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Speaker Key:

VB Vikki Boliver

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VB Thank you very much Rowena for that lovely introduction. And can I start by saying a huge thank you to Linda and to Cathy for inviting me to give this lecture in honour of David. It is a real honour to be able to pay tribute to him and his work by talking about how we can widen access, how we can make access to universities fairer in the Scottish context. I'd also like to actually thank the Scottish Funding Council for funding and supporting the work that I'm going to talk to you about tonight. That is much appreciated.

And also a big thanks to the many colleagues at universities throughout Scotland who contributed to the research that I'm going to talk about tonight. That was very much appreciated too. And I should also thank my collaborators who can't be here today but whose work and whose thinking has really influenced what I'm going to share with you tonight.

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Okay. So without further ado, I want to talk about promoting fairer access to Scottish universities and thinking about how this can be achieved. And I think it's a really exciting time to be thinking about or working in this area in Scotland, because, of course, there is a real determination right now at government level and throughout the sector bring about a sea change in widening access to really make a difference, to really make a dent on trends that have been quite flat for a long time in terms of access to higher education and particularly universities on the part of those from deprived backgrounds and also to bring about a paradigm shift in the way we think about what counts as fair access and fair admission in particular.

So, I think it really started in 2014 when the first minister put to the page a very bold ambition really, that within a generation somebody born in one of the most deprived communities in Scotland should have no less of a chance to go to university than someone born elsewhere. And I think that is one of the most bold statements that's been made by government that the ambition is not to merely make things a bit more equal, but actually to achieve full equality over a period of time.

What would full equality mean based on the Scottish government's ambitions? Well, it's framed in terms of, as you know, people from the most deprived communities in Scotland, so typically operationalised in terms of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, the bottom quintile... Quintile, quarter, I always get those confused, quintile. So those in the... The 20% most deprived neighbourhoods. And the ambition is to see... People from those 20% most deprived neighbourhoods

make up 20% of entrants to higher education. And the ambition is to do this by 2030.

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There are some milestones along the way, as you are all very aware. So the ambition is to get to 18% of entrants across the sector by 2026 to come from the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods. And just a few years away, 2021 to reach a figure of 16%. And I'm sure that you will have seen it reported a month or two ago that for the sector as a whole the statistics that have been released most recently, this very last bar in the chart here for 2017-2018, shows that about 16% representation in the sector as a whole has more or less been achieved a couple of years ahead of schedule.

So things are looking quite positive I would say. The breakdown of statistics for individual universities, we only have last year's figures to go on at the moment because the institutional breakdown won't appear until a couple of months; time. It will be published by SFC I think in May. So what I'm showing you here when I've broken it down by individual university are last year's figures. So things will look slightly different this year. But it gives you a sense of how much individual universities need to travel towards meeting these quite ambitious government targets.

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I hope this is helpful. I've colour-coded them red, amber and green, so you can see very easily where different institutions sit in terms of reaching that sector-wide target of 20% representation. But there's also an institution-specific target, as you'll be aware, of new entrants to each university, 10% to be from the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods, again, by 2021.

And what you see is that there are clearly a couple of universities, three universities that have been historically doing the heavy lifting, if you like, as far as widening participation goes. There are quite a few universities that are in that amber situation, where they've, some time ago, exceeded that 10% ambition for all universities by 2021, but are not quite at the 20% mark. And then there are a number of universities, some, but not all of them, are selective universities, and not all of the ones that are colour-coded red are the most selective either. But quite a number of universities that still have some way to go, at least on last year's figures to meeting this 10% target set by government for 2021.

Now, it is a bit of a shame that we don't have the most up-to-date figures, because I would like to know if there's been a big shift as we approach 2021. In lieu of those figures we can look at data published by UCAS that tells us, not about the entire populations of entrants to individual universities, but about people who are placed through UCAS at particular universities and what percentage of those placed applicants in the most recent cycle of admissions, were from SIMD20 backgrounds. And I show you the figures here, just for the ones that were colour-coded red in the previous graphs. So the institutions that have... Based on last year's figures have yet to hit that 10% of entrants are from SIMD20 backgrounds.

