The Impact of COVID-19 on Fair Access to Higher Education

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December 2020

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1. INTRODUCTION

This interim report from the Commissioner for Fair Access on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fair access to higher education considers both the direct impact of the public health measures that have had to be taken and indirect impact of actions taken by colleges and universities to mitigate the worst effects of these measures.

The headline is that COVID-19 has exposed, and exacerbated, existing inequalities of access to higher education.

- The number of infections, hospital admissions and deaths has been higher in areas of social deprivation. Public health interventions as a result have been more restrictive. There has been more disruption to schools. The impact on jobs and incomes has been greater.

- Pupils, and potential and actual students, from more socially deprived homes have found it more difficult to engage with the shift to more online delivery. Their access to IT, reliable Wi-fi and secure study space has been limited compared to that enjoyed by their more socially advantaged peers.

- All institutions have worked hard to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council have also made welcome interventions. But the greatest burden has fallen on those institutions that have the highest proportions of students from disadvantaged areas but also the most limited resources.

In other words – a triple whammy for applicants and students from deprived communities.

However, there is a second – and more hopeful – headline. By shining a spotlight on existing inequalities in access to higher education, the COVID-19 emergency has provided both a powerful endorsement of the priority given to fair access by the government, the targets it has set, the initiatives taken by the SFC (and other agencies) and the policies adopted by institutions; and it has also provided an equally powerful reinforcement of the need to take even more effective, and urgent, action. There is no longer room for scepticism about fair access, and the priority it should enjoy in the future development of higher education in Scotland.

2. BACKGROUND

The impact of COVID-19 on fair access was briefly mentioned in my last Annual Report published in June 2020 (https://www.gov.scot/publications/fair-access-higher-education-progress-challenges/). As the pandemic intensified I decided that its impact should receive more detailed consideration in my next Annual Report, and I wrote to College and University Principals, and other organisations such as Universities Scotland, Colleges Scotland and NUS Scotland asking for their views about the challenges they faced and how they were attempting to mitigate the worst effects of COVID-19.

As it became clear during the autumn that the lull on infections over the summer (and the near-eradication of COVID-19 in Scotland) following the initial lockdown was being succeeded by a 'second wave', I decided to write an interim report that focused exclusively on the impact of the pandemic, because it clearly had the potential to deliver a severe check to the impressive progress towards fairer access to higher education. I wrote, therefore, a second letter to Principals seeking additional and more detailed information. I have received substantive replies from 11 universities, 10 colleges and seven other organisations (and individuals). The responses from colleges did not distinguish between their further education and higher education students. In addition I have had a number of online meetings.

I am very grateful to all the Principals (and their colleagues) who have taken time to write detailed responses to my letter(s) and to all those who have taken part in online meetings. This report is based on those responses and meetings.

3. KEY MESSAGES

- The cancellation of National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher examinations in the summer and replacement by teacher assessments led to an increase in the number of qualified university applicants, which was met by the (necessary and welcome) provision of additional funded places by the government. Nevertheless it is likely that, because of the limited supply of qualified applicants from socially deprived communities (and other disadvantaged groups), a majority of these extra places were filled by applicants from more privileged social groups.

- The abandonment of the SQA's proposed algorithm for moderating teacher assessed grades avoided some negative consequences for fair access, for example a potent Iona bias against bright pupils from under-performing and low-progression schools. But it is still unclear whether teachers tended to give lower grades to pupils from more deprived social backgrounds (there is research evidence that teachers in England under-predict A levels grades for working-class students).

- The unplanned inflation in Higher grades and increase in the number of first-year places led to students being admitted to university who in previous years would probably have been enrolled on Higher National programmes in colleges. It might have been the case that they would have been better served by taking HNs. Universities may face additional challenges in terms of support for under-prepared students.

- In the first phase of the pandemic schools were closed, with almost all learning online. This disadvantaged pupils from deprived communities because of limited access to suitable IT and study space. Since the summer schools have stayed open. But attendance has been uneven with more pupil absences in deprived communities (which have also been worst hit by the pandemic). Despite the best efforts of schools and local authorities efforts to close the attainment gap will have suffered a set-back.

- The pivot to online had an immediate impact on outreach activities, and also summer schools and other bridging programmes. Typically programmes, which are focused on small groups of students and delivered face-to-face, have had to be delivered online. Although this has allowed more students to be involved, it has probably undermined their effectiveness.

- 'Digital poverty' has been a major issue for students from more socially deprived and economically challenged backgrounds. Like pupils in schools they are less likely to have access to suitable IT, reliable Wi-fi and quiet study space. Institutions have gone to great lengths to repurpose existing laptops and buy new ones, in order to lend them out to students in the greatest need. They have also worked hard to keep campuses as open as possible. But these efforts cannot fully compensate.

- Linked phenomena are 'digital literacy', which is different for the purposes of learning than for social media, and also 'digital fatigue', which may have handicapped in particular the efforts of institutions to reach out to prospective students while still at school. Again the impact on those from deprived communities, or suffering other forms of disadvantage, has been greatest.

- In addition to the pivot from face-to-face teaching to online learning induction, as well as enrolment, has had to be moved online. In the case of universities in particular it has been difficult to reproduce the full 'first year' experience which for all students, but especially for those from more deprived communities who are least familiar with university life, provides a key transition from school to higher education.

- Financial hardship has increased among all students, but – again – especially students whose parents cannot subsidise their studies and who must support themselves by taking part-time jobs (the supply of which, for example in hospitality, has been curtailed by public health measures which have been most restrictive in more deprived communities with higher infection rates). Institutions have paid out large sums to help the students in greatest need by transferring money from other budgets or, if they can, appealing to former students.

