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Education, Children and Young People Committee

Widening access to higher education inquiry



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Contents

Membership changes	1
Introduction	2
Background	3
Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation	5
Commissioner for Fair Access	5
Actions to improve access to higher education	6
Minimum Entry Requirements	6
Articulation	7
Barriers faced by students	8
Disabled students	9
Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students	12
Care experienced students	13
Former forces personnel	16
Support available to students to address barriers	17
Targets for widening access to higher education	21
Achievability	22
Attainment	24
Role of Colleges	25
Part-time students	27
Retention	28
Widening access measurements	33
SIMD and a basket of measures	33
Free School Meals	36
Unique learner number	38
Personal data sharing under GDPR legislation	40
Annexe	43
Bibliography	45

Education, Children and Young People Committee

To consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and matters relating to the Historical Abuse Inquiry, redress and languages falling within the responsibility of the Deputy First Minister.



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Membership changes

1. The following changes to the membership of the Committee took place during its inquiry—
 - Keith Brown (SNP) - 22 January 2025 to 2 April 2025
 - Joe FitzPatrick (SNP) -22 April 2025 to date

Introduction

2. The Committee undertook this short inquiry to look at the progress being made on widening access to higher education. Currently, Scottish universities are working towards a target to widen access. The overall national target is that, by 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds (SIMD 20) should represent 20% of full-time, first-degree entrants to higher education. The next interim target is for 18% of full-time, first-degree university entrants to be from SIMD 20 backgrounds by 2026.
3. The inquiry explored the following areas—
 - what is needed for colleges and universities to meet the 2026 interim target
 - which access initiatives are showing success
 - what impact widening access is having on other SIMD groups
 - whether the work of the Scottish Government and partners to introduce additional data measures is progressing, and when and how this might be incorporated into targets
 - what access challenges exist for disabled, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and care experienced students outwith SIMD20 areas, and what might be done to address these challenges
4. The Committee took evidence from witnesses during four evidence sessions at its meetings on 26 February 2025 and 5 March 2025. A list of the written evidence submitted in association with these sessions is provided in the annexe to this report.
5. The Committee was keen to speak with people with personal experience of accessing higher education from a range of backgrounds, to hear directly of the issues they faced and any areas where more could have been done to support them. The Committee also met with pupils, students and widening access practitioners at informal participation sessions on 3 March 2025. A note of the discussions from these engagement activities is provided in the annexe to this report and published on the [website](#).
6. The Committee would like to thank everyone who participated in this inquiry, in particular, those with personal experience of accessing higher education. The discussions it held and the evidence it received helped shape this inquiry and the Committee's recommendations to the Scottish Government.

Background

7. The Commission on Widening Access (COWA), chaired by Dame Ruth Silver, was set up in 2015. [COWA's final report published in March 2016](#) set out recommendations on how equal access to higher education could be achieved. These recommendations were accepted by the Scottish Government. Key COWA recommendations included—
- By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of full-time, first-degree entrants to higher education. Interim targets of 16% by 2021 and 18% by 2026 were also set.
 - The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) should be used to measure progress towards targets initially, with the Scottish Government working with the sector to further develop measures to identify 'access' students in the longer term.
 - Course entry requirements for those from the least well-off backgrounds and those with care experience should be established, separate to standard entry requirements. These should reflect the minimum academic standard and subject knowledge needed to complete a course.
 - The appointment of a Commissioner for Fair Access to lead and coordinate system-wide efforts towards equal access and publish an annual progress report.
 - The creation of a Scottish Framework for Fair Access to provide evidence of impactful access activity, with public funding for access initiatives consistent with the framework.
 - The introduction of a bursary for care experienced students.
 - The introduction of a unique learner number across all levels of education to track learners and share access data.
 - The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) should develop a model of bridging programmes (e.g. summer schools) to expand nationally.
 - SFC should monitor and expand articulation work between colleges and universities, encouraging full-credit articulation and expanding available pathways.
 - Universities and colleges should engage with children and families to provide support for young children and their families with a long-term view to improving access to higher education.
 - Skills Development Scotland (SDS) should work with schools to provide a more coordinated offer of information, advice and guidance to disadvantaged learners throughout their education.
 - Access to a range of Higher and Advanced Higher subjects provided by universities, colleges and local authorities working together to ensure learners

are not restricted by subject choices available to them.

- The Scottish Government and SFC should collect improvement data and data analysis around fair access.
8. Since 2016, universities and colleges have been working towards widening access to university to make it more accessible to students from Scotland’s most deprived backgrounds.
 9. [SFC’s Report on Widening Access 2022-23](#) contains data on full-time, first-degree entrants to Scottish universities by disability status and ethnicity. It highlights that the percentage of full-time, first-degree student entrants with a disability has risen in recent years, from 10.1% in 2013-14, to 17.4% in 2021-22 and 21.1% in 2022-23. In total, there were 6,765 disabled full-time, first-degree entrants to university in 2022-23.
 10. It also highlights that in 2022-23, BME students were 12% of all full-time, first-degree university entrants. This percentage has risen in recent years, from 7.5% in 2013-14. In Scotland’s Census 2022, 7.1% of the population identified as Asian, African, Caribbean or Black, Mixed or Other ethnic group.
 11. The most recent data on widening access progress is contained in the Scottish Funding Council’s 2022-23 report. Table 1 (below) shows the 2021 target of 16% of full-time, first-degree entrants to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) being from the 20% most deprived backgrounds was first met in 2019-20. The percentage has remained above 16% since then, but progress has stalled since 2020-21, at 16.3% in 2022-23 down from 16.7% in 2020-21.

Table 1: Scottish-domiciled, full-time, first-degree entrants at university by 20% most deprived areas (SIMD20) and care experience (CE), 2013-14 to 2022-23.

Year	Total Entrants	Entrants from MD20	% MD20 entrants	CE Entrants	% entrants
2013-14	28,285	3,850	13.7%	145	0.5%
2014-15	28,640	3,965	13.9%	170	0.6%
2015-16	28,770	4,015	14.0%	160	0.6%
2016-17	28,885	3,965	13.8%	170	0.6%
2017-18	29,880	4,650	15.6%	255	0.8%
2018-19	31,065	4,900	15.9%	320	1.0%
2019-20	30,620	4,970	16.4%	370	1.2%
2020-21	33,290	5,515	16.7%	510	1.5%
2021-22	33,885	5,595	16.5%	545	1.6%
2022-23	32,760	5,310	16.3%	585	1.8%

Source: Source: SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23, Background Tables Notes: SIMD data used the unweighted SIMD2012 file in all years prior to 2017-18. Proportions are derived excluding those with unknown postcodes/SIMD rank. 2017-18 to 2020-21 uses the Scottish Government SIMD 2016 file, and 2021-22 and 2022-23 use the SIMD 2020 file. The % MD20 entrants calculation uses those with a known SIMD quintile only. SFC total Scottish-domiciled entrant figures in the University sector may differ from those published elsewhere due to difference in domicile and mode of study definitions applied.

