# Widening participation in the Covid: more urgent but more difficult

Peter Scott

Commissioner for Fair Access, Scottish Government

Professor of Higher Education Studies, UCL Institute of Education

p.scott@ucl.ac.uk

# Contents of presentation

1. Access before the pandemic

2. Chronology of Covid-19

3. Government responses (hardship)

4. Impact reports - OfS, HEPI, Sutton Trust

5. CFA report (Scotland)

6. Main themes

7. Unresolved issues

# Access before pandemic

- Applicants from most advantaged quintile 3/4 times more likely to participate in HE than those from most deprived quintile…

- … but good progress: access gap (in selective universities) halved by 2025 / closed by 2040 (England): closed across all HE by 2030 (Scotland)

- Unresolved questions: strategies (no fees, targeted support…), target groups (individuals - communities, class / age / gender…)

# Chronology of Covid

- First wave: schools, FECs & HEIs (almost completely) closed

- School exams replaced by teacher grades

- HEIs partially re-open at start of 2020-21 (but major problems)

- Second wave: HEIs closed again (now 'opening' in England - not fully open until summer term?)
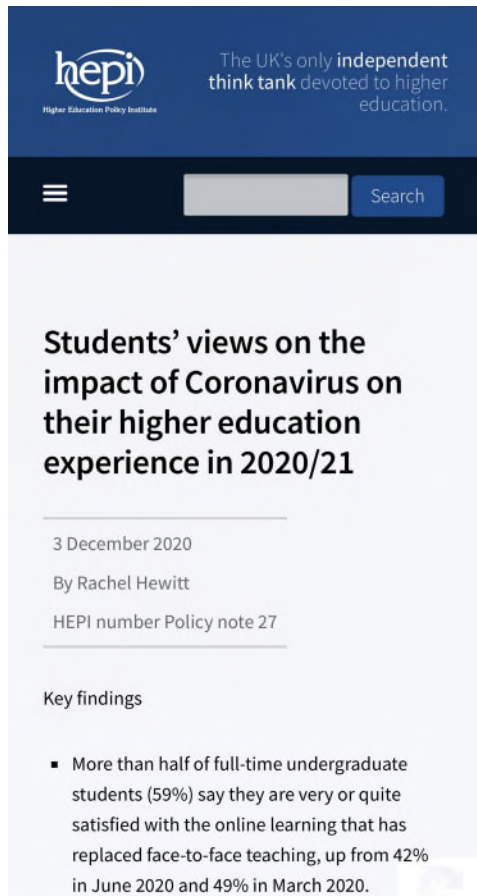
- School exams abandoned again

# Government responses

- Main focus on relieving student hardship (lack of PT income, access to computers...)

- No direct support for HEIs (England) - 'independent institutions' mantra

- Fee rebates resisted (England) - but (some) concessions on hall fees

- Limited direct institutional support (Scotland)

- More flexibility for international students

- BUT no retreat on Brexit damage

# Impact reports

- HEPI: *Students' views of the impact of Coronavirus on their higher education experience in 2020/21* (December 2020)

- Sutton Trust: (i) *Covid-19 and the University Experience*, (ii) *The University of Life* (both February 2021)

- OfS: *Gravity Assist: Propelling higher education towards a brighter future* (February 2021)

# HEPI & OfS

# Sutton Trust

# Impact on fair access

Commissioner for **Fair Access**

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

Peter Scott
December 2020
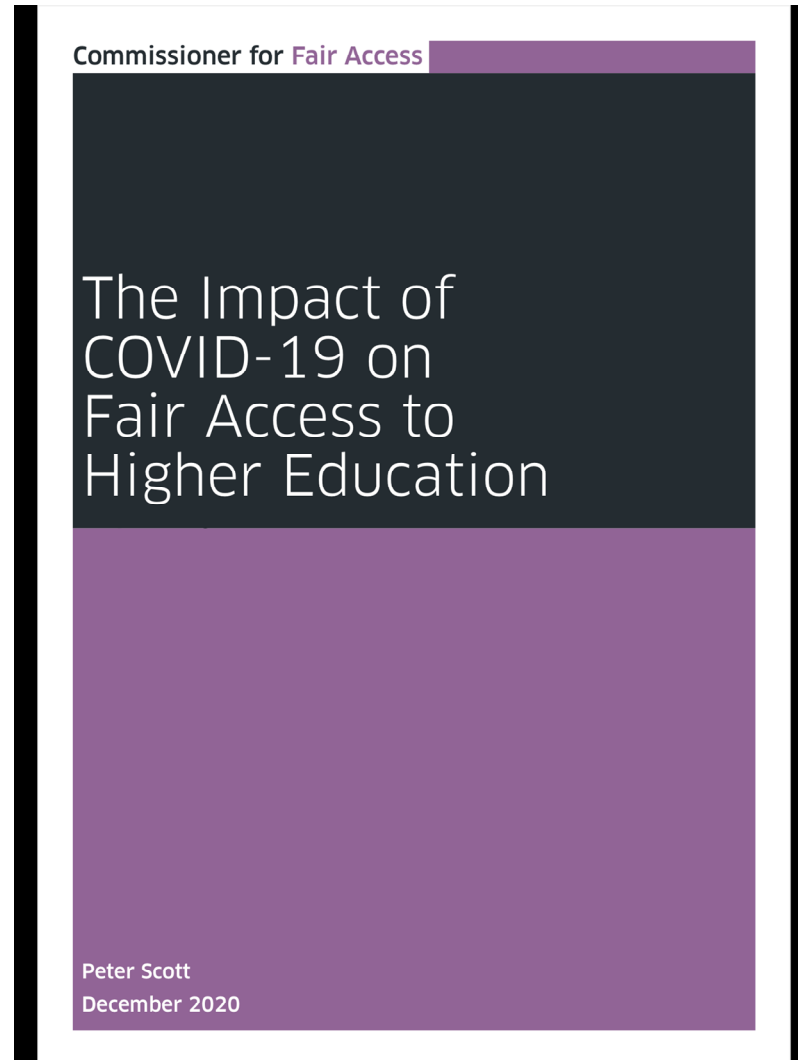
# CWA special report

