

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 27 November 2024
18th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

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

Introduction

Petitioner Caroline Gordon

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure fair access to Scottish universities for residents in Scotland and the UK by reviewing university business models and Scottish Government funding arrangements.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2009>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 6 March 2024](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Commissioner for Fair Access, the Scottish Government and Universities Scotland.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from Michael Marra MSP, the Commissioner for Fair Access, the Scottish Government, Universities Scotland, and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage](#).
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 29 March 2023](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 4,575 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
November 2024

Annexe A: Summary of petition

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

Petitioner

Caroline Gordon

Date Lodged

28 March 2023

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure fair access to Scottish universities for residents in Scotland and the UK by reviewing university business models and Scottish Government funding arrangements.

Previous action

I have written to my MSP, Michael Marra who raised a question at FMQs. I was not satisfied with the answer.

Background information

Information published by Edinburgh University showed that 9 courses including Scots Law did not admit any students in Scotland from backgrounds that were not classified as “deprived”. A poor business model and a lack of funding has meant that a large swathe of the Scottish population have been shut out of Higher Education. The Scottish Government should ensure that funding constraints or other factors do not result in discrimination against any group or demographic. I would like the Scottish Government to properly consider this and how it could be addressed.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2009 on 6 March 2024

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2009, on ensuring fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the United Kingdom, which was lodged by Caroline Gordon. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure fair access to Scottish universities for residents in Scotland and the UK by reviewing university business models and Scottish Government funding arrangements. We last considered the petition at our meeting on 17 May last year, when we agreed to write to Universities Scotland, the Scottish Government, the Commissioner for Fair Access and individual universities in Scotland.

While Glasgow Caledonian University states that its aim is to be allocated more funded places, it notes that growth would be focused on increasing and widening participation in Scotland. Edinburgh Napier University accepts that the funding arrangements mean that the approach could be described as an upper cap on the overall number of places. However, it states that it does not recognise the scenario that is presented in the petition, in which all places for Scottish-domiciled students on a degree programme are filled by students from a widening participation background.

The response from the Commissioner for Fair Access notes that he intends to review funding arrangements but has not found evidence to substantiate the petitioner's concerns that funding arrangements block access for Scottish-domiciled students or that such arrangements lead to students pursuing higher education elsewhere in the UK. Universities Scotland's submission recognises that, for some courses, demand will be so high that suitable applicants are unable to achieve their first choice. However, the submission also notes that the data indicates that applicants are not missing out on accessing Scottish universities on funding. It highlights that public investment in each Scottish undergraduate has fallen by 27 per cent in real terms since 2014 and that spending per student should be the focus rather than increased places.

Robert Gordon University, Universities Scotland and Edinburgh Napier University state that there is not an issue of too few funded places, with some highlighting the need for increased funding allocation per student. On that point, Robert Gordon University's submission points out that the Scottish Funding Council reduced the number of non-controlled funding places by 1,000 in the 2023-24 academic year in response to under recruitment of students across the sector.

The petitioner's written submission requests that the committee seek data from each university on a number of points relating to the number of applicants from different backgrounds who are being accepted into specific courses across Scotland.

We were joined at the previous hearing of the petition by our colleague Michael Marra, who is with us again this morning. Before the committee considers what action we might further take, I would be interested to hear again from Mr Marra.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the committee and the clerks for the support that they have given me in pursuing this petition. I have to say that

the evidence that has been supplied, particularly by the individual universities, has added to the understanding of the issue in specific contexts. The work that the committee has undertaken so far is greatly appreciated. I hope that there is further work that can be done to open this up and I will set out some of that if I can.

I have reflected on the submissions that have come back from the various consultees and, as I say, I think that the individual universities' context is useful. I would say that, in their submissions, both the Commissioner for Fair Access and Universities Scotland reference data but do not provide it. I have found some of that data difficult to find, particularly in relation to the assertion by the Commissioner for Fair Access on the question of whether too many Scottish-domiciled students are having to pursue higher education at personal financial cost elsewhere in the UK. He believes that there is no evidence of that and references data but does not provide the data. It would be useful for my constituent and for the general discussion of the policy if he were to do that. I would appreciate it if the committee might consider asking him to provide that data, as well asking Universities Scotland to provide the data that it references in its submission.

It is fair to say that I do not believe that the general issue of the funding model that is imposed on universities in Scotland will be resolved by the petition. I think that that is a political decision and the submissions set out some of the general issues around it, such as the 27 per cent decrease in funding per student, which I know will be deeply concerning to many people.