12. As shown in Table 1, care experienced full-time, first-degree entrants to Scottish universities represented 1.8% of entrants in 2022-23. The number of care experienced entrants has increased year on year since 2013-14. By comparison, the [Scottish Government’s Children’s Social Work Statistics for 2022-23](#) found that care experienced children and young people represented 1.2% of the under 18 population. In relation to the interim target of 10% of each institution’s full-time, first-

degree entrants being from SIMD20 areas by 2021, the SFC 2022-23 report finds this target has been met by 15 of 18 institutions monitored.

13. The Open University in Scotland is not monitored for progress on widening access due to it having no formal entry requirements for courses and modules.

Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation

14. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is used to measure eligibility for and progress on widening access initiatives. Widening access data is usually considered by SIMD quintile; this is where SIMD data is split into five groups, each containing 20% of Scotland's data zones. The SIMD 20 data zone contains the areas considered most deprived under this measure. Progress towards achieving widening access targets looks at the number of students from SIMD 20 areas going to university.
15. The COWA report identified limitations with SIMD data, stating that as an area-based measure it does not capture individual circumstances, for example, someone living in poverty within an otherwise affluent area. The report recommended further measures - such as free school meals (FSM) data - should be added to help identify individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Commissioner for Fair Access

16. Sir Peter Scott was the first Commissioner for Fair Access, appointed in December 2016. The current Commissioner is Professor John McKendrick, appointed in January 2023.
17. COWA set out that the role of the Commissioner was to—
 - Lead cohesive and system-wide efforts to drive fair access in Scotland; acting as an advocate for access for disadvantaged learners and holding to account those with a role to play in achieving equal access.
 - Coordinate and prioritise the development of a more substantial evidence base on the issues most pertinent to fair access, including the commissioning and publication of independent research.
 - The Scottish Government should ensure an appropriate annual budget is made available to support this work.
 - Publish, annually, a report to Ministers outlining the Commissioner's views on progress towards equal access in Scotland to inform development of effective policy at national, regional and institutional level.
18. The Commissioner is independent of government and responsible for leading a system-wide effort to deliver fair access in Scotland, including the development of a framework for fair access.
19. The [Framework for Fair Access](#) was launched in May 2019 to help access practitioners in schools, colleges and universities plan and evaluate ways of

supporting people from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education. The Framework for Fair Access toolkit was intended to provide evidenced activities that could be used to support access, though it has since been archived.

20. [Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners](#)(SCAPP) was also established to provide a forum for sharing and developing best practice. SCAPP remains active today, governed by a Steering Group with representation from across the university, college, school and charity sector and funded by the SFC to deliver its activities.

Actions to improve access to higher education

21. Universities Scotland published [Working to Widen Access](#) in 2017, which set out the university sector's response to the COWA recommendations. This outlined the following—
 - Agreement of a sector-wide approach to access thresholds - often called Minimum Entry Requirements - for applicants from SIMD20 and care experienced backgrounds.
 - Recognition of the need to provide a range of support for care experienced applicants.
 - Efforts to increase articulation routes and enable more college students to enter university in second or third-year following completion of a relevant college course.

Minimum Entry Requirements

22. Minimum Entry Requirements (MERs) are the minimum grades an institution believes is required for successful completion of a course. To qualify to apply under MERs, an applicant must be from an SIMD20 area and/or be care experienced.
23. In 2019, Universities Scotland published '[A guarantee of fairness when applying to a university in Scotland](#)'. This set out common admissions principles for universities in Scotland, committing to transparent and accessible admissions policies and restating the sector's commitment to widening access. This was [updated in April 2025](#) and published alongside the [Support for Disabled Applicants guide](#).
24. Also in 2019, Universities Scotland published details of a '[guaranteed offer](#)' for care experienced people applying to university. This set out that, where a care experienced applicant meets MERs for a course, they will be guaranteed a place wherever possible. The offer applies to anyone who has been or is currently in care, including adopted children. There is no age limit on eligibility.
25. In addition, care experienced students studying higher education courses are also eligible for funding of up to £11,400 each year. This comprises of the non-income assessed, non-repayable Care Experienced Students Bursary of £9,000 and a non-income assessed Special Support Loan of £2,400.

Articulation

26. Articulation is where a student gains entry into the second year of a degree with a Higher National Certificate (HNC) gained at college, or into the third year with a Higher National Diploma (HND) gained at college, in certain subjects where agreements are in place between institutions.
27. Partial credit articulation enables an HND level learner to enter the second year of a university course, where they will be required to repeat some study at the same level they have just completed.
28. Whilst college HNCs and HNDs are respected qualifications in their own right, many learners use them to open up opportunities for further study, which was the intention of the COWA recommendations relating to articulation and creating more ways into university for those who leave school with few qualifications.
29. [SFC's 2022-23 Report on Widening Access](#) shows that articulating students made up 22.4% of all Scottish domiciled full-time, first-degree university entrants. This overall percentage is down from 28.2% in 2020-21 and 27.7% in 2021-22. The data also shows a decrease in the number of students articulating with Advanced Standing using the main measure of articulation (students with HNDs/HNCs enrolling within three years of completing their college course) – down by 1,000 enrolments on 2021-22 to 2,895 in 2022-23.

Barriers faced by students

30. The Committee heard of the financial barriers faced by students from different backgrounds in accessing higher education, particularly in relation to the ongoing costs associated with studying such as housing, food and heating costs. When asked if the current system of student funding through grants, bursaries and student support is progressive enough, Professor John McKendrick (the Commissioner) said ¹ —
- ” It almost seems implausible that, if you have a free education system, it cannot be progressive. If it is free education, surely everybody will benefit from it, but the reality is that students must exist while they are in their studies. The fee for learning is not the only cost of study that they incur. They must exist. They must feed themselves. They must travel to university. Many costs are involved simply in living and the bursaries are not currently sufficient.
31. The Commissioner went on to welcome the recent increase in student loan entitlement bringing student support up to the equivalent of the national living wage, however he added that many students do their best to minimise the amount of loan that they take out and often undertake paid work during their studies. He argued that there should be a "realistic and honest conversation about the realities of student life, student financing and how students spend their time." ¹
32. The University of the West of Scotland (UWS) also expressed concerns around student support, highlighting proposals to end Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) cost of living support for students who repeat a year of study. While these changes have been postponed for 2025-26, UWS argued that this policy decision was "not in keeping with the Scottish Government's widening access targets." ²
33. Funding for further and higher education was mentioned in a number of written submissions. Universities Scotland stated ³ —
- ” Public investment in every Scottish student's education and wider experience has fallen in real terms by £3,000 since 2014/15. To widen access successfully, and in ways that offer students the best chance of success, is a resource intensive activity for every institution. No additional funding has been made available to universities on a sector-wide basis, either ring-fenced or through a rise in the teaching grant as the main source of funding for HEIs, since the COWA published its Blueprint in 2016.
34. On future college funding, Colleges Scotland stated college students deserve parity of investment and longer-term funding. It called for the Scottish Government to "accelerate activity" around the review of the college sector funding model. It stated that ⁴ —
- ” Currently, college funding covers the teaching element, but for a great student experience, equity of opportunity and to ensure adequate support for students with additional needs colleges require more investment.
35. Although outwith the remit of this inquiry, the Committee previously considered the

current funding model for further and higher education and the long-term sustainability of college and university funding as part of [its pre-budget scrutiny 2025-26](#).