- The impact of COVID-19 on mental health has been severe. The demand for support and counselling has been growing for a number of years (it has been argued that pre-Covid poor mental health had already become an epidemic in higher education in its own right). But in many institutions demand has exploded this year. While some students have settled comfortably into learning online, which may even have reduced stressful social encounters on campus, most are suffering higher levels of stress and depression. This is especially the case with students from deprived communities, who already needed more support to adjust to university life and are facing the greatest economic challenges.

- Continuation rates do not appear to have been adversely affected by the pandemic – so far. But there is uncertainty about whether students facing the greatest challenges and suffering the greatest disadvantages will be able to stay the course, and about the extent to which all students have been 'learning' as well as 'attending'. Success rates, in terms of completion and grades, may also be affected, in the short and long term.

- An inevitable result of the pandemic is that school performance has been disrupted. Pupils who took National 5 and Highers in the summer gained better-than-expected grades, which may happen again in 2021 if next year's school leavers are not to be disadvantaged. School attendance in the current academic year has been substantially affected by rising infection rates and the need for quarantining, with schools in more deprived areas hardest hit. But many universities are reluctant to revisit their minimum entry requirements or change their policies on contextual admissions – despite the evidence that examination grades have become less reliable and pupils from more deprived communities have suffered the greatest disadvantage.

- The impact on staff so far has received limited attention. Most have risen to the challenge of moving their face-to-face teaching online, and supporting their students (especially those in greatest need). Adjustments that would in normal times have taken years have had to be achieved within weeks. It is hardly surprising that morale is fragile, with some staff feeling dissatisfied with the quality of what they are able to provide and also vulnerable because of a lack of training and support. This feeling has been exacerbated by fears that some institutions may seek – or need – to restructure their courses and delivery in the light of the pandemic, with inevitable implications for job security and promotion prospects.

- The overall national target, that 16 per cent of higher education entrants in 2021 should come from the 20-per-cent most deprived communities as measured by SIMD, has probably not been in serious doubt despite the COVID-19 pandemic. But some individual universities may have lost ground – not necessarily in terms of their numerical targets for recruiting SIMD20 students but in terms of the proportion of SIMD20 entrants. As a result of COVID-19 the 2026 target, of 18 per cent of entrants from SIMD20 areas, may be more challenging – confirming the conviction that this is not the time to ease off on efforts to achieve fair access.

4. MAJOR THEMES

OUTREACH AND ACCESS

Outreach activities have always relied on face-to-face, small-group encounters to build self-confidence among potential applicants from more socially deprived backgrounds and those with other disadvantages such as care-experience, disability or estrangement from their families. These encounters have also helped to demystify higher education, especially universities (and most especially more selective universities that are seen as recruiting most of their students from the most socially advantaged groups). The COVID-19 pandemic has made such encounters very difficult, if not completely impossible.

Here is a selection of responses:

The impact is that already hard-to-reach pupils have become even harder to reach.
Glasgow Caledonian University

Online activities cannot replace campus visits, open days and residential events.
Scottish Community of Access and Participation Practitioners

Summer schools and campus visits are needed to counter perceptions that St Andrews is among the more inaccessible HE institutions for people from lower-income backgrounds – so online is a problem. University of St Andrews

A bigger issue has been the inability to engage face-to-face and demystify university life.
Heriot-Watt University

Our inability to host pupils on campus, allowing them to experience a sense of ownership and develop a better understanding of students life has undoubtedly lessened impact.
University of Strathclyde

But institutions have worked hard to mitigate the effect of moving outreach activities online, and some positives have emerged. Moving online has allowed institutions to reach more students. For example, 360 attended online summer schools at the University of Dundee, and completion rates were up by a third. Glasgow Caledonian had already been digitising some of its outreach activities and this work proved to be very helpful in moving all of them online. The University of Edinburgh, while recognising that the lack of campus visits made it more difficult to 'build rapport' and – echoing Glasgow Caledonian – made it even more difficult to engage hard-to-reach pupils, nevertheless emphasises the advantages of the ability to design bespoke programmes. The number of participants on the Open University's Young Applicants in Schools Scheme (YASS), university-level modules for S6 pupils, was initially down, but has now exceeded the level in 2019. St Andrews emphasises the potential benefits of a relaxation of geographical restrictions, and of the capacity of online outreach to offer more flexible timing, more sessions and also repeat sessions.

The University of Glasgow's local student orientation event, usually attended by more than 500 when held on campus, only registered a small decline in participation (still more than 400) when it had to be moved online. But some programmes have had to be cancelled such as its Glasgow City Council 'taster weeks' and a larger programme for younger secondary school pupils. Strathclyde also emphasises the opportunity moving online offers

'to scale provision and increase reach'

- but also to develop complementary 'analogue approaches' that provide continuing engagement without the need for equipment. An example is a series of 'box' projects that provide pupils with everything they need to undertake an activity, along with teacher-led sessions.

Universities in general are reluctant to abandon the potential advantages of staging some outreach activities online – notably scale and reach, speed of response and the capacity to build up a bank of suitable material and what one institution called 'repurposing staff time' by saving travel time. But the consensus remains that the most effective outreach work requires face-to-face activities. 'It is an unfortunate reality that nothing can replace an in-person visit' was a typical comment. Heriot-Watt concluded:

'One of the biggest changes to someone's view of university, and to their aspirations, is the ability to show people what a university environment, and a university student, actually looks like'.