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And again I think in many ways the picture is quite encouraging. So if you look over time you see, particularly in the last couple of years, quite a significant uplift in terms of the percentage, particularly here at Edinburgh in the UCAS-admitted entrants. In the last year or two it's jumped up above that 10% mark. Likewise at St Andrews, no doubt because of the 2021 date approaching, right? But that's a good thing. That's very helpful to have a time set for this and it tends to move things on a bit. So, some recent progress and some important tangible real, by typical government standards, very ambitious targets. So things are quite exciting and there's a promise of a real shift across the sector.

Of course, one of the things, one of the tools, if you like, that universities now have that's probably going to do most to help them get those numbers up to improve that representation of people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get close to the 10% mark and close to the 20% mark, is, of course, access thresholds. And I think it was an extremely helpful intervention in policy that the Commission on Widening Access put this out there as a thing that universities need to be doing, are mandated to do.

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Of course, Scotland is the originator of access thresholds and contextualised admissions. This university included has been doing it for many, many years. But to have it mandated for all universities, to say that all universities for all programmes should look at entry requirements and think about ways in which they can be set at a level that is more realistic in terms of what is actually needed in order to complete a degree programme, and a level which better recognises that not everybody has had a very easy upbringing and education that makes it possible for them to really evidence their capabilities through the examination system.

So this I think has been a really important intervention and potentially a big game changer in terms of the trends that we've seen historically in widening access, and as I mentioned before, in contributing to a kind of paradigm shift in terms of how we think about fairness and who should get to go to university and in particular who should get to go the most traditionally academically selective universities.

And you'll all be aware that... I think it's this... Since... This calendar year, anyway, around about now, all universities are beginning to publish their first set of access thresholds. Obviously some universities have been publishing and using access thresholds for a long, long time, but this is the first year in which all Scottish universities have been publishing access thresholds for basically all of their programmes.

And to give you a sense of what these look like I've picked on Edinburgh, [?] who are here, might as well have a little look at what Edinburgh's doing for the 2020 entry. And I've an Edinburgh Napier example as well just for contrast. I've picked a programme fairly randomly, so this is for entry to an English degree. And you can see that Edinburgh, for example, is asking applicants who are not identified as disadvantaged to get four A's or two A's and two B's by the end of S5. But those who are identified as widening access students are being asked to get an A and

three B's. So a couple of grades less and they're being given longer to achieve that, by the end of S6.

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Okay. A similar kind of pattern at Napier. So another example, standard entry requirements for an English degree, an A and three B's. But if you're identified as contextually disadvantaged then the requirement is several grades lower, B, B, B, C. So all universities have these now for... Well, I haven't done an exhaustive check, but for all programmes I'm going to say, or at least most programmes. And have clearly embraced the requirement to create these access thresholds.

Now I want to show you some data from the project that we did for SFC that will show you in case you're not already keenly aware, that there is actually a real need for these access thresholds if we're going to actually make any progress on widening access, especially to the most selective universities. And you'll see when I put this slide up, that it's actually mathematically necessary to do this if we want to change the representation of disadvantaged students at universities generally, particularly, the most selective ones.

Okay. So what I want to show you is some data that we got through the Scottish government Education Analytical Department and it's data that's about... It takes the entire population of people in Scottish state schools, S4, in 2007 or 2008, and it asks, what have they achieved in terms of Highers by the end of S6?

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And what I'm showing you here is the distribution of achievement for each group, each category. So the very bottom... Does this pointer work? This one here at the very bottom, the very bottom row, shows you the distribution of achievement by the end of S6 for people who are from the most deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland. And then the next few are the next 20%, the next 20%, the next 20%, and this one here is the people in the least deprived neighbourhoods. And then at the very top I've just combined everyone who's not in the most deprived to contrast them to the most deprived at the bottom.

And the very first thing that really strikes you about this, I think, is what a high portion of people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods have no Highers whatsoever by the end of S6. And you might say, well, this date is 2017. It's not actually very different now. It's a little bit different, but it's not... The pattern's really... The story is basically much the same now as it was back then. Okay?