Disabled students

36. The Committee wanted to explore the personal experiences of those trying to access higher education. Although the widening access targets relate to students from deprived areas, it was keen to also hear about the experiences of disabled, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and care experienced students and young people.

37. The Commissioner stated that the primary focus of fair access work should be on facilitating access for those with potential among the socio-economically disadvantaged. He stated ⁵ —

” ...there are specific challenges in accessing, thriving, and benefiting from higher education that are experienced by those who are not (or are less) financially disadvantaged that must be – and are – acknowledged by the sector as being necessary to address.

38. SFC’s Jacqui Brasted highlighted the work being done in partnership with the Equality and Human Rights Commission on setting national equality outcomes for colleges and universities. These focus on protected characteristics and aim to tackle the most persistent inequalities in further and higher education. ⁶

39. On supporting disabled students in accessing higher education, Lead Scotland set out the work it had done to raise awareness among universities of the issues students face. It said that the possibility of including disability as a contextual flag during the university admissions process was explored with stakeholders and the Scottish Government, and while this is not being taken forward by the sector as a whole, there are three Scottish universities that do consider disability or ill health as a potential for a guaranteed minimum entry offer. Lead Scotland said ⁷ —

” Contextual admissions are a contentious issue with divided opinion on what the eligibility criteria should be. We always argued that being disabled in and of itself should not be considered an automatic guarantee for minimum entry. Instead, it should be a flag to invite further information about the background in which a student gained their qualifications.

40. Lead Scotland provided comments gathered from a survey with 20 respondents on the experiences and barriers disabled people face in accessing higher education in Scotland. Among its findings were ⁷ —

- ” • 17 respondents said they got lower grades than expected for a reason related to being disabled.
- When asked if anything related to being disabled had made it harder for them to go to university, 16 respondents said yes.
- Respondents were asked if they felt Scottish universities welcomed and encouraged disabled applicants. 15 people said no.

41. The survey asked what participants thought universities should do to remove the barriers disabled people face in accessing higher education. The comments included ⁷ —
- ” • Make it easier to find information on how to access a course if someone has an untypical experience of school education.
 - Understand the barriers, allow distance learning even making the course a year longer to allow time to complete courses. Listen to the student and make reasonable adjustments for each individual. Everyone is different.
 - They should realise that disability should be all inclusive and have staff members who can sign or support students as a matter of course not just a named disability advisor- all staff should be trained as a matter of course and the standard of awareness therefore higher!
 - More comprehensive information on how they support access needs. For example: just because a university has step-free accessible entrances for example, doesn't mean they necessarily have accessible desks, toilets, enough accessible parking, accessible routes to campus, or give leeway for being late to courses because you had to take a longer route than other students to get there.
42. During [its scrutiny of the Disabled Children and Young People \(Transitions to Adulthood\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) in 2023, the Committee heard that there was, at times, a deficit of aspiration for disabled young people who were sometimes discouraged from attending university or pursuing other goals which were dismissed by adults as being ‘unrealistic’. During an informal session, one young person said that their school was not supportive of their ambition to go to university. The young person told the Committee, "I felt that they [the school] were pushing me towards college, and were negative about my desire to go to university." The young person added "They said I would get tired, I wouldn't be able to handle it. They didn't give me information about universities, about open days. I didn't get the support that I needed. I did go to open days, but only because my parents got that information." ⁸
43. In its [report published in October 2023](#), the Committee was extremely concerned by the evidence it heard about the poor experiences of transitions for many disabled young people. The Committee stated it intended to continue to monitor the work of the Disabled young people: National Transitions to Adulthood Strategy Strategic Working Group and to scrutinise the forthcoming Scottish Government National Transitions to Adulthood Strategy.
44. In addition, the Committee's report into [Additional Support for Learning](#) published in May 2024, asked the Scottish Government for an update in relation to the National Transitions to Adulthood Strategy. The Committee [wrote to the Scottish Government](#) in November 2024 to express disappointment that the publication of the Strategy had been pushed back from December 2024 until Spring 2025.
45. The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise [responded in December 2024](#) setting out actions needed to improve the experience of transitions for young disabled people and confirming the strategy will be published in spring 2025.
46. During this inquiry, the Committee was also told that a Scottish Government review

of disabled student support in 2019 was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and that it finally reported in 2023.

47. Rebecca Scarlett, representing Lead Scotland, told the Committee that very few of the report recommendations have been implemented. She said ⁹ —

” Nothing has changed, even in relation to the smallest recommendations that were made, and now the work is all out of date. All that energy, resource and time were invested, but nothing has happened, which is extremely frustrating.

48. She spoke of the need to disaggregate information in relation to disabled students. She said ¹⁰ —

” One of my concerns is that, because the proportion of first-year entrants who are disabled students is now up at 21 per cent, people will perhaps think that we can celebrate and rest on our laurels. It is important to disaggregate the granular information, because we have seen a huge rise in people who are presenting and disclosing mental health issues, which is really skewing the data and leaving behind people with different impairment types who perhaps face more persistent inequality.

49. Rebecca Scarlett highlighted the fact that there has been no change to the numbers of students who are blind or visually impaired entering university, yet the numbers who are presenting with disabilities have doubled. She said— ¹⁰

” That is just one example—it is important not to look at disability as a homogeneous group. I know that that is really difficult and that there are challenges but, rightly or wrongly, there has been an increase in the use of mental health vernacular on social media and in the public arena. We are seeing a huge increase among young people who identify with such language, which is potentially skewing some of the figures for disabled people.

50. Universities Scotland stated that Scottish universities have agreed a shared set of principles and will publish a guide for disabled applicants later this year. It also called for transitions support going beyond the age of 26, stating that 38% of Scottish students with a known disability are 25 or older. ³

51. When asked if setting targets for the number of disabled students accessing university would be useful, Rebecca Scarlett, representing Lead Scotland, said there was a need to consider persistent inequality and argued "it is important to set targets, but it is important not to solely use that one measure for disability." ¹⁰

52. The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (the Minister) confirmed that the Scottish Government intends to launch a consultation on support for disabled students (and on part-time students) prior to summer recess. ¹¹ The Minister also argued that a number of initiatives were taken forward following the previous consultation and cited a pilot online application service for students to apply for disabled students' allowance, which is intended to be rolled out this year. The Minister said ¹² —

” ...I accept that there have been issues. I hope that those who might be viewing that element of the consultation with a degree of cynicism recognise that I would not commit to it if I were not serious about delivering on it. I am keen that we engage properly on this.