DIGITAL POVERTY

Digital poverty is seen as arising from deficits in three areas: 1. IT equipment, notably laptops with suitable specifications; 2. reliable access to the internet (connectivity) and data (at no cost to students); and 3. secure study space which is a particular issue for students living in crowded households in more deprived communities. Adequate funding is clearly necessary and some has been provided by the Scottish Government and the SFC. Colleges Scotland, while welcoming the £2.3m in capital funding to colleges (which enabled them to loan laptops to students as long as they remained college property), believes that extra funding is still needed. It has included a bid for an additional £2m in its budget submission to the Scottish Government.

It is common ground that so-called 'digital poverty' has been a major factor in producing greater inequality of student access and engagement as a result of the pivot to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost every college and university recognised in the early days of the pandemic that much greater reliance on online learning would disadvantage students from more deprived backgrounds. Glasgow Kelvin College for example writes in its response:

'In many cases the electronic devices students [from disadvantaged backgrounds] are using are mobile phones which are not suitable for positive or prolonged learning experiences'.

But there are interesting differences of emphasis. In some responses digital poverty is seen mainly as a logistical issue, while others emphasise its wider dimensions. Two quotations illustrate this difference of emphasis. The first is from the Scottish Funding Council's response, and the second is from the personal response of the Executive Director of Education of one of Scotland's largest local authorities.

> *Access to equipment and broadband are the two most obvious issues impacting on digital poverty… Arguably they are perhaps the easiest to solve*

> *It's more than digital exclusion – it's loneliness, lack of individual support and while young people may be techie savvy they are not used to being taught online.*

Institutions have moved quickly to make more, and more suitable, laptops available to students in need. They did so by repurposing laptops in libraries and other campus spaces that were no longer being used and by purchasing extra laptops with the help of funding from the SFC. At the University of Glasgow laptops in loan lockers in libraries have quickly been made available for longer-term off-campus loan, with access students being given priority.

But again there were important differences in perceptions about the scale of the challenge. On the basis of a survey of digital needs as part of enrolment West Scotland College identified 3500 students who were either eligible to receive an IT device as one of three priority groups or who had self-declared they needed one. Glasgow Kelvin College, in one of the most deprived areas in Scotland, felt it was unable to afford the purchase for distribution of the IT equipment it believed was required by its students. City of Glasgow College had already introduced an innovative laptop loan scheme for students who needed them – at a cost of £1.6 million. In contrast, in most universities the demand was more manageable, although the University of Aberdeen points out that the fact that so many institutions had ordered new laptops had tended to create a delivery bottleneck. In addition to lending laptops to students in need, most institutions have helped to provide then with adequate Wi-fi connectivity, by providing mobile dongles (for example, at Glasgow and the University of Dundee) or offering £150 bursaries help students turn their phones into mobile hot-spots (University of Strathclyde).

Other issues were also quickly identified. These include the need to enable students access to essential software from home, which may not be covered by institutional licenses. Not all college and university IT systems make it easy to access a full range of services except on campus. Glasgow has created 'Glasgow Anywhere Desktop' with software, applications and files that can be accessed remotely by any registered user. Study space for students living in crowded households has also been a major issue. Borders College has allowed students to use hardship funds to buy desks and chairs. Dumfries and Galloway College has stressed the need for 'digital literacy', pointing out that

> *'technology for recreation and technology for learning are quite different'.*

City of Glasgow College also highlights digital literacy, particularly among the most disadvantaged students.

Overall institutions have worked very hard to bridge the 'digital divide', which has always existed but has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. They have done everything they reasonably could. But the timescale within which they have had to make appropriate adjustments, the funding available (institutions have often had to dip into their own funds to top up the funding that has been made available, and their capacity to do so is perhaps inversely correlated with the scale of the challenge they face), and deep-rooted structural inequalities inevitably mean that the 'digital divide' has not bridged. It is not an accident that colleges have faced the greatest challenges in this respect.

ONLINE LEARNING

Closely linked to 'digital poverty' is the wider issue of the impact of the pivot to online learning, more generally on students from more deprived communities and with other forms of disadvantage such as care experience (which, in turn, is linked to the third major theme considered in this report, the overall student experience).

The pivot to online has not been complete. Both colleges and universities have remained 'open', either for socially-distanced in-person teaching or to offer access to library or other facilities (for example, as safe study spaces for students living in crowded housing), or both. Most universities have succeeded in maintaining some in-person teaching. The University of St Andrews estimates that 40 per cent of its teaching has still been in-person. Many colleges have also attempted to give priority to in-person teaching for students who were unable to complete their courses in the last academic year because of college closures, especially those on practical courses.

But managing a balance between in-person teaching and online learning is not easy, especially if changes in COVID-19 risk level have affected what is possible. Timetabling is an important issue if classes combine residential and commuter students. Commuter students may also have to be provided with additional space, which is a challenge when capacity has been reduced by rules about social distancing. Some lecturers have also found it difficult, and pedagogically unsatisfactory, to teach socially distanced students in person while a session is also being made available to other students online.

Universities Scotland emphasised the importance of in-person campus-based teaching for all students, but especially for 'access' students who may lack the connections and self-confidence that other students enjoy. 'It is not a level playing field', they added. Glasgow Caledonian University in its response was clear:

> *'It is really important that care experienced and estranged students have face-to-face interaction'.*

This appears to be the view of most institutions – but with some differences of emphasis. Edinburgh Napier University argues in its response that:

> *'while the move to online and blended learning has undoubtedly posed challenges to the University community as a whole, we believe that the widespread adoption of these technologies, which has taken place within Edinburgh Napier and beyond, may provide opportunities going forward which could contribute positively to reducing inequalities and enhancing access'.*

Edinburgh College also reports some benefits of online learning, particularly for disabled and care-experienced students.