So most people from deprived neighbourhoods actually don't have any Highers at all. We could say... We could look at the other end of the spectrum and say, let's imagine that to come to Edinburgh you need four As. Well, that would be 14% of all young people who were not from deprived neighbourhoods, but actually it's only 4% of those from SIMD20 neighbourhoods get four A. and to have the same... To have equal representation at a university that requires you to have four A's, you'd have to go down as low as... What's that? Four B's, yes, to get 14%... To draw 14% of individuals from SIMD20.

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And clearly you can see as well, when you look at the least deprived neighbourhood individuals, there is... 20% of young people from the least deprived neighbourhoods are getting four A's or more, typically more, Highers. And if you wanted to have the same size, same proportion of the pool from SIMD20 neighbourhoods, you'd have to go down to something like three B's and a C to get to the same chunk, same size chunk of young people from that group.

Let me remind myself of what I was going to say. Oh yes, okay. Likewise if you wanted to say, okay, let's say you need two A's and two B's, which was the lower end, you recall, of what you need to study English here, on the standard entry requirement. The equivalent for SIMD20 individuals compared to the people who are not SIMD20 is more like C's and D's, Highers, yes.

The point I'm trying to make is that if you wanted equal representation of people from deprived neighbourhoods and not deprived neighbourhoods, you actually have to go really quite far down the grade distribution to find enough people to populate your lecture theatres. Or you have to massively favour any disadvantaged person you find who's got these high grades, admit them at much higher rates than you would their equivalents from the less advantaged backgrounds.

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So the point I'm making is that it's actually mathematically necessary if you want to reach these 10% targets in places like this and if you want to reach 20% targets for the sector overall and in many institutions, it's mathematically necessary to have access thresholds, and probably to have access thresholds that are even more ambitious than the ones we've got now, even though I want to say I'm very pleased that we've the ones that we have got now, and I think they are a major step forward, they might not be quite enough, though.

Are you with me so far? Yes, you're with me? Okay, all right. Now, this is couched in terms of SIMD20. I want to just highlight something now and I'll return to it later about area level measures, which is that the SIMD20 measure is about people who live in an area that is deprived. It doesn't necessarily capture the most deprived individuals. So I want to show you how things look if we're talking specifically about people who were in receipt of free school meals when they were at the end of their secondary schooling.

And basically what is really clear is that the proportion of free school meal young people who don't have any Highers is even bigger than is the case for people from SIMD20 backgrounds. And to get an equivalent sized pool of applicants with, let's say... This pointer doesn't work very well. Let's say with three A's and a B, you'd have to start to go into the territory of preschool meal kids who only have one Higher or two Highers and maybe not very good grades in those Highers either to have the same proportionate sized pool. Okay, I'll come back to that issue later. Okay.

So I think the data shows really clearly that it's mathematically necessary to have access thresholds if anything's going to change in terms of representation of

disadvantaged students. But I think one thing that the Commission on Widening Access did really was begin to make the ethical case for access thresholds as well and really shift the thinking around what counts as fair admission.

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So I want to talk about that briefly. And I want to start by really thinking about the fairness of access thresholds and lower entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants by contrasting it with... Let me put my microphone back on first. By contrasting it with, if you like, traditional ways of thinking about fair admissions and what counts as an appropriate way to select people higher education.

So if you think about the way we've done things historically in terms of admissions criteria and practices, formally at least, there's been a sense of equality of opportunity. There are no formal barriers to someone coming to Edinburgh University. Anyone, regardless of their social background, their demographic characteristics, can come here. What they need to have, though, historically are very high grades to be among the top performers nationally at Highers or Advanced Highers. And the selection process is one of a kind of traditional meritocracy, the idea being that the people who get places at this university are people who have shown that they merit them, shown that they deserve those places and are deemed to be the most likely to benefit and best placed to benefit from those university places.

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And the fairness claims to the traditional model of admissions come from a school of thought about justice and equity that's more along the lines of procedural justice that the system is fair because we treat everyone the same, because we require everybody to have these grades and we assess everybody in the exact same way.

So with my sunflower analogy it might be, saying, we're going to measure the height of all of these sunflowers using the same tape measure and we're going to require them all to be six foot tall, regardless of the pot that they're in and the nutrients in that pot and regardless of how often that pot was watered. So, procedural justice was key, I think, to the traditional way of doing things.