53. In addition, the Minister agreed to consider reconvening the group set up following the 2023 report recommendations and to consider basing some of the consultation on its findings.¹³

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students

54. The Committee is aware that fair access is about ensuring that those who have the ability and potential to benefit from higher education, irrespective of their background or socio-economic circumstances can do so. Although there is no widening access target for BME students, the Committee was keen to understand the barriers faced by those students.
55. At an informal participation session on 3 March 2025, the Committee heard from BME students and pupils not yet in further or higher education and staff who work on widening access to higher education. A note of the discussions has been published on our [website](#).
56. Discussions centred around the following three main themes—
- What has been your experience thus far of accessing higher education?
 - What support do you need to access higher education and what has been your experience of accessing support?
 - What do you think would help more students from your background access university?
57. The Committee heard that there was a lack of information provided to pupils moving to Scotland from overseas regarding university requirements and the applications process. It was suggested that more advice on what subjects should be taken at school would be useful for pupils who moved to Scotland from overseas who are not aware of the academic level of the National 5 and Higher qualifications. There was also a lack of awareness among pupils in relation to the graduate apprentice scheme.
58. In addition, pupils and students expressed concerns regarding the cost implications of going to university. They spoke of the requirements for SAAS funding - having resided in Scotland for at least 3 years, which meant many decided to go straight into work rather than into higher education as they were not yet eligible for funding.
59. The following was suggested which would help more BME students access university¹⁴ —
- Greater awareness of widening access programmes available across Scotland for pupils, teachers and parents and carers of pupils aspiring to go to university.

- Continuous Professional Development for staff offering information advice and guidance, including school careers advisors.
 - Greater financial support for students including help and advice in relation to student accommodation affordability and availability.
 - Removing the myth that university is only for the select few.
 - Support programmes should encourage pupils ‘to be their best self’ and promote positive actions and destinations.
60. During evidence, James Dunphy, representing Advance HE, said it was important that support is provided to disabled and BME students. He said ¹⁵ —
- ” Black and Minority Ethnic students are still receiving lower degree outcomes than their white peers, yet there has been a huge amount of work on that in the system, with individual institutions trying to take steps and working together, including through work with Advance HE around our race equality charter. That is where some of the institutional perspective is coming from when we say that there is a need for support in the system.
61. Fiona Burns, representing SFC, confirmed that data on intake, retention and degree outcome is recorded in relation to disabled and BME students. She said ¹⁶ —
- ” We have done a significant piece of work with our partners in the Equality and Human Rights Commission to look in depth at persistent inequalities. That work involved setting equality outcomes that we ask all institutions to contribute to, including a set of outcomes on race and specific elements related to that. That piece of work was very data heavy, but it was also very heavy on lived experiences, which are reflected in the equality outcomes for that protected characteristic in our national equality outcomes.
62. Universities Scotland highlighted that there was an “unexplained gap” of 8.8% at UK level between the percentage of white and BME students awarded a First or a 2:1 in their degree. It said "While this gap is closing, it continues to exist and is unexplained." Universities Scotland highlighted ongoing work within the sector to attempt to address these issues. ³

Care experienced students

63. At an informal participation session on 3 March 2025, the Committee heard from care experienced students and staff who work on widening access to higher education. A note of these discussions has been published on the [website](#).
64. The Committee heard that the information on transitions to university provided to care experienced students was variable and dependent on the support networks in place for individual students. It was suggested that there needs to be consistency of support available across the board. Concerns were raised regarding the retention of care experienced students and it was suggested that ongoing support should be in place to ensure students are supported throughout their time at university. In

addition, it was suggested that care experienced pupils need access to consistent careers advice at school, with bespoke advice and information about their support entitlements. Students said that currently this provision varies across Scotland.

65. The following points were made during the session in relation to the issues facing care experienced students and how access to university might be improved ¹⁴ —

” • Having opportunities to join in with LEAPS/Lift Off, Skills Development Scotland and programmes like this are very important. Supporting the work that is happening is needed to ensure success.

• HUB for SUCCESS offers one to one bespoke support for care experienced learners who are or planning to attend one of their 3 partners college or 5 partner universities.

offers one-to-one bespoke support for care experienced learners - this covers all of Scotland.

• There are other groups that are slipping through the net - estranged students (those who separate from their parents over the age of 16) are getting less support. Estranged students' bursary is a lot less than the care experienced bursary. Different agendas are progressing at different stages.

• There is a lack of support for Additional Support Need (ASN) students around how to apply for DSA etc, and students need to be proactive in tapping into support for disabled students. The system doesn't join up between schools, colleges and universities and this is exhausting for young people as managing the systems is difficult and time consuming.

• The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) was highlighted as a good example of having to disclose personal information only once. Rolling this out to colleges would be positive too.

• Improving college access routes and ensuring HN pathways, for example, HNCs and HNDs, into all degrees would be a positive move and help move toward lifelong learning.

• Data is incomplete and it might be easier for practitioners to prioritise fair access learners with more data.

66. The Committee also heard that accessing suitable housing played a significant role in allowing care experienced students to complete their university studies. The Committee raised this with the Commissioner, highlighting some of the barriers care experienced young people were currently encountering. The Commissioner committed to exploring this issue in more depth. ¹⁷

67. In supplementary evidence to the Committee, Universities Scotland highlighted the role of housing within the widening access agenda and provided the following data on additional accommodation support ¹⁸ —

- ” • half of responding institutions (50%) offer a guarantee to first year students from underrepresented groups (it is worth noting that not all 19 HEIs own accommodation so this would never be a 100% response).
- Three quarters of respondents (11 HEIs/ 68%) make a commitment to offering year-round accommodation to care experienced students.
- The requirement for a “guarantor” can be a barrier to accessing student housing where there is no option of a parent or guardian to do so. This was reaffirmed as a concern by some of the students participating in our 40 Faces campaign, which heard the lived experience of underrepresented students. Institutions recognise this and the vast majority do not require a guarantor for their own accommodation (only two do) and one further institution requires a parental signature where the student is under 18 years of age. Further, 73% of institutions don't ask students for a guarantor for Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) where the PBSA is owned by the university.

68. Lydia Rohmer, representing Colleges Scotland, told the Committee about the housing crisis in parts of the Highlands and Islands and highlighted that the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) has student residencies and operates a priority system for learners from widening access and care experienced backgrounds for accommodation. She said—¹⁹

- ” We attract a lot of learners from the rest of Scotland and the UK, as well as international learners, but care experienced learners have a guaranteed student accommodation place, so they get absolute priority. The issue is that there is not enough housing supply for the demand, and when the university or colleges are financially challenged, they are often unable to invest further in student accommodation. That is a real issue and a real disadvantage, but housing, such as it is, is prioritised for those with the biggest need.

69. Fiona Burns, representing SFC, highlighted the SFC's [National Ambition for Care Experienced Students](#) publication, which includes ambitions relating to intake, retention, successful completions and articulation for care experienced students. She commented that the number of care experienced students is at record level and the number of care experienced students in relation to articulation is above the level for the general population. She said²⁰ —

- ” We recognise that we have more work to do on retention and successful completions, and we are committed to doing it. That shows what is possible when there is a clear focus on addressing disparities in the outcomes for a small group of people. Colleges and universities have really responded to that challenge. If we put in the effort and focus on a certain group of people, we can achieve a turnaround in outcomes, but it takes a laser focus and determination from everyone involved.