However, these differences of emphasis should not be exaggerated. It is common ground that the enforced, and inevitably hastily planned, shift to online learning has inevitably disadvantaged those students with least experience, either personally or from their families, of university study. But it is also common ground that a more gradual and properly resourced shift (which was already in train in any case) has the potential to reach more students in new ways, as the success of the Open University in Scotland has demonstrated.

Less expected effects of the pivot to online learning were also highlighted. West College Scotland in its response emphasises the need to take account of gender based violence if students are studying at home. The College adds that some students are still concerned about switching video cameras on on laptops, especially in more 'chaotic households'. It stresses the need in the context of more online learning for better training to identify risks to protected groups, mentioning the influence of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. The University of Strathclyde also highlights

> *'particular challenges for our LGBT+ students who may be learning in hostile home environments'.*

The pivot to online learning may have exposed the importance of college and universities campuses as 'safe spaces', which is in contrast to the more prominent narrative about on-campus threats to students, and staff, such as sexual harassment.

The evidence is clear – the pivot to online learning and the reduction in in-person on-campus teaching, required by the COVID-19 public health emergency, has posed particular challenges to socially deprived and vulnerable students, which have the potential to act as a brake on progress towards fair access. So, if this pivot is to continue after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and public health restrictions, for good pedagogical reasons or reasons of efficiency, greater compensatory efforts and investment will need to be made.

However, there is ground for optimism. An 'early impressions' survey at Glasgow Clyde, in one of the most deprived areas of Scotland, found that 51 per cent of more than 4,000 respondents when asked to rate their online experience in relation to the quality of their learning rated it either 'excellent' or 'good', and a further 30 per cent as 'satisfactory'. Colleges Scotland also points out that,

> *despite the current emphasis on digital poverty with regard to online learning, it has the potential to produce greater parity of experience among students, especially in more rural and remote communities.*

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Two of the most critical phases in terms of fair access are outreach to pupils from deprived communities and disadvantaged backgrounds in the senior phase of secondary education, which has already been discussed, and their first-year experience of higher education.

There have been several examples of successful schemes to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the first-year experience, which is particularly important for students from deprived communities or who are otherwise disadvantaged because the transition from school to university can be more challenging for them. Glasgow Caledonian University has established a PALS scheme for new students (2600 have signed up), which linked them to class mates and to older students. It provided online 'break-out' sessions for students to communicate with each other in small groups. The University has also extended its UCAS mentoring scheme so that first-year students could stay in touch with their mentees. It has even organised special online social events and activities – including a cooking channel.

Glasgow has reinforced its first-points-of-contact for vulnerable students. St Andrews has developed a special 'countdown to St Andrews' online orientation programme, with more than 200 'events' from August onwards, in addition to its routine orientation programme. Heriot-Watt University has organised a socially distanced welcome fair, attended by more than 500 students. Aberdeen has produced an online 'isolation kit', scaled up alumni and peer mentoring, increased access to digital library resources and established safe gathering places on campus.

There have also been examples of good practice in many colleges. Borders College has established an I-learn space and stayed open as much as possible to allow students not only to use the library 'but to stay warm'. It has also arranged one-to-one meetings for students off campus in venues such as coffee shops. More vulnerable students have received weekly catch-up calls. Forth Valley College, like St Andrews, has maintained 40-per-cent capacity, and established student 'bubbles' that rotated with one week on campus and the next online. West College Scotland argues that opening the campus as much as possible within social distancing, and 'level', rules is essential to provide

'a much welcome study space for those who need to get out of the home environment which may, for some, not be the most conducive environment for studying or even a happy place to be'.

But these, and other, initiatives cannot fully mitigate the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the student experience. The University of Edinburgh highlights a number of disturbing trends – 'flight' from university halls in favour of 'self-contained' alternatives because of concerns about the impact of possible quarantine, evidence of increased learning difficulties as a result of the enforced shift to blended learning, growing levels of isolation and an increase in requests for authorised interruptions by students in their second and later years. Overall it remains concerned that the measures that have had to be taken are having an impact on 'the sense of belonging to the University'.

MENTAL HEALTH

A key concern is that the restrictions that have had to be imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have had alarming consequences for the mental health of students – and also staff, although this has received less attention. NUS Scotland is very clear. Its surveys show that

> *50 per cent of students report money worries which had increased their sense of anxiety.*

(Financial hardship is discussed in the next section of this report). Surveys also showed that

> *72 per cent of undergraduates said they experienced the most anxiety in the first year.*

It also pointed out that, while first-time round self-isolation might be seen by some students as a novelty, if it was repeated it created an 'intense environment' within halls and flats with serious consequences for mental health. Care-experienced, estranged and also international students who often had to stay in halls or flats over university breaks were particularly exposed. A larger UK-wide survey by the NUS confirmed this picture of deteriorating mental health among students.

NUS Scotland also highlights the disparity in terms of access to counselling between higher education institutions and colleges. This point is taken up by the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland which emphasises that,

> *while all students are experiencing higher levels of anxiety as a result of the shift to online learning and other social restrictions, its pre-HE students do not have the same level of access to counselling as those on higher education courses.*

The RCS believes additional SFC support is urgent.

However, NUS surveys also show that even before COVID-19 half of all students said that money worries were affecting their mental health. Over the past decade the scale of poor mental health among students has been more widely recognised. The SFC has provided £20 million over four years to invest in improved mental health services, including £3.6 million to enhance student counselling services. It has even been said that poor mental health among students was already approaching epidemic proportions in its own right before the arrival of COVID-19.