The issue is what other data we can obtain that can help applicants to better inform the decisions that they might make. That is particularly pertinent in the coming year. A significant budget cut of £28.5 million is being made to higher education institutions, which may further decrease the number of Scottish-domiciled students who can gain access. It makes the competition ever tighter. It is key and the relevance of this has increased since the budget process has come through. I hope that the committee would take that into consideration as well.

I support my constituent's view on this. Universities should be publishing more data about the make-up of the students on courses, whether it be international students or Scottish-domiciled students. There is one reason for that in particular. A Scottish student applying to universities has five options when they fill in their Universities and Colleges Admission Service form; that has been the case for a very long time, certainly since I applied to university in the mid-1990s. What we have heard in the evidence so far is that, on some courses, the person making that application had zero chance of accessing that course, on the basis of the evidence from the previous years. Some of those cases are very isolated, and the universities are keen to express that point; it is a rare occurrence in their view. I think that there is a solid case for that information to be published proactively to best inform applicants as to whether they are using one of their five bullets—the five chances that they have—properly. Do they have a real chance of gaining access to the course that they want at the institution they want, or do they not? To me, that is an element of fair access.

Perhaps that is something on which the committee might consider asking for the views of Universities Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Commissioner for

Fair Access. That is not to say that the committee should endorse that position, but it might be something that could be explored. I think that having that information makes it a fairer system all over for everyone concerned, whether it be Scottish-domiciled students, international students or widening access students, so that they can best understand where they should engage with the process and how they will be supported in what they do. Opening up the data so that there is greater transparency is probably the next logical step on the petition. If the committee was of a view to support that, that would be most welcome.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Marra. I think that that is a telling point. I certainly have constituents for whom it would be useful to have a more informed understanding of where they might reasonably make their five applications with an expectation of success based on some data that verified that. I would think that a very useful thing for us to seek to bring into the light of public scrutiny.

Are colleagues content to pursue the further advancing of data as Mr Marra has suggested?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you very much. We will keep the petition open and seek to make progress on that basis. No doubt we will see you again when we next consider it, if we are fortunate enough to receive the information that we have requested. Thank you.

Annexe C: Written submissions

Michael Marra MSP written submission, 14 March 2024

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

I am writing to thank you, Committee members and clerks for facilitating my appearance at the Committee's meeting on 6th March 2024.

I was pleased to have the opportunity to speak in support of my constituent, Caroline Gordon's petition PE2009: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK. The Committee's decision to keep this petition open is very welcome.

I thought it might be helpful for the Committee if I set out in writing my principal suggestions as to how the Committee might explore further the issues raised in the petition.

Requiring universities to publish how many Scottish-domiciled students were accepted to each course annually would mean that prospective applicants are better informed as to their chances of being accepted to a particular course. Applicants can apply to a maximum of five institutions in one academic year. Universities proactively publishing this data would allow applicants to optimise their chances of being accepted and prevent "wasted" applications.

The Commissioner for Fair Access wrote "I do not find evidence that a "large swathe of the Scottish population" has been "shut out of higher education"". I note that the data to substantiate that claim has not been made available. In particular, I think the Committee should take an interest in what data is available about Scottish students going south of the border for undergraduate degrees as they have been unable to secure a place at a Scottish university.

Could the Committee write to the Commissioner for Fair Access and the Scottish Government requesting this data? The Scottish Government should hold that data and, I believe, should make it available in the interests of transparency.

The Commissioner for Fair Access also acknowledged that his submission did not address "the most substantial concern raised by the petition, i.e. the funding of universities and possible unintended consequences as a result of pursuing access." The Commissioner indicated his intention to review funding arrangements in more detail in his second year in post. I think it would be worthwhile for the Committee to be kept updated of the outcome of this work by the Commissioner's office.

I trust that the Committee will find these suggestions helpful, and I look forward to working with members as the Committee continues its consideration of this important petition.

Commissioner for Fair Access written submission, 22 March 2024

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

Thank you for affording me opportunity to reflect further on Petition PE2009 (Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK), specifically “... *whether, in the interest of greater transparency, data from each university on how many Scottish-domiciled students are accepted onto each course annually could be published. It was suggested that prospective students could use this information when deciding where to apply, optimising their chances of being accepted to a Scottish university.*”

I also note the Committee’s response to the Petition: “The Committee is aware that students have a limited number of applications *when applying to universities and has heard that in a small number of cases, prospective students may apply to a university where there is no possibility of access for them based on evidence from previous years*”.