70. She also confirmed that similar data is gathered in relation to estranged students and that the SFC has made a commitment to improving its data on estranged students.²¹

71. The Minister acknowledged that there is a need to simplify the support landscape

for care experienced students. The Minister said he was particularly interested in young carers and said, "I am sympathetic to the idea that we could look into doing something more there." ²²

72. The Minister also confirmed the commitment to improving data on estranged students and acknowledged that the engagement with this group could be improved. ²³ In supplementary evidence, the Minister said the Scottish Government remained committed to supporting estranged students and said— ²⁴

” Estranged students in Higher Education (HE) are able to access a package of support equivalent to the student Living Wage of £11,400 on a non-means tested basis. In order to improve awareness of this support, we also have a bespoke application route for estranged students. With regard to Further Education (FE), students who are estranged are able to access the maximum bursary amount of £125.55 per week on a non-means tested basis; if they are under 25 they will not be asked for their income when working out what funding is available to them.

73. In relation to the housing barriers faced by students, the Minister committed to raising this issue at the widening access forum. ²⁵

Former forces personnel

74. Although not directly related to widening access to higher education, the Committee heard evidence in relation to how former forces personnel access further and higher education.

75. In supplementary written evidence, Universities Scotland highlighted the following access support available to former forces personnel— ²⁶

- Ten of Scotland’s universities are signatories of the Armed Forces Covenant. The Covenant is based on two principles: that former members of the armed forces and their families should face no disadvantage for having done so; and that in some circumstances, special consideration may be appropriate for those individuals.
- The Covenant covers key areas such as healthcare, housing and education but is not specific to higher education.
- We can additionally advise that six institutions include “Armed Forces or parent in Armed Forces” as a contextual indicator for admissions to university. This helps to level the playing field for those applicants, recognising, for example, that a child of armed forces personnel can experience disruption to their education. It is possible that more than six institutions have this as part of their indicators but the data set, we have on this is incomplete (five HEIs are yet to respond).

76. Fiona Burns, representing the SFC, confirmed that data is collected on former forces personnel and reported in the SFC's widening access report. She said that the data is relatively new and that the SFC is working to ensure that the numbers

are accurate.²⁷

77. Erica Russell-Hensens, representing the SFC, spoke of the relationships between institutions and the armed forces and resettlement schemes highlighting the work on which the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Partnership has been leading on to map qualifications of military and veteran personnel to the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. This included supporting a mapping tool, which will enable people to understand how the skills and qualifications that they have acquired through their service map to that.²⁷
78. The Minister highlighted the monitoring and data collection in relation to former forces personnel entering further and higher education with 10 universities having signed up to the armed forces covenant but said that more needs to be done in this area. He committed to write to the Committee with further details on what can be done to ensure universities are aware of their responsibilities in relation to former forces personnel.²⁸

Support available to students to address barriers

79. The [Framework for Fair Access](#) was launched in May 2019 in order to help access practitioners in schools, colleges and universities plan and evaluate ways of supporting people from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education. The Framework for Fair Access toolkit was intended to provide evidenced activities that could be used to support access, although the toolkit has since been archived. Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP) was established to provide a forum for sharing and developing best practice and this remains in operation.
80. The Committee heard of the positive work being undertaken by practitioners, universities and colleges across Scotland on widening access and widening participation programmes and sharing best practice. During the informal session with students and practitioners, the Committee heard of the support for widening access provided to a range of students by HUB for SUCCESS, Passion4Fusion, Aspire North, The Sutton Trust, FOCUS West and The Robertson Trust, and the work being done by SCAPP on sharing best practice.
81. The Commissioner also highlighted how SCAPP was allowing different institutions to come together to share their experiences of successfully supporting widening access students. He said that "a collective sense of purpose exists across the sector, together with an understanding that all parts of the system have to work together if we are to achieve our ultimate goal of fair access to higher education."²⁹
82. In written evidence, the SFC said it invests just under £5m per year on access programmes, including the National Schools Programme (supporting around 50,000 learners per year); the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), which works in partnership with colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to provide routes into higher education for adult learners with no/few qualifications; and SCAPP, which provides peer support for access practitioners.³⁰
83. Erica Russell-Hensens, representing SFC, spoke of the SFC's support for these

widening access programmes and of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework which maps qualifications in Scotland and helps employers, young people and teachers understand how all the different qualifications are linked to each other.³¹

84. Jacqui Brasted, also representing SFC, commented on the support given to universities and colleges to support widening access. She highlighted the £15.6 million widening access and retention fund for universities, half of which goes to the University of the West of Scotland and Glasgow Caledonian University due to proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in addition to other specific investment programmes. She also highlighted £51 million access and inclusion funding for colleges to support retention and access.³²
85. Despite the positive and successful widening access programmes across Scotland, the Committee heard that some students still found the educational landscape cluttered and confusing. We heard how some students did not get the correct advice from their careers advisors and there was a lack of awareness of the graduate apprentice scheme.¹⁴
86. The Minister accepted there was an issue regarding young people being "entirely equipped to make the decisions that they are going to make about their futures." He said work has to be done in this area and agreed to consider this further.³³

87. The Committee recognises that widening access students currently face a range of financial barriers in accessing higher education, including, but not limited to, housing, food and heating costs. The Committee also notes the evidence it heard in relation to current college and university funding models, and questions whether the financial support available to students being targeted under widening access initiatives is adequate. The Committee considered this as part of its pre-budget scrutiny for 2025-26 and expects to return to this topic in the context of future work around the financial sustainability of colleges and universities.
88. The Committee believes that, although the widening access targets relate to students from deprived areas, it is important to consider young people from backgrounds including disabled and BME students as part of the widening access agenda. The Committee asks the Scottish Government to consider further measures to improve access for these groups.
89. The Committee notes the evidence it heard in relation to disabled students and is disappointed that the findings from the last review of disabled student support do not appear to have been actioned at the time. The Committee notes the Scottish Government plans to conduct a fresh consultation on this issue in the near future and would welcome timescales for when this consultation will be undertaken, when a report will be published and when disabled students are likely to see improvements as a result of this work. The Committee welcomes the Minister's agreement to consider reconvening the group set up following the 2023 report into disabled students support and asks for confirmation that this group will be reconvened and, if so, when it would next meet.
90. The Committee requests that the Scottish Government provides an update on the

National Transitions to Adulthood Strategy, including specific details of when it will be published.