So the picture is complex. Borders College has experienced a reduction in mental health issues among students, although limits on access to services may have been a factor. Some, perhaps less socially confident, students have found online learning less stressful than navigating the campus environment. At the City of Glasgow College the number of student mental health referrals has increased 350 per cent since 2014-15. Students accessing support have been predominantly female, aged between 18 and 24. Care-experienced, LGBTQ, and black and minority ethnic students (BME) have also been over-represented. But the biggest jump, more than a doubling, was between 2017-18 and 2018-19, which underlines again the longer-term deterioration of students' mental health across higher education. During lockdown in the spring and early summer the number of referrals fell, with some students reluctant to engage in telephone counselling which had replaced face-to-face counselling.

But the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions cannot be understated. Forth Valley states that,

> *while the demand for counselling had already been increasing rapidly in the pre-Covid days, it has now 'gone through the roof'.*

Dumfries and Galloway College emphasises in its response that disadvantaged students have access to fewer support networks, may have no one else in their families with experience of education beyond high school, may also have additional caring responsibilities and often lack suitable IT and space for online learning. For these students college attendance offers mental stimulus, social networking and interaction – even physical activity and nutritious food. Inevitably limited attendance combined with wider social restrictions has had a negative impact of their mental health and well-being. West College Scotland makes a similar report. The COVID-19 restrictions have exacerbated existing mental health issues. The college has organised 'blether sessions', timetabled online sessions focused not so much on learning and teaching but on 'bonding, opening-up and socialising'.

Universities have also been active in mitigating the worst effects of the COVID-19 restrictions on mental health. Glasgow offers emergency accommodation for vulnerable students who have been defined as at risk, for mental health or other issues, which has been literally 'life-saving' for some. Aberdeen agrees with NUS Scotland that the loss of part-time jobs will have a significant impact on mental health, in particular that of students from deprived communities or suffering other forms of disadvantage. Students, and staff, at Glasgow Caledonian have access to the 24/7 TogetherAll confidential online counselling service, which is used by several other universities and colleges.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious impact on mental health. Poor mental health among students had already been approaching epidemic proportions in its own right. COVID-19 has compounded this epidemic, while shifting the focus. In a more recent survey of 50 class representatives at City of Glasgow College almost 90 per cent said that,

> *COVID-19 had had a high or medium impact on their mental health and well-being.*

Alongside general feelings of anxiety and depression they cited 'loss of focus' (a loss of control and sense of drift), 'missing the social aspects of class' (lack of peer contact and sense of isolation') and 'Zoom is mentally draining' (the concentration required in online learning and the lack of social clues, such as body language).

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

Financial hardship is a key element in poor mental health. Dumfries and Galloway College points out the financial obstacles that many disadvantaged students face – they come from homes reliant on insecure employment; they often rely themselves on part-time jobs while they study; their parents, or careers, may have lost their jobs; and, to cap it all, they may be aiming at work and careers in sectors that have been hardest hit by the pandemic. Another college, Borders, reports that its

hardship funds had been used by students to pay for food, utilities and even funeral expenses.

The picture in universities is similar. Glasgow relaunched its hardship fund in April. To offer a measure of how great the need has become only £50,000 had been paid out in hardship funds between August 2019 and March 2020; between April and August this year almost £1.6 million has been paid out, and that figure has continued to increase. Since April more than 3,000 successful applications have been made, benefiting 2400 individual students. Dundee reports 'unprecedented levels' of students seeking financial support, in particular those with the least financial resilience who had very limited opportunities to secure support from their parents. The story has been similar at Aberdeen which anticipates spending £650,000 this year, while admitting that this will still produce

'relatively small sums for each student in need which is insufficient to replace lost income'.

Some universities, like Aberdeen, have been able to appeal to alumni/ae for extra funding to help students in financial need. But most colleges, and some universities, have not been in a position to do this. Most have had to struggle to increase their hardship funds by borrowing money from other budgets, which is clearly not sustainable in the long run. As with several other aspects of the impact of the COVID-19 emergency those institutions with lower levels of demand for financial help have generally been those with the greatest resources to help – and vice versa. For that reason NUS Scotland has asked for a doubling of the amount of FE and HE discretionary funding in its submission to the government for the 2021-22 budget. The current figure for HE is £18.6 million; the figure for FE is more difficult to identify, although it is in the region of £7 million. NUS Scotland asserts that, despite additional and more flexible funding in the current year, because of the increase in demand the amount per student has been reduced.

However, some responses point to more positive effects of COVID-19. Some colleges, especially in more rural areas where public transport is more limited, point out that the shift to online learning has reduced travel costs for students. The University and College Union also suggests that

one of the benefits of blended learning, with more online delivery, may have been that students have greater flexibility to take on part-time jobs – provided these jobs are available.

EXAMINATIONS, GRADES AND CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS

As is well known, Higher and Advanced Higher grade examinations were cancelled in 2020, and replaced by teacher assessed grades (after an attempt by the Scottish Qualifications Authority to use an algorithm to moderate these grades failed). The government had already announced that National 5 examinations would not be held next year, and recently announced that Higher and Advanced Higher examinations would also be cancelled for a second year.

In England the equivalent examinations, A levels and GCSEs, were also cancelled this year and replaced by teacher assessed grades (after a similar attempt to use an algorithm to moderate these grades also had to be abandoned). But the UK Government has announced that in England school examinations will be held next summer, but with changes to content and grading to reflect disrupted schooling. As a footnote – these different approaches to school examinations could create difficulties for Scottish universities which recruit significant number of students from the rest of the UK.

