

# PE2009/N: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

## Universities Scotland submission, 23 April 2024

Thank you for your letter dated 19 March regarding petition PE 2009. In preparing our response, we have consulted with our Admissions Policy Group, which draws its membership from senior admissions professionals across a wide representation of Scotland's universities. We have summarised information on existing data sources, which we hope supports your enquiries, letter in an annex.

We would also like to make three broad contextual points which are relevant to the petition and the information we have supplied.

The first point is to be clear that the number of funded undergraduate places available to Scottish-domiciled applicants for academic year 2024/25 sits above the pre-pandemic, high watermark level. The Scottish Funding Council confirms this in its [indicative funding allocations for universities](#), as published on 18 April. In 2024/25 there will be 119,540.2 non-controlled funded places available to Scots, compared to 107,982.0 non-controlled places in 2019/20, as the last year before the pandemic<sup>1</sup>. This wide availability of places is reflected in a high proportion of accepted applicants into Scottish universities. In 2023, 75.7% of Scottish applicants were at university at the start of term, which is the highest proportion in the last ten years.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to set out the data on funded places, as relevant to this petition, as there is a public narrative emerging that Scotland has a problem regarding the total number of funded places available for Scottish-domiciled students. The data shows that this is not the case, and we are keen to take this opportunity to share information with the Committee to ensure that misleading narratives do not take hold and serve to deter applicants. Scotland has a far more acute problem in regard to the scale of underinvestment made in every Scottish domiciled place than the total number of places available, relative to overall demand from Scottish students. We expand on this below.

Secondly, universities are deeply committed to fairness in admissions policies. Scotland's universities adhere to two admissions codes. They are:

- The Universities UK [Fair Admissions Code of Practice](#) (2022)
- The Universities Scotland [Guarantee of Fairness](#) (2019)

Transparency and the need for institutions to protect applicants' interests are core to both codes. Therefore, we understand the Committee's perspective and in principle support, the exploration of how data might contribute to greater transparency and insight for applicants.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Funding Council Final Funding Allocations. Annex B Funded Places

<sup>2</sup> UCAS data for the 2023 (2023/24) entry cycle

Our final, contextual point relates to universities' commitment to widening access and the need to ensure that developments in this area are made in a way that continues to support students from underrepresented backgrounds into higher education. Scotland is proud to have introduced the most progressive admissions policies in the UK, with the aim of widening access. The use of contextual admissions and minimum entry requirements for applicants with contextual flags, is key to progress with this agenda. However, this adds a level of complexity to entry requirements which would need to be captured and reflected in any student-facing data on admissions and entry criteria, so that the applicants who are intended to benefit from the contextualised admissions process are not misinformed.

### **Other factors highly relevant to supporting student choice**

We appreciate the Committee's letter is focused on the added benefit that data in particular might bring to applicants, however we think there are other, highly relevant factors to mention in students' interests:

- The availability of good careers advice to Scottish pupils (and adult returners to education) is essential so they are informed about subject choices and how to build their path to university. It is also important they are informed about different routes into education, recognising that not all learners take a linear route from school and that universities support multiple diverse routes. Careers advice to school pupils (which should include advice on how best to achieve career aspirations) is severely under-funded and this is problematic when informing and supporting students.
- Funding levels for education, both at a school and university level are crucial in this space. Without adequate funding, schools may be forced to make difficult choices to deprioritise Higher and Advanced Higher provision in costly or lower-demand STEM subjects, modern languages and performing arts, which then limits onwards progression opportunities for students. This is likely to be more acute in remote and rural areas and areas of deprivation.
- At university level, the Scottish Government's budget decisions have led to a decade of erosion of the real-terms value of the teaching grant. This means the amount of public funding the Government invests per student has fallen by 39% in the 9 years between 2014/5 and 2023/24. This figure does not include universities' settlement for AY 2024/25. This funding situation will inevitably have an impact on the viability of certain courses, which would limit student choice and opportunity as well as the wider student experience universities are able to provide. The consequences of such funding pressures are likely to be accelerated if the decline in the number of international students coming to Scotland becomes an established pattern beyond one year. So far, international student demand for places and the cross-subsidy that has been possible from their fees (in most institutions) has been essential to the protection of choice, and high quality, for Scottish university students.

I hope this response, and the detail in the annex, has been helpful to the Committee's ongoing work in relation to the petition.