91. The Committee notes the evidence it heard in relation to the barriers faced by BME students. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government liaises with relevant stakeholders, including those with direct experience of working with students from BME backgrounds, on how these barriers might be addressed. In addition, the Committee recommends the Scottish Government works with Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners to ensure widening access programmes take into account the issues raised by BME students when accessing higher education.
92. The Committee was concerned to hear that the information on transitions to university provided to care experienced students was variable and agrees that there needs to be consistency of support available for care experienced students on accessing university. The Committee notes the evidence in relation to the retention of care experienced students which is discussed later in this report.
93. The Committee welcomes that the number of care experienced students is at record level and that the number of care experienced students in relation to articulation is above the level for the general population. The Committee welcomes the publication of the National Ambition for Care Experienced Students which considers intake, retention, and successful completions for care experienced students. The Committee notes the evidence on the lack of data in relation to estranged students and recommends that the Scottish Government works with SFC to ensure data collection in relation to these students is improved.
94. The Committee also notes the evidence in relation to the housing barrier for care experienced students and estranged students and welcomes the commitment from the Scottish Government to consider this further. The Committee recommends the Scottish Government provides an update to the Committee on the steps it plans to take in relation to these areas including indicative timescales for action.
95. The Committee commends the work being done by practitioners, colleges and universities, supported by the SFC, in developing and delivering widening access programmes across Scotland. These programmes are hugely beneficial to students from not only deprived backgrounds but also disabled, BME and care experienced students.
96. The Committee notes the evidence that, despite good work, some students are still not receiving the correct advice from their careers advisors and that there was a lack of awareness of widening access programmes and the graduate apprentice scheme. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government works with stakeholders/practitioners and SCAPP to address these issues and ensure awareness of widening access information is consistent among practitioners, including careers advisors, across Scotland.
97. The Committee welcomes the monitoring and collection of data collection in relation to former forces personnel entering further and higher education and the

work being done by Scottish Credit and Qualifications Partnership to support a mapping tool. The Committee requests that the Scottish Government keeps the Committee updated of developments in this area.

Targets for widening access to higher education

98. The overarching target for COWA on widening access is that, by 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Equality of access should be seen in both the college sector and the university sector. To drive progress towards this goal, COWA set out the following interim targets—

- By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 16% of full-time first-degree entrants to Scottish HEIs as a whole.
- By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10% of full-time first-degree entrants to every individual Scottish university.
- By 2026, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 18% of full-time first-degree entrants to Scottish universities as a whole.
- In 2022, the target of 10% for individual Scottish universities should be reviewed and a higher-level target should be considered for the subsequent years.

99. A number of submissions, including from the Commissioner and Universities Scotland, argued for the need to remove the 10% COWA targets for individual institutions saying that for some universities this is unachievable, and using other identifiers and indicators such as Free School Meals (FSM) would be more effective. Universities Scotland said ³⁴ —

” This is not about institutions stepping back from the goal. A change in approach is now necessary in order to prevent a potential unintended consequence arising from over-reliance on SIMD... Additionally, in areas known to have very few SIMD20 data zones, it is simply the case that institutions are unlikely to be able to recruit sufficient numbers of SIMD20 students to reach their institutional targets. An unachievable target is not an effective motivation.

100. The [Commissioner's 2024 Annual Report](#) recommended the withdrawal of SIMD institutional targets and called for these to be replaced with a commitment from institutions to increase the proportion of access students. The Scottish Government agreed in principle with this, pending further discussion with SFC and institutions.

101. Robert Gordon University (RGU) stated that, as most SIMD20 school leavers are located in the central belt, RGU's geographical location makes meeting the 10% institutional target "extremely challenging." ³⁵

102. The Commissioner said that removing institutional targets on SIMD20 and instead measuring progress by maintaining or improving SIMD20 numbers would be fairer for institutions with limited SIMD20 learners in their area. He suggested a more flexible target would work better for institutions for whom the nationwide target is

largely unattainable. This would allow those institutions to continue to demonstrate positive progress towards widening access, whilst at the same time recognising the broader context in which they are operating. He said ³⁶ —

” I have suggested that, instead of having the same figure for every institution, regardless of catchment, every institution should be asked to do at least as well as it has done before, or to do better by increasing the number of students from the most deprived areas...The cumulative effect of that would be that the national target could be met by those in west central Scotland achieving more than 20 per cent, with those in the more northern and rural parts of Scotland reaching not 20 per cent but a reasonable percentage for them to achieve, based on where they are in the country.

103. When asked why the target was set this way, the Commissioner could not confirm why but did say ³⁷ —

” I do not think that we have been fair, because there is a power of good work being done in the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University to promote fair access, but every year, when the data are released, a media story comes out about how they are failing because they are not meeting the target. That is so unfair. That is not to say that better work cannot be done, but I think that we are at a mature stage of the agenda.

104. The Minister confirmed that the suggestion from the Commissioner to review institutional targets is currently under consideration and said that there was support from universities for this. ³⁸

Achievability

105. The Commissioner spoke of the welcome progress being made in widening access to higher education thus far. He said ³⁹ —

” About 10 to 12 years ago, there were three times as many entrants to higher education from the most affluent areas compared with the most deprived areas. There are now twice as many. We might argue that that is a sign that there is more work to do, but it is also a sign that significant progress has been made.

106. The Commissioner commented that if the 2030 target was not to be met that this would not necessarily constitute a failure. He said ⁴⁰ —

” It would be a great risk to draw the conclusion that if we do not meet the target by 2030, we have somehow failed. When we sit back and look at it, we can see that you are right, in that the number of participating students who are entering university from the 20 per cent most deprived areas has almost doubled in the past 10 years. That is an incredible transformation. Our universities are much more diverse than they were beforehand. That is about people realising their potential. It is a success story for Scotland.

107. Claire McPherson, representing Universities Scotland, said that the 2030 target has had a galvanising effect and it was "a simple target and there is something to aim for, particularly as there are interim targets along the way that mean that we can measure progress." She referred to events such the cost of living crisis and the

Covid-19 pandemic which have taken place since the target was initially set which have had an impact on progress. ⁴¹

108. She spoke of the “40 Faces” campaign which celebrated achievements through the voices of 40 widening access students who had been through the system, who showcased their achievements and those of the institutions that they had been a part of. She said— ⁴²

” We have tried to do a huge amount to showcase the celebratory elements of that with a view to asking, at this point in time and as we look ahead to the 2030 targets, how we can replicate that and be galvanised together behind that and achieve more. We obviously cannot control media coverage or anything else but, as a sector, we have tried, and are trying to be, evenhanded in the way that we are approaching the matter. We are not resting on our laurels but saying that we have achieved a huge amount and want to achieve a huge amount more.

109. Lydia Rohmer, representing Colleges Scotland, also highlighted the impact of the pandemic on the contribution made by colleges to achieving widening access targets with a reduction in the number of students studying HNC and HND courses in colleges. She explained that this was due to pupils staying on longer at school instead of accessing college education. She also highlighted that in 2020, the way in which school pupils were assessed meant that their results enabled them to go directly to university, and that the university sector was given additional numbers for full-time equivalent undergraduate entries, which had a detrimental impact on the numbers of HN students in the college sector. She went on to say that the mental health impacts of the pandemic have, in turn, impacted on retention and attainment in colleges and thus impacted on articulation numbers. ⁴³

110. On the likelihood of achieving the 2030 target, she echoed the Commissioner's view that it is achievable. She said— ⁴⁴

” The target is not unachievable, but it will take a huge collective effort for us to get there, which is partly why we are keen for the inquiry and phase 2 of the work to focus on things that will make a big difference for us.

111. Fiona Burns, representing SFC, spoke of the “incredible progress” that has been made on the widening access target. She said— ⁶

” It was always an ambitious target. We met the first milestone a year ahead of time, but it is difficult and challenging, and quite rightly so. It is impressive how well institutions have responded, particularly through their admissions criteria.