In principle and in general, I am strongly in favour of greater transparency and making more effective use of existing data. In my first annual report, I make several recommendations and outline priority actions to this effect. For example, recommendation 10 asks for disaggregation of data by pathway, recommendation 11 asks for disaggregation of data to understand the impact of SFC’s Access to High Demand Professions programme, and priority action 6 advises that I intend to scrutinise retention rates.

However, I would not endorse the specific recommendation outlined above.

First, it is unhelpful and inaccurate to assert that “*prospective students may apply to a university where there is no possibility of access for them based on evidence from previous years*” (emphasis added). Even the catalyst for this petition – entrance to some specific courses at the University of Edinburgh in academic year 2021/22 – is an exception, and is atypical for that institution and for the courses in question.

Second, the number of students accepted on to courses varies markedly within and across institutions. A low count of entrants does not necessarily imply that it is more difficult to gain entry, just as a high count of entrants does not necessarily imply that it is easier to gain entry. Providing data on acceptances, without broader context, may be misleading and counter-productive in addressing the problem this recommendation seeks to address.

If data on numbers accepted on to courses is to be made available, it would be necessary to contextualise this with data on number of applications. It would also be necessary to take account of acceptances that do not lead to registrations (as the application-to-acceptance rate, may be higher than the application-to-registration rate in many instances – as a result of some students receiving multiple offers and having to reject some).

It should be acknowledged that, to their credit, in recent years, Scottish HEIs have improved the transparency of what is required to gain entry to specific courses in their institution. Nevertheless, prospective students need guidance to enable them to understand the array of opportunities that are available to them.

I would welcome developments that improve the information available to applicants that would enable them to make fully informed decisions. However, I am not convinced that the recommendation of publishing *data from each university on how many Scottish-domiciled students are accepted onto each course annually* is required.

Scottish Government written submission, 16 April 2024

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

Thank you for the opportunity to respond further on Petition PE2009 in particular "... whether, in the interest of greater transparency, data from each university on how many Scottish-domiciled students are accepted onto each course annually could be published. It was suggested that prospective students could use this information when deciding where to apply, optimising their chances of being accepted to a Scottish university."

The Scottish Government is fully supportive of transparency and providing prospective students with as much information as possible to help them to make informed choices. However, publishing data from each university on how many Scottish-domiciled students are accepted onto each course annually could be misleading.

The number and proportion of students accepted onto courses at university varies greatly from year to year and between institutions. Each institution is allocated a number of full time equivalent funded places via the Scottish Funding Council. It is for the universities themselves to decide: how to distribute the places between faculties; the courses they offer; and how many of the total funded places will be available on each course.

Data is available on: [Number and Proportion of Full-person equivalent \(FPE\) Scottish domiciled Entrants to Scotland's Universities 2021-22 by Subject Studied, mode and level, and ethnic group \(Background Tables \[XLS\]\)](#) which prospective students may find helpful when making their choices.

I would like to thank you again for raising these concerns with the Scottish Government and I hope that you find this response helpful.

Universities Scotland written submission, 23 April 2024

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

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 pandemic¹. 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.²

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.

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

¹ Scottish Funding Council Final Funding Allocations. Annex B Funded Places

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

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.

Annex

Suggestion for publication of data at a course and institution level on the number of Scottish-domiciled accepted students

The data that the Committee is interested in, regarding numbers of Scottish-domiciled students by course/institution is collected by the admissions body, UCAS, and by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and could, theoretically, be published without the need for new data collections. Although it is important to note that HESA uses a subject coding system (HECoS) which is incredibly detailed with over 1,092 subject terms in its vocabulary, rather than by course.

However, we are of the view that data alone, without wider contextual information will not provide potential applicants with enough to make informed choices, in their best interests.

To be of most use to applicants, we are of the view that data on the **offer rate** to Scottish-domiciled applicants would be of more value than data on student enrolments (available from HESA) or the acceptance rate or entry rate. As the objective is to help inform student choice, the relevant factor for an applicant is how many offers (or opportunities for study) are made to Scottish-domiciled applicants on a course-by-course basis. Thereafter, student choice (as well as student attainment) becomes a factor in the eventual progression into higher education. A Scottish-domiciled student may receive multiple offers to study in Scotland but will only select one of them – or they may choose to study at an institution in England or Wales, take a gap-year or go into employment.