- *The Impact of COVID-19 on Fair Access to Higher Education* (December 2020)

- Consultation with all HEIs & colleges (& other bodies, e.g. SFC, NUS, UCU) in Scotland

- 17 (19) HEIs / 12 (22) colleges responded (some detailed)

- 10 follow-up Zoom / MS Teams meetings

# Main topics

1. Outreach & access
2. Digital  divide / poverty
3. Online learning
4. Student experience
5. Mental health
6. Financial hardship
7. School exams, grades & contextual admissions
8. Articulation
9. Targets
10. Staff

# Outreach & access

- 'Already hard-to-reach pupils have become harder to reach'

- 'Inability to engage face-to-face and demystify university life'

- 'Online activities cannot replace campus visits, open days & residential events'

- 'Online is a problem. Summer schools are needed to counter perceptions that X is…inaccessible for people from lower-income backgrounds'

- BUT: 'Moving online offers opportunity to scale and increase reach'

# Digital poverty

- Three areas of concern: (i) computers: (ii) connectivity; (iii) space

- 'It's more than digital exclusion. It's loneliness, lack of individual support'

- 'Access to equipment & broadband are the most obvious issues… Arguably they are easiest to solve'

- 'Using technology for recreation [social media] and technology for [online] learning are very different'

# Online learning

- 'UNDER a level playing field'
- Care experienced & estranged students need face-to-face interaction'
- 'A particular challenge to LGBT+ students who face learning in a hostile environment'
- BUT: 'Move to online… may provide opportunities to contribute positively to reducing inequalities and enhancing access'
- 'It has the potential to produce greater parity of experience among students [especially in more rural and remote communities]'

# Student experience

- 'Flight from halls in favour of self-contained alternatives, increased learning difficulties following enforced shift to blended learning, isolation, requests for interruption of studies… eroding sense of belonging to University'

- 'Essential to provide study space for those who need to get out of the home environment which may not be conducive for study – or even a happy place to be'

# Mental health

- 'While the demand for counselling had been increasing in pre-Covid days, it's now gone through the roof'

- 'COVID-19 has had a high or medium impact on their mental health and well-being'

- 'Loss of focus… missing the social aspects of class… Zoom is mentally draining'

- <u>BUT</u> mental health already its own pandemic before Covid…

- … and some students feel relieved from stress of campus attendance

# Financial hardship

- 50% of students report money worries which have increased their sense of anxiety

- University X: hardship payments - £50K to £1.6m, University Y: 'explosion of demand'

- Hardship funds used to pay for food, utilities – and even funeral expenses

- 'Relatively small sums available [hardship funds] for each student in need totally insufficient to replace lost income'

- BUT 'a benefit of more online delivery has been students have greater flexibility to take part-time jobs – provided jobs are available'

# Exams – and contextual admissions

- 2/3 cohorts of pupils will not have taken formal exams – 'issue for retention in HE environment'

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

- 'Negative perceptions of the year ahead among some secondary school pupils' [especially among 16-year-olds, i.e. GCSE / N level]

- BUT 'there is inherent value in establishing stability concerning contextual admissions… need to be established as best practice before metrics are altered'

# Articulation (college > university)

- 'Increased intake into universities by school leavers may lead to fewer students from HN courses'

- 'If more students are admitted to university and there is no increase in places, access students will suffer'

- HN applicants used to fill gaps in years 2/3

- More applicants qualify for university entry, diverting HN applicants – but universities may struggle to meet their needs

# Targets

- University A: share of entrants from SIMD20 areas likely to decline from 11 to 9.5%

- 'Target more challenging because of reduced outreach'

- 'Difficult to convert applicants from deprived communities with online outreach... pool of qualified SIMD20 applicants will remain limited, or decline if one of the Covid impacts is to widen attainment gap'

- Can metrics discover the 'newly impoverished'?

- BUT 'while developing other metrics [FSM] important in future, current areas of deprivation worst affected by pandemic and must remain immediate priority'

# Staff

- Staff commitment: driving to top of hill to get mobile reception to teach students, meeting off-campus for tutorials…

- Insufficient time / resource for switch to online learning

- Increased 'emotional labour' (especially female staff)

- Staff left to sort out 'difficulties' on individual basis, limited recognition of systemic problems / blamed if quality issues raised by students

- Maximising resources for teaching, research leave cancelled

- Covid emergency as cover for restructuring?

# Unresolved issues

1. Enforced shift to blended learning: turbo-charging reform or 'back to normal'?

2. Re-evaluating the campus experience – like the high street & the office?

3. State responsibility for [emergency] funding – future of fees (England), planned student numbers (Scotland)?

4. Post-Covid internationalisation in a climate emergency?