112. Having said the 2030 target was a realistic target, the Commissioner was less sure of the interim target being met. However, he suggested this was not necessarily problematic. He said ⁴⁵ —

” For me, it is more important that we are doing the right things and getting the system right. If we do the right things and get the system right, the stats will change, because that will be what they will reflect, at the end of the day. Nevertheless, I think that it is a possibility that we will meet the interim target—and that it is a much stronger possibility than it was a few months ago.

113. Fiona Burns said it was very difficult to say whether the interim target of 18 per cent by 2026 will be met. She described the three main pipelines affecting institutions' ability to meet the target: the school pipeline; the college sector pipeline; and the adult returners pipeline. She highlighted the importance of the college sector pipeline to universities in sourcing people from SIMD20 areas with the right qualifications for degree-level study. She said ⁴⁶ —

” We cannot give a guarantee that the target will be met, but we believe that it is possible. We will have to do some work in the next few years to get there, and we are reliant on those pipelines being able to provide the numbers and the talent pool that we need.

Attainment

114. The Commissioner commented that three broad policy agendas in Scotland are interlinked: tackling child poverty; narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap; and trying to achieve fair access in higher education. He said that the first two "are necessary but insufficient if we want to achieve fair access in higher education." He said— ⁴⁷

” The evidence suggests that the poverty-related attainment gap is not narrowing in Scotland and that, if it was, it would make fair access easier to achieve.

115. Claire McPherson, representing Universities Scotland, said that a reduction in the attainment gap was central to sector assumptions that were built into the targets. She told the Committee there had been discussions with the Scottish Government about how the sector could support school attainment from a higher education perspective. She said ⁹ —

” There are great examples in the system of tutoring programmes that involve university staff and students going out to school settings to provide school pupils with wraparound support, thereby giving them the opportunity to succeed and helping to shift the attainment gap... Colleges need to have a pipeline of young people coming through the door, as do we... We are not passively observing that there is an issue with the attainment gap; we are asking what we can do to help to make a difference.

116. Lydia Rohmer, representing Colleges Scotland, echoed these points and said there was a huge demand from schools for provision that colleges provide, particularly in the senior phase in relation to widening subject choice. She commented that around 17 per cent of further education enrolments are through school-college partnerships. ⁴⁸

117. As part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, the focus of the Scottish Government is on closing the gap in attainment between children from the most deprived areas and the children in the least deprived areas attending publicly funded schools. The poverty-related attainment gap is a long standing and complex issue and, although outwith the remit of this inquiry, the Committee has previously undertaken [scrutiny of the Scottish Attainment Challenge](#) and produced a report on its findings. This is an ongoing area of interest to the Committee where it most recently took post-

scrutiny evidence at its meeting on [12 March 2025](#).

Role of Colleges

118. In keeping with one of the key COWA recommendations to encourage full-credit articulation and expand available pathways, Lydia Rohmer, representing Colleges Scotland, commented that articulation has been successful in providing a stepping stone for a significant number of learners from SIMD20 backgrounds to university. She pointed out that colleges also provide care experienced learners and learners who have a disability with access to university, although, at the moment, widening access measures are focused on students from SIMD20 backgrounds. ⁴⁹
119. She said much work is being done to ensure that the delivery of HNCs or HNDs by colleges is in strategic partnership with universities and takes into account the fact that it is a different qualification assessed differently to the undergraduate degree that the student might progress into. This is particularly the case where a student articulates further into a degree course, e.g. Year 2 or Year 3. She said ⁵⁰ —
- ” Just as important is the culture of learning, teaching and assessment that comes with that, and preparing students for that. Quite often, that requires additional support of learners in a transition programme that is run by the college and the university together as part of those partnerships.
120. She also highlighted the importance of subject alignment to ensure that universities that have autonomy in the design of their degrees, align these in such a way that enables learners with national qualifications at HN level to articulate successfully towards them.
121. The Committee heard positive examples of work being undertaken by universities working in partnership with colleges to widen access. One example included a franchise arrangement with New College Lanarkshire, whereby there are four subjects in which someone can study for their University of West of Scotland degree at the colleges in Lanarkshire. ⁵¹
122. Lydia Rohmer, representing Colleges Scotland, highlighted that colleges are key providers of wider access programmes for adult learners. These enable direct access to higher education. She said that the college sector has also supported the fair access agenda by working in partnership with the university sector through the national articulation forum and subsequently the joint articulation forum. ⁵²
123. The Commissioner spoke of the value of college education in its own right and not just as a means of articulation to university. He said ⁵³ —
- ” Valuing each of the sectors and the role that it plays is important. The sectors should not be seen as competitors, but as doing the right thing at the right time for our young people. When we have strong partnerships—and there are many examples of those—it is more likely that we will do the right thing for the young person rather than the right thing for the institution.
124. HUB for SUCCESS highlighted the crucial role colleges play in education for care

experienced young people due to the percentage of those leaving school in their fourth year (S4). It stated ⁵⁴ —

” Over a third (34.4%) of care experienced young people leave school in S4 or before and this remains considerably higher than for all school leavers (14.4%) - meaning that traditional widening access initiatives simply do not reach this group.

125. Lydia Rohmer, representing Colleges Scotland, spoke of the critical role colleges play in enabling multiple routes for individuals to access post-school education and in widening access. She highlighted the role they play in helping individuals "to step out of poverty and into qualifications and more valued jobs." She outlined the work done by colleges in conjunction with schools and told the Committee ⁵² —

” They have significant involvement with the senior phase, enabling pathways in schools to facilitate post-school choices, so they have a direct role to play in young people accessing such options, whether they be for college or university. Colleges deliver significant higher education themselves, through HNCs and HNDs but also through their partnership agreements with individual universities, including the degree provision aspect that is franchised to them.

126. Rebecca Scarlett, representing Lead Scotland, made the point that colleges play a vital role in enabling disabled people to learn in the community and that these pathways are essential for those learners to be able to progress to higher education. ⁵⁵

127. Claire McPherson, representing Universities Scotland, highlighted the important role partnerships play in widening access and the different roles that different institutions play. She commented ⁵⁵ —

” When we look at the progress that has been made to date, it is a story of partnership and collective effort in the higher education sector and between the sector and schools, colleges, the Government, the Scottish Funding Council and the fair access commissioner himself. We have that collective effort and a sense of a common mission and endeavour.

128. The Commissioner's 2024 Annual Report was published in January 2024 and one of its recommendations was to strengthen the Commissioner's remit to include colleges. The Commissioner argued that this was necessary due to the vital role colleges play. This recommendation was rejected by the Scottish Government. When asked about this, the Commissioner said ⁵⁶ —

” I understand the reasons why the proposal was rejected. It was perhaps felt that we must throw our energies into meeting the targets that have already been set, and that, given that the next interim target was soon upon us, it would be unwise to broaden the agenda at that point. I can understand why it was rejected, but I completely and whole-heartedly believe that, with regard to fair access and the appropriate outcomes for young people and adults returning to education, the right thing for Scotland is that we consider further education as well as higher education.