Further, data on the offer rate by subject level is of limited value to an applicant unless there is additional information on average entry qualifications or tariff scores which helps that individual to situate themselves in the data and assess their likelihood of being offered a place based on their own actual or projected grades relative to the average from recent years.

We are particularly concerned that any additional data does not unintentionally discourage applicants from widening access backgrounds. As referenced above, Scottish universities set minimum entry requirements (with grade adjustments) for students from widening access backgrounds. Minimum entry requirements recognise the barriers these students may have faced and that their academic grades may not reflect their academic potential. It is therefore important that any data published to inform student choice, with intention of maximising opportunity, includes appropriate contextual information.

Existing relevant data sources

As the Committee considers this further, we'd like to point the Committee to two existing data sources that could be of interest. Neither currently deliver exactly what the Committee is looking for, but further exploration of these data sets might help to move toward what is valuable and necessary, whilst avoiding duplication.

- **Discover Uni.** <https://discoveruni.gov.uk/>
This is a student-focused resource, which is supported by the Scottish Funding Council, the Office for Students (in England) and the funding bodies in Wales and Northern Ireland. It offers a fully searchable platform with information available at an institution and course level, including the profile of UCAS tariff points as achieved by entrants to that course based on recent years. By way of illustration, a search for a forensic science undergraduate degree at University X, might provide information that over 60% of recent successful entrants to that course held more than 159 tariff points. The platform user can then compare that information with their own projected academic attainment to decide whether to

apply. They can also compare that average grade profile with that of other forensic science degrees in other institutions.

One limitation, in so far as the Committee's interest, is that we are not aware that Discover Uni offers anyway for an applicant to filter this data by domicile of applicant. The ability to narrow the data set to focus on average tariff attainment of successful Scottish domiciled entrants is relevant in the context of a fixed number of funded places in Scotland's model of full-time undergraduate education. Without it, the data could mislead a Scottish applicant.

We are also unclear if Discover Uni includes information on subject specific requirements for entry, beyond grade-based information (so in the case of an applicant to a forensics degree, it might be a further requirement for applicants to hold at least one science and a maths qualification, as well as meet certain grade requirements for example).

At present, Discover Uni is unable to provide the level of detail necessary to inform Scottish applicants who might benefit from contextualised admissions and minimum entry requirements, in support of the widening access agenda.

- **UCAS data project focused on grades on entry.**

Later this year, UCAS expects to launch a new pilot project aimed at helping to inform student choice. The project will publish data about students' grades on entry and is UK wide in scope, so it will include Scottish providers, but it will only track and publish data on the grades on entry to university where the applicants have A-levels. In practice, this means that very few state school Scottish-domiciled applicants are likely to be covered within the scope of the pilot.

As we understand it, the aims of this project align closely to the Committee's stated aims. UCAS believes this project will be of value to applicants because it will allow an applicant to assess how their actual/projected attainment compares to the average grade level achieved where offers are made/offers are accepted. In recent years, the competition to recruit students in English universities has been intense and some institutions have accepted applicants with grades below their advertised entry requirements. The UCAS pilot is intended to address a scenario in England whereby a university's published entry requirements state a tariff score of 180 for entry but, the average grade attainment of offer holders in recent years sits below this, at 159. If an applicant has access to the data about the average 159 score for offer holders, they may consider applying where they know they are predicted to get a tariff score of less than 180 points.

There has been some discussion between UCAS and the sector in Scotland during the development stage of this pilot. However, as it stands, we are of the view that there are several significant differences in the Scottish school and university sector which mean the project is not easily replicable in Scotland. In addition to the important widening access points made above, Scottish applicants typically apply to university with a much broader spectrum of qualifications and much greater variability in the number of qualifications than applicants in

England, which has a much more standardised requirement of 3 A-levels (with some exceptions). In Scotland, applicants routinely apply with a mix of Highers, Advanced Highers, Higher Nationals (for students articulating from college) and the sector is very supportive of retaining and promoting a multitude of routes into university. It is much more challenging to present data on grades on entry across this spectrum of entry qualifications in a meaningful way and it would need a lot more development and testing for Scottish institutions to be confident to progress to an equivalent pilot based on Scottish qualifications.

We will follow UCAS's pilot with interest and remain in close touch with UCAS, Universities UK and institutions in England as to their experience. We are very interested to learn how this is received and used by applicants and UCAS's evaluation of the pilot.

We think there is merit in exploring the limits of the existing data sources, and learning from the UCAS pilot, to determine what might be of most use to Scottish applicants.

