year to 48%.
 - Students with a declared disability comprise 19% of enrolments, consistent with last year. The distribution of male and female students is even at 49% each, with the remainder unknown or preferring not to say.
 - Some 18% of enrolments are from students with non-white backgrounds, an increase of 4pp from last year.
 - Glasgow's SIMD performance should be viewed in the context of the disproportionate levels of deprivation in the city, and its consequent 'share' of share of SHARE of SIMD postcodes.
 - in recent years City has significantly increased the volume of credits committed to care experienced learners (also a priority cohort for the Government). In AY 22-23, these students made up 5% (666 students) of all enrolments on courses of 160 hours or more, consistent with 21-22. That said, our performance on priority groups on care leavers, is around 10 pp below the college average.
14. Additionally, City continues to support Glasgow's 'marginalised' neighbourhoods with ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) provision and support for learners with protected characteristics. Collaboration is at the heart of the City approach, and this year we have worked in alongside the Prince's Trust, Simon Community Glasgow City Mission, Sahelyia, the Young Women's Movement, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Maryhill Integration Network, Crossreach Youth Barn, The Learning Network, Strathclyde University, Glasgow Caledonian University, the University of Dundee, and Glasgow City Council Primary and Secondary schools.
15. Whilst the data clearly suggests that CoGC does well in providing education for some of our most marginalised and deprived students and communities, our priority is the support we provide for students to ensure they thrive during their time at the College, allowing them to progress to positive destinations in employment, and to succeed on further learning pathways. Moreover, the nature of our student body is such that intersectionality – often with many co-dependencies - is an important factor.
16. The College has taken a firm approach to inclusivity, avoiding a 'checkbox' exercise, and instead seeking to embed an ethos. We recognise that what is right for one student is ultimately good for all, and we therefore avoid a deficit model focused on limitations, preferring instead to adopt a strength-based model and enhancement. Thus, every part of the College focuses on student success, challenging students to more independent learning to achieve the best outcome they can. L&T practices are focused on inclusivity – with support where necessary provided through student services and the Student Experience Directorate. The College also focuses on skills and attributes that go beyond academic or vocational qualifications and ensure all our students are prepared for, and achieve, a rounded education to preparing them for a world of continued change and challenge.

Annexes

1. Challenges the Commissioner foresees

The report outlines five key issues: what is fair regarding fair access; whether fair access concerns more than entry to higher education; the substantive focus of fair access; whether promoting fair access for the most disadvantaged is at the expense of others; and clarification that Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is an indicator, rather than a measure of progress.

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Amongst the recommendations in the annex to this paper is that the “The Scottish Government should consider strengthening the remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access to assume responsibility for advising on fair access to the whole of tertiary education.” This could have implications for the College, but it may also be an opportunity to outline progress on the five challenge areas given the proportion of SIMD areas in the Glasgow city region.

There is also an opportunity to engage and support data / evidence gathering as that appears a key focus for the Commissioner. There is a significant network of intelligence in the Glasgow City Region with the Intelligence Hub and the College could support activity and alignment with fair access indicators. This could include drawing on the previous IPPR Scotland report.

Annex B - The Commissioner's priorities for 2024

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2. To produce a second annual report, to be published as soon as is practicably possible after the release of the SFC's Report on Widening Access 2022-23.
3. To produce my first bi-annual report, ideally to be published at the start of 2025, i.e., halfway between annual reports, to provide a timely update on progress to promote fair access.
4. To engage with school leaders and universities in Scotland to explore whether inefficiencies in SCQF Level 7 can be addressed through system change and/or institutional practice.
5. To engage with Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland to better understand the prospects for increasing the proportion of HN students articulating with so-called 'Advanced Standing' into SCQF Level 8 and 9.