I think the access thresholds idea introduced is a recognition that formal equality of opportunity isn't equality of opportunity if you live in a society that is unequal. Right? It can't be. It's not possible to actually follow through on the promise of equality of opportunity if there's not a level playing field, if there are persistent socioeconomic inequalities in wider society that prevent people from realising their potential, prevent people just due to circumstances of birth, depending on the family and the community that you were born into.

So I think it actually links into a notion of fairness that philosopher John Rawls wrote a lot about, where he talked about, instead of striving for formal equality of opportunity, let's try for genuinely fair equality of opportunity, which actually entails us building in something that recognises and addresses the fact that we live in an unequal world and people aren't equally able to demonstrate what they're capable of.

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So what access thresholds does it involve selecting on potential or what you might call calibrated merit? So we're not doing away with the idea of meritocracy entirely. We're still saying, it's relevant, what you've studied before and it's relevant what you've achieved before, to think about progression to university, but we're calibrating this merit now rather than saying, here's the bar, everyone jump over it.

And the calibration is thinking about not just how well people have achieved nationally, compared to the national picture, but considering their circumstances. So how well someone's fared educationally compared to people in the same circumstances as them, with the same opportunities, the same barriers?

And so here we're talking a different kind of justice, right? We're not talking about procedural justice; everyone's treated the same, therefore it's fair. We're talking about distributive justice, we're talking about working back from a fair distribution of resources, in this case the scarce resource a university education. And building in a process that is geared towards achieving a fairer distribution of that resource at the end of the day.

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Okay. So, I think it's possible to make quite a convincing case that access thresholds are needed statistically for anything to change and they are highly compatible with a notion of genuinely fair equality of opportunity and distributive justice. There will, of course, always be a question and concern, however, about whether... How low access thresholds can go without risking setting a lot of students up to fail?

And so, a really important question and one that actually it's not possible to definitively answer, is, what do students need to succeed at university and what is an appropriate minimum entry requirement?

Now, one of the things that the Commission on Widening Access flagged up was that at the time of them writing, it was certainly the case that what Scottish universities and universities throughout the UK were asking for were almost certainly higher than what was needed to do well at the university and had definitely crept up over time.

So I'm showing you here some data for the whole of the UK, but the pattern for Scotland is the same as for the UK. And it shows you at what... It's in UCAS points, but what students came in with in terms of UCAS points to universities, each dot is a university, in 2006 compared to 2015. And you'll see that the dots for 2015, the red dots and every case are higher quite substantially higher than ten years previously.

And what that's telling us is that people were coming in with more, rather more in terms of prior qualifications this decade than they were a decade previously. And that's not due to grade inflation, it's not that Highers and A level grades people have been performing much over time and that's why they're coming in with more. It's because universities, during that period, had lots of applicants and were able to fix the price of admission accordingly, I suppose, right? If you've got lots of

people applying, you've got lots of demand for your product, you can raise your price.

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And as the Commission pointed out, lots of universities did that, partly for pragmatic reasons because the demand for places was so overwhelming, one of the easiest ways to reduce that administrative burden of processing so many applications is to put your grades up and then you get fewer applications. This is also disastrous for widening access. So there's some circumstantial evidence certainly to say that what we have traditionally been asking students for is higher than it needed to be.

We can also look at some historic data on the relationship between the Highers that students have come in with... Come into Scottish universities with and how that relates to their success in higher education. And what I'm going to show you is again from the Scottish Funding Council project that we did. And we looked at two different ways of measuring success. One was to say, what are the chances that somebody who enters with a certain set of grades, Highers, makes it through the first year of their course and successfully progresses to year two?

And we also looked at, given that people get through to the end of their course, what's the probability of a successful outcome in the sense of getting a first class degree or a 2.1 rather than a 2.2 or below?

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And so I'm going to show you what the relationship between these two things looks like for a cohort, for the same cohort that I showed you the Highers' achievement for. So those who were finishing secondary school in the end of the two... Around 2008-9, going into universities at the beginning of this decade.

