

An Open Letter to the Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education

30 July 2026

Dear Minister,

Congratulations on your reappointment as Minister for Tertiary Education. We are looking forward to supporting you, your officials, agencies and Scotland's Fair Access Commissioner in progressing fair access to higher education in Scotland, particularly as you continue your work on post-school education and skills reform.

While significant progress has been made on fair access to higher education in Scotland over the last decade, there is clearly more to do to ensure Scotland has an inclusive, equitable higher education system. With this in mind, we thought that it would be helpful to share with you a summary of the views, concerns and aspirations expressed by attendees at our SCAPP and Carnegie Education Fund joint sector engagement event on 17 June 2026.

In particular, the sector has emphasised that attention must now move beyond its focus on undergraduate entry to universities and place greater emphasis on participation, retention, progression and successful outcomes across the higher education system.

To enable this, the sector has highlighted the need for:

- **A whole system approach with national leadership:** Participants highlighted the need for greater recognition of colleges, articulation pathways, flexible learning, part-time study and other non-traditional routes as key components of a fair and inclusive tertiary system. They underlined the importance of stronger collaboration across schools, colleges, universities, employers, public bodies, student representative bodies and the third sector to address increasingly complex barriers to participation. As a starting point the Minister may wish to consider broadening the remit of the Access Delivery Group as a governance group to better coordinate national progress and take forward key actions, including the Commissioner's recommendations.
- **A renewed framework for measuring national progress on fair access that better defines and recognises individual disadvantage and increases focus on progression and outcomes, not just access to higher education:** Many agreed that SIMD20 is not an effective measure of individual disadvantage and that the sector needs to adopt a broader range of indicators that better reflect the complexity of inequality, including rurality, disability, care experience, estrangement, caring responsibilities and other intersecting factors. This aligns with Recommendation 7 of the Commissioner's February 2026 report, which states that the fair access agenda should be "transitioning towards the use of individual-level indicators of socio-economic disadvantage".

Participants also felt that progress needs to look at more than access to university, and should include student experiences, and whether learners complete their studies and progress into employment, further study or professional careers, through a range of higher

education pathways. This is in line with Recommendation 8 of the Commissioner's February 2026 report, "the fair access agenda should be recalibrated to give equal weight to entry, student experience, and outcomes" and the Commissioner's recommendations to strengthen the ROWA evidence base, including the "disaggregate[tion] [of] 'retention data' to provide data for each year of study within the degree".

- **An assessment of the options for introducing a Unique Learner Number (ULN) for learners in Scotland to better track outcomes:** Underpinning more meaningful measurement of progress, and provided appropriate safeguards around privacy, governance and consent are in place, participants could see significant potential in the development of a system which improves learner tracking, enabling better evaluation of long-term outcomes and enhancing our understanding of what interventions are most effective. We are aware that the government has committed to exploring this and are keen to understand the process and timeline for doing so.
- **An enhanced focus on early intervention:** Participants highlighted that interventions often arrive too late for young people most affected by structural disadvantage. Patterns of aspiration, confidence, subject choice and opportunity are shaped much earlier and are closely intertwined with the wider drivers of child poverty. Strengthening early intervention and careers advice, in partnership with schools, families and community-based services, would support the Government's wider agenda on tackling poverty and improving transitions, ensuring that post-school reform is connected to the realities of learners' journeys.
- **Funding that incentivises and embeds fairness as a key mission, not a side-project:** Many participants were concerned that short-term funding cycles limit innovation, impede long-term planning and reduce impact. Moreover, the financial pressures facing institutions and a funding model for universities that is focused on recruitment to funded places drives competition between providers which many were concerned risks diverting attention away from fair access outcomes and student success. Work underway to look at future funding must have fair access as a central ambition.
- **Investment in and recognition of practitioners:** The success of Scotland's fair access agenda rests on the efforts of its practitioners. A survey conducted by SCAPP prior to the event shows the commitment and value that they place on their work. However, participants also raised concerns about workforce wellbeing and highlighted the need for better support for staff working in widening participation in Scotland, including greater investment in professional development and progression opportunities. This is a key focus of SCAPP's work but is limited by its resources and capacity.

The event was attended by over 100 individuals from across Scotland's colleges, universities, public and third sectors, who work to support underrepresented groups and individuals to access and participate in higher education. They bring informed perspectives and first-hand experience which we believe are of significant value in determining how we can improve opportunities and outcomes for learners in Scotland.

While the sector recognises the progress made, there is a strong sense that the agenda does not always get the attention or resources that it deserves and that the wider financial challenges facing the public sector and higher education providers in Scotland pose a threat to continued progress, unless a more concerted and coordinated effort is made to ensure equity is embedded in policy approaches and funding priorities, including post-school reform.

As we enter a new parliamentary term, we must now agree a more holistic definition of fairness which goes beyond access to university and take clear, concrete and coordinated steps to work across the higher education system to drive collective, national progress on this critical agenda. We would like to see proactive leadership from Scottish Government in taking this forward and stand ready to assist in whatever way we can.

Yours sincerely,



Patricia Anderson, SCAPP Development Manager



Hannah Garrow, Chief Executive, Carnegie Education Fund