One of the main reasons for the revolt against the SQA's algorithm was the belief that it might 'bake in' disadvantage by potentially downgrading pupils from under-performing and low-progression schools, regardless of their own individual achievements. Less attention so far has been given to an alternative hypothesis, that teacher-assessed grades may favour pupils from more advantaged backgrounds. There is evidence that this happens in England when teachers are asked to predict the A level grades of candidates for higher education. A further issue that the events of the summer have raised a more fundamental question – which are more accurate in measuring pupils' attainment (and, crucially, for higher education entry, potential), examination results or teacher assessed grades? Now it is clear that some Scottish candidates for higher education entrance in 2021 will not have sat a formal examination for two years, and all will not have taken Higher or Advanced Higher examinations, all these issues require urgent and detailed study, in particular from the perspective of fair access.

In the first wave of the pandemic in the spring schools were closed and struggled to provide limited online teaching. Since the summer schools have remained open, despite the rise in the number of infections. However, schooling has been significantly disrupted. Attendance is running at least 10 per cent below the usual figure, and has been hardest hit in areas of highest infection where more pupils (and teachers) have been required to quarantine. These areas correspond closely to those of greater social deprivation. As a result of both continuing uncertainty about school examinations and a lack of research about the impact of the substitution of teacher-assessed grades, and of school disruption, and an uneven pattern of attendance, there are fears that efforts to close the attainment gap between the highest performing pupils and schools and those with lower levels of performance will stall – or even go into reverse. The implications for fair access to higher education are both stark and obvious.

Edinburgh emphasises the

'usual opening up of the attainment gap during the summer holidays has been made worse by longer shut-downs and intermittent attendance',

and has developed a pilot programme of tutoring and small-group support in south east Scotland. Dundee reports anecdotal reports of

'negative perceptions of the year ahead among some secondary school pupils'

- for example, not wanting to stay on at school and some concern about the value of qualifications [as a result of teacher-assessed grades]. St Andrews is in no doubt that the pandemic will have impacted attainment significantly in the lower SIMD quintiles. Strathclyde states: 'the time away from learning during lockdown and the impact of exam cancellations will.. play out over the course of several years'. West College Scotland believes the

position in 2020-21 is even more challenging with different patterns of attendance, more severe interruptions in more deprived communities and difficulties accessing and benefiting from online provision.

Despite this, universities seem to be reluctant to adjust their contextual admissions and minimum entry requirements (MERs) to reflect the new reality in secondary education. To some extent this is understandable in the light of the effort required to establish and publish MERs in the first place, and it is important to recognise that Scotland leads the UK in terms of transparency about contextual offers. Universities Scotland argues

it would be 'risky' to make further adjustments to MERs because existing adjustments have been made after 'careful consideration'.

St Andrews agrees. While stating that 'our attention to contextual admissions and MERs is reaffirmed and increased following the adverse effects of COVID-19', it argues that:

'there is inherent value is establishing stability concerning contextual admissions which have been set in accordance with the elegant research and need to be established as best practice before the particular metrics by which they operate are altered'.

However, universities agree there must be more flexibility in how MERs are applied. Aberdeen says that in the coming year experience of COVID-19 will become 'almost another contextual factor' with applicants being encouraged to discuss any mitigating circumstances that have arisen. In particular there seems to be growing consensus that applicants should be able to meet MERs in two rather than a single sitting. Glasgow Caledonian, while believing that, now schools are back, there is no need to adjust MERs, adds that,

if school examinations are cancelled again, more entrants from 2021-22 onwards will not have sat level 6 or 7 examinations, which could be 'an issue for retention in an HE environment'.

The University emphasises that 'SFC support for widening participation is therefore absolutely critical at this time, and this should be a priority 'set in-stone' in the SFC review'. Glasgow is taking more positive action. MERs have been reduced for two priority groups, including SIMD20, care-experienced, refugee and asylum applicants, and summer school grades are being accepted in the place of school examinations.

ARTICULATION

Articulation from HNs to degrees has been one of the issues on which it has proved to be most difficult to make progress. Although not of itself directly relevant to fair access, it is important because a much higher proportion of students taking HN courses come from more deprived social communities, or suffer other forms of disadvantage, than those on first-degree courses. So any additional obstacles placed in the way of smooth articulation by the COVID-19 emergency could have serious consequences for fair access to universities.

The evidence is mixed. Some colleges believe COVID-19 has had little effect. City of Glasgow reports that HN recruitment has been largely unaffected with more than 7,000 entrants. It is 'unaware of any changes to existing institutional commitments and existing partnerships are continuing'. Forth Valley has noticed no haemorrhaging of student numbers of HNs and integrated pathways. Glasgow Clyde takes a similar view and has

> *no 'anticipated concern about HN students being crowded out by better-than-expected Higher grades'.*

But, in common with several other colleges, it points out that the difficulty of meeting work placement requirements for some courses may mean that HN graduates may not satisfy the criteria set by some universities for advanced standing.

Other colleges have different experiences. Edinburgh College says it

> *has had particular difficulties with SWAP students in terms of meeting the challenges of providing tutor and UCAS support for progression to university.*

Newbattle Abbey believes there is a danger of HN students being crowded out, outside fixed and guaranteed partnerships. Borders College says there has been a negative impact on HN students who wish to move onto university courses, especially in care, because larger direct first-year entries in universities mean that fewer places are available for HN students in the second year. Glasgow Caledonian admits that

> *the increased intake into universities by school leavers this year may lead to fewer students from HN courses in colleges in future years.*

West College Scotland makes the same point. It says more places for articulating students are given when universities have spare places in their second-year courses, which will not be the case in 2021-22; the curtailment of some projects and placements may have left some HN students less prepared for university; and some potential HN students got higher grades than expected and took up degree places in university, although they might have been better off in colleges (and will require support that universities may not be able to provide). Glasgow is also concerned that some colleges may struggle to fill their HN places because better-than-expected Higher grades have allowed more students to go to university, warning that 'a level of risk is present'. But St Andrews makes the wider point that,

> *if more students are admitted to university and there is no increase in the total number of places, access students will suffer.*

TARGETS

As a result of the increase in the number of funded places for Scottish domiciled students in the wake of the higher-than-expected Higher grades this year the proportion of SIMD20 entrants is likely to fall. At the same time the actual number of SIMD20 entrants has increased, with all offers to SIMD20 applicants having been honoured according to Universities Scotland. This, apparently contradictory, effect has come about because, while the pool of eligible SIMD20 applicants continues to be limited (although it will have expanded by the higher-than-expected grades), most of the 'extra' entrants with higher-than-expected Highers have inevitably come from other SIMD quintiles.