I'm going to show separately for higher tariff universities, then medium tariff universities, then lower tariff universities, but the story is very similar in each case. I'm also splitting it out by arts degrees and science degrees, again, just in case there are some important differences between the two. And there are some differences but they're not super important.

So this first graph shows you that at higher universities the relationship between the best four or five Highers on entry and the probability of making it through to year two, successfully completing year one. And what you can see here is that there is a relationship between the two things, so you are more likely to get through the first year successfully if you come in with higher grades. But the slope is really shallow, isn't it? It's a really... It's not like a super steep association. And it's as though once you go below having all A's that suddenly you're destined to fail and you're just not going to get through first year. It's a very shallow relationship and even students historically who've been entering high tariff universities with B's and even a C in there, by and large they've got through to year two.

The picture looks a bit different when you think about the degree classification that they get. There is a steeper relationship there between grades on entry and getting a first or a 2.1, rather than a lower degree classification. But it's still the case that historically students who have come into those universities with B's rather than A's

have had a better than evens chance of getting a first or a 2.1. And I'm not saying that that is necessarily what we want. A 50/50 chance is good enough, but what I'm saying is that that tells us that it isn't a foregone conclusion that you're not going to get out of... You're not going to get a first or a 2.1 from Edinburgh if you come in with B's. There's actually a 50/50 chance that you will.

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And that indicates to us that it's possible, right, it is possible for students to come in with lower than traditionally or historically required grades and be fine. Some will, some won't. We need to do more work, I think, to figure out what makes the difference, right? But it's clearly the case that we're not definitely setting people up to fail if we admit them on less than really, really high grades to high tariff universities.

I can't tell you what happens much further down the grade distribution because there isn't anyone here. So I don't know. It could be that that plateaus out. It could be that it falls off a cliff. I don't know. We might find out, right, in the coming years what happens.

Let me just show you the same thing for medium tariff universities. Here it's an even flatter relationship, not really a slope at all, I'd say, when it comes to the relationship between Highers on entry and getting through onto year two, successfully completing year one. And here we have some information for those who just had four rather than five Highers as well. Again, you get this steeper slope when it comes to the outcome... Success as measured by getting a good degree, a first or a 2.1. But again, it's still the case that people coming in with C's there's a bit of an evens chance that they'll come out with a first or a 2.1. And there like a four in five chance that they'll come out with a degree.

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Finally for lower tariff universities, again, very flat, shallow relationship between Highers on entry and getting through a programme. And a less steep relationship between Highers on entry and the outcome of getting a good degree. And we'll return in a moment, so some reasons why that might be the case.

So I think one thing that has yet to be grappled with, and really will need to be grappled with, is that if students, contextually disadvantaged students are going to be coming into Scottish universities in increasing numbers with lower entry requirements than has historically been the case, then we're really going to have to think much more carefully and it's going to be much more important that we get it right that we support students to learn once they get to university.

Cathy and Sarah Minty, it was mentioned earlier, have produced a really excellent document where they've spoken to disadvantaged students at a range of universities and asked them what do they need to help them succeed at university? And they want and need support. And quite right that they should want and need that support too, right, because by definition they're individuals whose circumstances have prevented them from having as advanced and as deep and as developed an education than more traditional students.

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So they're going to come in, some of them... Not all of them, of course, but some of them are going to come in to university with knowledge gaps. There'll be some things about their subject that they don't know because they didn't get that in their schooling. Some of them are going to come in wanting and needing help with academic skills, like, how do I write an essay? How do I build an argument How do I use the library? And they need support to develop those skills that are going to help them do well while at university. And it's really going to be very necessary for all universities, not just those that have historically been very good at doing that, but for all universities, to start providing this kind of support for students.

And there are lots of examples of good practice already in the sector, of pre-entry programmes, the national SHEP scheme and then the institution-specific programmes like the top-up programme at Glasgow, for example, pre-entry programmes that are working with students to help them develop those academic skills and help them fill those subject knowledge gaps prior to starting their degree programme.

Foundation years I think are more relevant for the English setting, where the degree programmes are shorter and there's scope to add a year of study on the front. Supported first years, I think, are going to be increasingly important. And again, there are already some examples of good practice on this, for example, the St Andrews Gateway programme, very scaffolded, supported first year of study to help students make that transition, fill in the knowledge gaps, build up the academic skills.