Petitioner written submission, 12 November 2024

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

I have watched this petition and the views of those who support it be incorrectly dismissed as misguided or the actions of myopic "middle class monsters" who want to selfishly hoard opportunity.

On the first point, the petition was born because information obtained using a Freedom of Information request showed that there were several courses at Edinburgh University, including Law, where only Scots who met widening access criteria were granted a place. This is a verifiable fact. Other universities rejected or did not respond to identical FOI requests. Concerns about access cannot therefore be fairly categorised as misguided.

On the second point, I am not a fan of using personal or social circumstances as credentials. I have been persuaded though, that sharing a little of my own background might help reinforce the inaccuracy of the suggestion that those who raise concerns do so to callously safeguard privilege. I grew up in a single parent household where circumstances were chaotic, unpredictable and my needs were not always met. We relied on benefits. After school, I went onto university, qualified as a solicitor and during my career have worked as a Children's Reporter and volunteered as a Children's Panel Member. I believe that I have some insight into the difficulties associated with pursuing success amidst challenging personal circumstances. I wholeheartedly believe, as I suspect that all the signatories to the petition do, in supporting young people to overcome challenge and wish to see the development of an education system that we can be proud of where all young people can develop skills and build healthy self-esteem.

What I see is Scottish education in decline, underfunded schools, cuts and plummeting standards. Colleges, an important pathway to better careers have seen their funding decimated to maintain free university tuition. Universities are being asked to address and fix the issues that naturally follow on shoestring budgets. We have a system that lets all parts of our society down and may not even adequately help the groups it sets out to.

It is not possible to talk about fair access to universities without addressing widening access. Unfortunately, widening access initiatives have been weaponised; if you have concerns about access, then you must be against widening access. A facile argument, but one that sadly helps silence and deflect discourse from the difficult core issues of underfunding and capped places for Scottish students. In a healthy functioning education system, university widening access initiatives should not require significant resource and would draw little comment, but instead they have had to work too hard with too little resource and are having a disproportionate impact on a dysfunctional system. These initiatives look to me like a sticking plaster on a gaping wound, measures that can create a good news story to mask failing education governance.

I owe much of my success to great teachers and a decent curricular offering. To support young people to meet university entry requirements and to just simply do well, I would contend that what is needed is more investment and initiatives at an earlier stage of the education process. As things stand my thoughts turn to the children and young people who encounter challenges that inhibit their achievement and are let down long before they reach the end of school and a possible university application, as well as the capable young people who will pursue a life outside Scotland because there is not a place at a home university for them or an alternate career pathway. Fixing our broken system starts in schools with investment in teacher recruitment and retention, increasing additional support staff including support for learning teachers, creating smaller class sizes, reviewing the curriculum and providing better funding for sport and music. In a country the size of Scotland, with our history, it should be eminently possible to have a dynamic strategy for education that puts us at the top of world league tables, where widening access initiatives are a much smaller need.

I digress however, back to fair access, I hear anecdotally that, irrespective of their political outlook, many Scottish MSPs and civil servants understand and will admit privately that the current approach to funding universities is unsustainable. However, focus groups and the like tell them that free tuition is popular among young people and voters and so heads disappear into the sand and meaningful discussion becomes impossible. Retaining or gaining power looks to be more important than undertaking serious deliberation to come up with innovative solutions.

I understand that circumstances have moved on since the inception of this petition. International applications to our universities are collapsing and our universities face more significant financial challenges that threaten their offering to students and perhaps even the future of these institutions. Nevertheless, I have the sense that there is a desire to sweep this petition and the issues it raises into the long grass,

and I am disappointed by that because it offers an opportunity to face and address some of our challenges.

Being a cross-party organisation, the Committee enjoys some political cover and should feel some confidence in being able to take an issue that the public feel strongly about and properly interrogate it. Indeed, shouldn't it feel obliged to do exactly that? The responses to date have been vague and lacking in detail. We cannot be satisfied that there are not difficulties for young people accessing universities, that entry requirements may not be as advertised. The Scottish Government's most recent response says that it would be misleading to publish statistics that tell us more about university admissions. I disagree, that response feels patronising and disingenuous. I would respectfully suggest that the next steps are to get these detailed admission figures, publish them, analyse what they tell us and consider what needs to change; to facilitate a process that will enable universities to better serve all the young people of Scotland, and be an attractive option for international applicants. I invite the Committee to do so.