The 2021 interim target, 16 per cent of entrants from SIMD20 areas, looks safe. In effect, it has already been met. But some individual universities may fall back. At St Andrews 11 per cent of new entrants came from SIMD20 areas in 2019-20; this year it is expected to decline to 9.5 per cent. But there is greater nervousness about future years, and the 2026 interim target of 18 per cent SIMD20 entrants. Heriot-Watt believes

> *this target will be more challenging because of reduced outreach and the need to provide more support for SIMD20 applicants as a result COVID-19 disruption.*

St Andrews again is concerned that

> *it may be more difficult to convert applicants from more deprived communities with mainly online outreach and that the pool of qualified SIMD20 applicants is likely to remain limited, and even decline, if one of the impacts of COVID-19 is to widen the attainment gap in schools.*

Aberdeen also has

> *'significant concerns about next academic year as we enter a full recruitment cycle with very limited face-to-face opportunities with widening access prospective students', adding 'this critical personal interaction is often lost in the virtual world and there could be knock-on effects for widening access as a result'.*

The university is also concerned that, because most potential SIMD20 applicants come from the central belt, any trend towards 'staying local' could have severe effects on its ability to meet its targets. Glasgow worries that any loss of time in school as a result of COVID-19 interruptions may balance out any 'gain' in widening participation entrants because of higher grades in the summer. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland had already seen a decline in the number of its Scottish applicant numbers before the full impact of the pandemic had been felt, which it attributes to a rhetoric that treats the creative arts as second-class subjects rather than recognising their major economic impact and their ability to develop listening skills, empathy, team work and creativity. It highlights the UK Government's late support for arts organisations and freelance artists, as evidence of this rhetoric.

Many of the responses mention the need to develop other metrics of disadvantage to be used alongside SIMD. Universities Scotland highlights the plight of the

'newly impoverished'

as a result of COVID-19, who will not be captured in the SIMD classification of communities which is only revised at four or five-year intervals. Aberdeen, while accepting that SIMD is the key metric, argues that take-up of free school meals (FSMs) and eligibility for Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) should be included, although both need to be more clearly articulated; that funding strategies should support mobility by students wishing to travel further to study; and that secondary school teachers should be trusted more to identify non-SIMD disadvantage. St Andrews believes it would be

'incredibly disappointing' if no progress was made towards widening metrics beyond SIMD by using FSMs and EMAs.

Borders College points out the impact of poor transport and rural poverty, with the most deprived forced to seek the cheapest housing in farm cottages and small hamlets. Not everyone agrees. West College Scotland says that,

while developing other metrics may be important in the future, current areas of deprivation have been worst affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and most remain the immediate priority.

STAFF ISSUES

Only a few responses specifically highlight the pressures on staff in colleges and universities, although Forth Valley College underlines the need for constant engagement with staff. The college has organised weekly meetings between staff and their curriculum managers and appointed learning and digital mentors. Borders College also emphasises the dedication of individual members of staff who organised one-to-one meetings with students in a variety of off-campus venues, instancing one who has to drive to the top of the highest hill to secure a good enough mobile signal to teach her students.

The University and College Union argues that

there has not been sufficient recognition of the extra time and resources needed to shift from face-to-face to online teaching.

It estimates that one day's work is required to prepare one hour of online provision, with substantial effort required to prepare captions and check transcripts (essential for some disabled students). UCU is also concerned that, if quality issues are raised by students, lecturers themselves are blamed for any shortcomings (especially if English is not their mother tongue); that line managers are expected to sort out 'difficulties' on an individual basis rather than to recognise systemic problems; that staff on more precarious contracts, such as teaching assistants and teaching fellows, find it hard to say 'no' if extra demands are made; and that the burden of increased 'emotional labour' caused by student distress often falls on lecturers, especially women. UCU accepts the need for some emergency measures, for example restrictions on taking research leave at St Andrews and Stirling to maximise resources for teaching students. It contrasts this above-the-board approach with the 'creep' in some other universities of extra responsibilities being added while retaining existing ones, for example the need to be research active for the purposes of the Research Excellence Framework. The union also strongly supports the need to maintain or increase student numbers, and current targets, in support of fair access.

UCU is also concerned that a few universities have been tempted to use the COVID-19 emergency to pursue longer-term restructuring plans. The evidence that this is happening is limited at this stage. Clearly university leaders have an obligation to respond to any budgetary pressures arising from COVID-19, whether additional costs for student hardship or digital investment or reduced income from student recruitment. Their response could well require some degree of restructuring. But it is important to recognise the challenges staff, at all levels, have faced and the commendable ways in which they have risen to these challenges, and also the fragility of staff morale and even their physical and mental exhaustion, in pursuing even the most urgent restructuring.

5. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the public health measures taken to combat it, have the potential to deliver a serious check to the impressive progress that Scotland has made towards fair access to higher education. Although Colleges and universities have worked very hard in adverse circumstances that could have not been imagined a few months ago to mitigate the most damaging effects, it is almost impossible to exaggerate the negative impact of COVID-19.