ANNEX C – The Commissioner's Priorities for 2024

6. To follow up on each of my recommendations and to report on progress in my next annual report.
7. To produce a second annual report, to be published as soon as is practicably possible after the release of the SFC's Report on Widening Access 2022-23.
8. To produce my first bi-annual report, ideally to be published at the start of 2025, i.e., halfway between annual reports, to provide a timely update on progress to promote fair access.

ANNEX: D Full list of Commissioner's recommendations

1. The primary focus for fair access should continue to be improving outcomes for those who experience or have experienced socio-economic disadvantage.
2. Retain SIMD as the central metric to indicate national progress in achieving fair access.
3. To strengthen the utility of SIMD to understand fair access, SFC and institutions are encouraged to report evidence in deciles up to SIMD40, in addition to quintiles.
4. Withdraw the SIMD Institutional target but introduce a commitment from each HEI to take action to increase the proportion of SIMD20 among its entrants or, if this is demonstrably not possible without adverse consequences, to match the highest proportion and number of SIMD20 entrants that it achieved since 2013-14.
5. For universities in Scotland to collectively specify a basket of indicators from which individual HEIs may draw to demonstrate their wider work in promoting fair access.
6. The Scottish Government should consider strengthening the remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access to assume responsibility for advising on fair access to the whole of tertiary education. In his focus on the breadth of the tertiary system, Prof McKendrick echoes the central theme of Cumberford-Little Report.
7. The Scottish Government should take the necessary preparatory steps to embolden the fair access agenda beyond 2026 by transitioning toward individual-level indicators of socio-economic disadvantage, and thereafter to challenge institutions to achieve fair access for prospective students who have experienced such disadvantage.
8. The fair access agenda should be recalibrated to give equal weight to entry, student experience, and outcomes.
9. The primary focus on fair access should remain on Scottish-domiciled, full-time, first- degree entrants. However, for a rounded perspective on fair access to higher education, it is necessary to also focus on Graduate Apprenticeships, part-time undergraduate study, and postgraduate study.
10. Wherever practicable, data on fair access should be disaggregated to understand the relative contributions of different pathways (direct entry from school; articulation; and adult wider access).
11. SFC, in conjunction with participating universities, should ensure that disaggregated data are available for each of the disciplines that comprise the 'high demand professions' that are part of the AHDP programme (to enable the national impact of this work to be appraised) and the Transitions programme.
12. SFC should act on the advice of the previous Commissioner for Fair Access, specified as a recommendation in each of his last four annual reports, to commit to more secure and longer-term funding for SCAPP.
13. It should be re-affirmed that the central purpose of SCAPP is as a vehicle to support the development and professionalisation of a widening access and participation practitioner community in Scotland.
14. SFC, in conjunction with SCAPP, Universities Scotland and the wider educational research community in Scotland, should examine what steps should be taken to strengthen research and evaluation to underpin the fair access agenda.
15. For universities in Scotland to collectively agree what intelligence is in the national interest to promote fair access (as opposed to that which is commercially sensitive), and thereafter to ensure that this intelligence is made available to all relevant stakeholders in Scotland.
16. Should the decision be taken to withdraw funding for an intervention that had been integral to promoting fair access, or if an element of such work is to be radically altered, providers should undertake (and funders should encourage) an impact assessment to ascertain the impact on pupil cohorts who have previously benefited from this provision.
17. School leaders in Scotland, the SFC and its National Schools Programme, SCAPP and Universities Scotland should examine if, and if so what, steps should be taken to underpin the fair access agenda within the broad general education phase in Scottish education.
18. SFC, Universities Scotland and Skills Development Scotland should examine the prospects of introducing an easily accessible user-centred web-based resource that provides a single point

of reference to inform prospective students and other stakeholders of the programmes and resources that are available to support access to higher education.

19. Stakeholders should explore the prospects for introducing a single student identifier to improve tracking and to facilitate more robust evaluation of the impact of fair access activity.
20. Stakeholders and leaders should reaffirm their commitment to promote fair access and commit to take those actions necessary to attain the next interim target for 2026