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But increasingly, we're going to need to think about supporting students throughout the whole life cycle of their studies, right, to actually support students to learn throughout their entire degree programme. Financial support, of course, is also important, but that's perhaps a topic for another day.

Now, I want to just spend a moment thinking a bit more about this issue of supporting disadvantaged students to succeed in higher education, because I think there are certain discourses within the higher education sector, not specific to Scotland by any means, but evident in the Scottish context, as well as elsewhere, that actually push universities away from devoting resources and energy into helping students to learn.

And I think one of the issues here is that the way that excellence is framed in higher education isn't really about teaching and learning, to put it in a very blunt way. Much of the discourse is about being a world class university, about being an internationally excellent university or department within a university. It's all framed in terms of being academically selective, admitting the best students nationally or from around the world as judged by really stellar prior achievement. It's all about being research intensive. These are the... This is the currency of what it means currently to be a great university or a great department.

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And these discourses actually are not very helpful when it comes to widening access, because they tend to encourage quite a conservative approach to what's possible when it comes to widening access.

And I'm drawing here on some of the interview research that we did in Scotland. I must say that interviews that we've been doing in England, throwing up the exact same issues. And one of the issues that we came across and I should say this was interviews conducted in 2015-16, so it's before access thresholds were announced as a policy.

One of the things we found was that there was a lot of enthusiasm at that time in Scottish universities for widening participation, but there was a real focus at that time still on a very narrow proportion of the core of disadvantaged young people. And that focus was on what we think... We've termed the heroic disadvantage, that is, universities were very keen to widen participation but they specifically were looking for students who had overcome major adversity but still got brilliant Highers, and still were going to just hit the ground running when they got to university.

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And as we've seen earlier, the heroic disadvantage, there aren't very many of them, right? There aren't very many people who are from genuinely disadvantaged backgrounds who get all A's at Highers. There are just very few and far between. But there has historically... I think this has changed a lot actually since we did the research, but at the time there was very much a focus on, it's the heroic disadvantage that we're looking for in the other people that we want to admit.

And related to this, I think, was a hesitancy often about admitting students who were unlike the typical students, typical being someone who you could admit them and you actually didn't need to worry about whether they would successfully pass through the programme. You didn't need to worry about whether they get a first or a 2.1 at the end. They were going to get one clearly because, look, how well they've done at the point of entry.

And there was a genuine concern about admitting students for whom that was not guaranteed. And I think it was, to be fair, a realisation that in many universities and in many departments, particularly the highly selecting ones, there hasn't been a culture of thinking about what do we need to do to help people who need a bit of support to get there? There's been a long history, I guess, of teaching students who kind of don't really need teaching, who are going to be fine if you just point them in the direction of the library and put on some lectures, they're going to be fine. And a recognition, I think, that currently we're not set up actually to serve students who are going to need us to go that extra mile as educators.

As I say, I'm an optimist, I think that's changed a lot actually in just a few short years and I think there is a recognition and a willingness across the sector to say, yes, we need to put on this support for students to learn and not assume that it's a sink or swim kind of scenario.

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All right. I've got a few minutes left. Okay. So, I wanted to spend five minutes or so returning to the issue of indicators of contextual disadvantage. I mentioned earlier that the targets are all set in terms of SIMD. That is a bit problematic for reasons that you'll already be aware of I'm sure, but I'll rehearse them with you anyway.

So, when we use SIMD and SIMD20 to say, this is what a disadvantaged person is and this is how we measure whether someone is entitled, say, to a reduced offer. This is how we measure progress across the sector on widening participation. We're doing something quite risky there because, of course, people who live in disadvantaged areas are not necessarily all disadvantaged. And likewise, disadvantaged areas don't capture the entire population of disadvantaged people. There are disadvantaged people who don't live in SIMD20 postcodes.

And I think we're all aware of this, but we use SIMD20 because government tells us to. But also because it's a very readily available measure, right? It's postcode-based and we say postcodes are really reliable, aren't they, because we can ask someone to show their gas bill to prove that they really live there. And it's just easy information to get hold of, it's very reliable. The problem is it's just not very valid necessarily. It doesn't necessarily tell us about the characteristics of [?] some individuals.