• Outreach activities targeted at under-represented social groups and individuals have had to delivered almost entirely online, undermining the personal hands-on experience that is so often key to their success in raising aspirations and reducing barriers, real and imagined;

• 'Digital poverty' has put students from more socially deprived backgrounds at a serious disadvantage because they lack the tools of effective learning – IT, connectivity and quiet space – in an predominantly online environment;

• The same students are experiencing unprecedented levels of financial hardship, as a result of the shortage of part-time jobs and their inability to fall back for help on parents and carers (who themselves are often being exposed to unprecedented levels of economic strain);

• All students are experiencing an impoverished learning, and social, experience and also increased levels of poor mental health. But deprived and disadvantaged students, with more limited familiarity with university life, are suffering worst;

• There is a real risk the attainment gap between pupils in the most advantaged and most deprived schools will widen as a result of interruptions which have been greatest in areas of the greatest social disadvantage;

• The, perhaps illusory, 'gold standard' of National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher grades has been called into question by the cancellation of examinations. The uncertainty could destabilise carefully calibrated systems of contextual admissions which have benefited applicants from socially deprived communities.

In short, to paraphrase the Matthew principle, 'to those that have least, the most is being taken away'.

Of course, there are also grounds for hope. COVID-19 has laid bare the massive, and morally unacceptable, inequalities that exist in society and economy and disfigure our democracy. They are now in plain view. They cannot be denied. There is no longer any room for scepticism about the urgent need for fair access. Nor can these inequalities be minimised, and attributed to gaps in attainment or deficits in aspiration. Effects can no longer be confused with causes. If the case for fair access is strengthened, and also for more radical action rather than incremental interventionism, some good will have come from the terrible experiences of the past few months.

Finally, three other issues should be considered:

The first is the pace and extent of the return to 'normality'. Although it can no longer be seriously argued there will be a full return in 2021, it remains an open question about how long the scarring to society and the economy will last. In the context of fair access to higher education it will clearly take several years for the effects of disruption to schooling to work through, and for the shock to ambitions and aspirations among young people in more deprived communities to wear off. In other words the measures that colleges and universities, as emergency responses in 2020, will probably have to be continued for several years – and perhaps on a permanent basis because the disadvantage (and, to speak frankly, discrimination) that COVID-19 has highlighted, and in response to which these measures were taken, are deep-rooted.

The second issue is future demand for higher education. It would be reasonable to expect demand to increase as a result of COVID-19. In the short term the number of alternatives, for example directly into employment, is likely to be reduced as firms struggle to adapt to the post-Covid environment. Higher levels of unemployment are also forecast. There is some evidence from the experience of the current academic year that, if demand increases (in this case because of the higher-than-expected grades that swelled the number of qualified applicants), applicants from more socially deprived backgrounds and other forms of disadvantage may be crowded out, even when extra funded places are provided – at least in proportional terms. A further factor is that the need for up-skilling and retraining will become urgent as the economy recovers, if – as expected – the experience of COVID-19 leads to far reaching changes in the nature and balance of jobs. Expanding opportunities for adult education, in a broader sense, will be equally urgent to aid 'social recovery' from the scars of the pandemic.

The third issue is that there is risk that the lessons of the enforced shift from face-to-face to online may be learned too well. The benefits of online outreach – such as its increased reach or more efficient use of staff time – may be over-emphasised while its deficits as a means to build confidence and remove misconceptions about university life among those least familiar with it may be downplayed. On a wider plane the success with which institutions have been able to pivot to online learning in the COVID-19 emergency may be taken as a wider endorsement of the inexorable movement towards a cyber future for higher education, by emphasising the benefits of customised – and, once again, cost-effective delivery. Up to now online learning has typically been regarded as complementary to in-person teaching (and, in some cases, the benefits of residential university education) not as a substitute for them. It is an open question whether students at large would benefit from such a future, beyond the scope of this report and my competence as Commissioner for Fair Access. But it is not an open question that students who have been historically disadvantaged should have access to the very best higher education on offer on the same terms as other students.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The interim target for 18-per-cent of entrants to come from SIMD20 areas by 2026 should be reaffirmed, regardless of any loss of momentum (or ground) that may have been experienced as an unintended consequences of measures taken to combat COVID-19.

Individual colleges and universities should make full use of a basket of indicators of disadvantage, for example to identify rural poverty or the 'newly impoverished" as a result of COVID-19, to set their own targets. But the primary focus on communities suffering multiple deprivation in setting national targets should be maintained.

Outreach activities should have priority in the return to face-to-face delivery. Funding for outreach should also be increased, at institutional, regional and national levels.

The increase in the number of funded places for Scottish students, which was made to accommodate higher-than-expected Higher and Advanced Higher grades this year, should be made permanent, to avoid the risk of opportunities for SIMD20 and other disadvantaged applicants being squeezed and to provide institutions with the additional resources they need to meet the post-Covid demand for up-skilling and retraining.

Universities should consider whether their minimum entry requirements need to be further adjusted in the light of (a) the shift from examinations to teacher-assessed grades; and (b) interruptions to school attendance.

Research should be undertaken into the impact of teacher assessment on the grades awarded to pupils from social deprived communities and other disadvantaged backgrounds.

Targets for an increasing proportion of HN entrants to universities to be granted advanced standing should be reinforced, in the light of concerns that they may have been 'crowded out' by increased first-year entry and restrictions on project work, placements and other enhancements of HNs.

In the next stage of its review of the sustainability of higher education the SFC should explicitly include fair access as a key objective.

The Scottish Government, in association with the SFC and institutions, should consider a COVID-19 recovery fund, focused in particular on addressing 'digital poverty', financial hardship and poor mental health among students.

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