

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

Petitioner written submission, 12 November 2024

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 horde 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.