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And one of the things we need to worry about if we're using actually any area level measure, rather than one that's about an individual, to decide whether someone's disadvantaged or not, is this issue of false negatives. That's where our indicator tells us that somebody isn't disadvantaged, but actually they are.

So, an example would be... Let's take people who are in receipt of free school meals. We know for sure that people who are in receipt of free school meals are disadvantaged, right? We know that because you have to meet some eligibility requirements in terms of your family income and receipt of certain welfare benefits in order to get free school meals. It's an official piece of information about individuals that we don't have to ask them to supply that, we can get it from official records. Yes, it's a very valid, very reliable indicator of disadvantage.

When you look at the percentage of free school meal recipients who live in SIMD20 areas, only about half of them do. The other half of free school meal recipients live not in SIMD20 areas, right? So if we use SIMD20 to decide who's entitled to the access threshold, half of people we definitely know should be entitled to this are not going to be in the frame. And I think, to be fair, universities are increasingly aware of this and are not necessarily using SIMD20 to determine who gets these access thresholds. But nonetheless, obviously, government is still requiring you to measure your progress at least partly in terms of SIMD20 and that's problematic.

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I think people are very well aware of the false negatives issue, but there's another issue which is the possible false positives issue. False positives are where an indicator that you're using tells you that someone's disadvantaged, but they're

actually not. So, this second graph shows you what percentage of the people who live... In our dataset, who live in SIMD20 zones were receiving free school meals. A quarter of them were. They are true positives, yes? They are people that our SIMD20 indicator has told us are disadvantaged, and they are.

The other 75% I've put in amber rather than red, because they're not necessarily not disadvantaged, but they might. We don't know, right? Some of them will be, some of them won't be. Maybe a good... Maybe that would take up to 75% are disadvantaged. They're people who live in deprived neighbourhoods. They're not free school meals recipients or even eligible, but they're not on high incomes, they're still on low incomes, just above the threshold, say, for eligibility.

But equally, we all know that there'll be plenty of people who live in deprived neighbourhoods, who are not deprived, are not really the intended beneficiaries of these access thresholds, would give a misleading picture of progress if we included them in our statistical returns. And I think we need to be really worried about these possible positives as well. Not least because... I need to do the analysis, but I bet that the size of the false positives gets bigger as people move through the education system, so the people who live in deprived neighbourhoods but are not deprived make up an even bigger share of those who are surviving to the next level of education, who are getting high grades, and so on.

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So we could, if we're not careful, if we used SIMD20 to decide who gets an access threshold, we could, if we were really unlucky, be in a position where we're actually giving all those adjusted entry requirements to people who are not disadvantaged at all, they just happen to live in SIMD20 postcodes. And then we're actually making things worse, aren't we? Potentially making things... Doing the opposite of what we wanted to do.

Okay. Let me sum up then of what I think are the kind of key messages of this talk. The first one is to genuinely say, I think that Scotland is leading the way on fairer access debates, both practically and in terms of the discourse. Whenever I give talks about contextual admissions in England, I always say, look at what they're doing in Scotland. They are way ahead. And it's true in terms of the government policy, in terms of what universities are doing right now in terms of setting these reduced entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged students.

And I think there's enough evidence there to reassure us that the kinds of reductions that we're seeing at the moment are going to be fine actually. That we're not going to be setting students up to fail. That we can support students to do well and have a high probability of success, if they coming in with B's rather than A's to a university like this one.

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I think it's clear, though, that we do... As universities, do need to do more than we have historically to support students at, bridge subject knowledge gaps, build academic skills. We're going to need to do more of that now that there's an access threshold system. And the more of that we do, the lower those access thresholds can go. And as I showed you previously, they actually do have to go quite low in

order to achieve this ambition of a perfectly representative cross-section of society entering universities, particularly universities like this one.

And finally, let's please use individual level verifiable, reliable indicators of contextual disadvantage, if we're going to be implementing these policies that are designed to benefit individuals, and we don't want to unintentionally apply them to unintended beneficiaries.

Okay. Thank you. I welcome your comments and questions. Thank you very much.

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