129. When asked to explain his reasoning for rejecting the recommendation to extend

the Commissioner's remit to include colleges, the Minister responded stating it was important that the Commissioner's continued focus should be on universities but that he understood his view and that his position might change in the future.⁵⁷

Part-time students

130. The Open University in Scotland's submission called for the inclusion of part-time students in future widening access measurements, which could include data on students accessing the Part-Time Fee Grant. It stated that widening access should not focus only on full-time, campus-based undergraduates⁵⁸ —

” The Open University has been designated as a part-time provider since its funding was transferred from HEFCE to SHEFC in 2000 – as a result, OU students are classified as part-time even if they are studying 120 credits i.e., full-time intensity. In 2021/22, 30% of all Scottish domiciled taught university enrolments in Scotland were for part-time students with 38% of Scottish domiciled part-time students studying with The Open University.

131. Claire McPherson, representing Universities Scotland, also pointed out that all students at the Open University in Scotland are classified as part-time students therefore do not feature in widening access statistics. She said⁵⁹ —

” Recognising the full achievements of the sector would involve acknowledging the role of part-time learning, because it will be increasingly vital as we think about Scotland's demographic changes and the fact that we will want more adult learners, and more people to upskill and reskill within higher education. Part-time learning is an access issue, but it is also, fundamentally, an economic and growth issue when it comes to meeting economic and employer needs.

132. Universities Scotland called for a discussion on how part-time and mature learners – not captured under current COWA targets – might be recognised and supported in future. The University of the West of Scotland stated that the current funding model for part time students does not work due to the Part-Time Fee Grant only being available to those earning under £25,000.²

133. Lydia Rohmer, representing Colleges Scotland, echoed these points and highlighted that although part-time students are not included under the COWA measurements, this does not mean there are not part-time routes into higher education. She explained that colleges support this part-time route and said it is especially important for adult learners who are unable to attend full-time education due to other commitments. She told the Committee⁶⁰ —

” The financial system is not equal or equitable when it comes to supporting access to higher education, particularly with regard to college students and, I think, with regard to part-time learners in general across both colleges and universities. It is definitely the case that work needs to be done.

134. Colleges Scotland's submission called for a greater focus to be placed on funding of part-time provision as this would bring benefits for adult returners and those seeking to develop their skills while in employment

135. Fiona Burns, representing SFC, stated that the SFC monitors data on part-time students and includes this in its report on widening access, even though part-time students are not part of the COWA target. She highlighted that the Open University in particular has a strong intake of students from SIMD20 areas and confirmed that consideration had been given to including part-time students in the widening access targets. She did say, however, that ⁶¹ —
- ” We do consider that, but including part-time students would skew the picture slightly. There are more part-time students in the higher quintiles, so including those students would change the picture entirely with regard to what we are trying to do with full-time students.
136. The Minister confirmed that the Scottish Government is exploring how the role of part-time students can be better reflected in widening access targets through a consultation exercise. The Minister said ¹¹ —
- ” A consultation on part-time study is also a valuable step towards widening access, because, by gathering insights into the needs of part-time students, we can better understand the barriers that they face and explore potential solutions. It is therefore my intention to launch a consultation, prior to the summer recess, on part-time study and support for disabled students.
137. On whether the Scottish Government would consider reviewing the Part-Time Fee Grant, which is currently available to those earning under £25,000, the Minister confirmed that this would form part of the consultation exercise. ⁶²

Retention

138. The Commissioner's 2024 Annual Report contains a recommendation to examine retention rates for SIMD20 entrants, with a focus on why these have not improved substantially since the introduction of the COWA agenda. ⁶³
139. While there is not a specific COWA target in relation to retention of SIMD20 students, [SFC's Report on Widening Access 2022-23](#) states that the retention rate for students from all SIMD quintiles returning to study in year two was at a low of 88% in 2022-23. This is thought to be down to 'no detriment' marking policies implemented during the pandemic, along with opportunities in the labour market.
140. A [SPICe briefing paper](#), highlights that the retention rate for SIMD20 students returning to year two study in 2022-23 was 83.1% - down from 88.6% in 2021-22, and lower than at any year over the period from 2014-15 onwards. For care experienced students, the retention rate also fell from 90% in 2021-22 to 83.6% in 2022-23. Again, lower than any year over the period from 2014-15 onwards.
141. [Background tables in SFC's 2022-23](#) report also contain data about retention rates by disability status and ethnicity. The overall retention rate for BME students returning to year two studies fell from 95% in 2020-21, to 93.4% in 2021-22 and 90.3% in 2022-23. The 2022-23 retention rate for white students was 88%. The overall retention rate for disabled students was 87% in 2022-23, down from 90.4% in 2021-22 and a high of 92.5% in 2020-21.

142. The Commissioner argued that retention should be a priority area in the context of widening access, given the importance of ensuring that students not only gain access to university but that they thrive when there. He acknowledged that more work needs to be done in this area.⁵³ He spoke of the importance of early intervention and ongoing support for students to enable them to achieve their full potential and posed the question regarding the additional costs associated with teaching students from a fair access background and whether these costs should be borne by the universities and reflected in student financing.⁶⁴
143. The Commissioner spoke of the limitations associated with the measurement of success rates of students where data is collected only on progression from the first year. He said—
- ” There is absolutely no point in getting people into higher education if they do not succeed in and thrive beyond it. It is a waste of public money and of their time if they are not succeeding in their higher education. We measure the staying-on rates, or the retention rates, after one year. That is a very crude measure of success in higher education and much more can be done to measure success. We also measure destinations at the departure point from university—again, more can be done to make more of those data.⁶⁵
144. Erica Russell-Hensens, representing SFC, confirmed that currently the transition of students in higher education from first year to second year is monitored, as is where students go on to successful completion of their degrees. This is done through statistical modelling. She said that the modelling is complicated and does not give a complete picture.⁶⁶
145. The Commissioner argued that the data held by institutions could be used better and shared more widely, in order to demonstrate the extent and the ways in which those who come from a fair access background are progressing in their studies. He said⁶⁵ —
- ” That is vital, in terms of public interest in our money being well spent in pursuing this agenda, and in terms of social justice, so that we are not just putting a lot of energy into getting students in and then forgetting about them once they are in.
146. The Commissioner highlighted that data on entry and on graduation showed that a gap had emerged for students from more deprived backgrounds and other students in relation to retention. He explained that the retention rate is there for the four years of university study but by the time students get to that exit point, "it is not 16.4 per cent of graduating students who are from the 20 per cent most deprived areas, it is less than that."⁶⁷
147. James Dunphy, representing Advance HE, echoed the importance of retention and enabling students to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by entering higher education. He said widening access should focus on positive outcomes for individuals and graduates in addition to the widening access targets which would "likely to be able to secure the outcomes that we want to see on health and in our labour market."⁶⁸
148. He spoke of the importance of wraparound support to ensure the retention of

students and that more work needs to be done in this area. He said ⁶⁹ —

” The delivery of the outcome for the student is not simply to enrol in a college or university; it is to secure the broader set of outcomes that they believe participating in higher education will bring.

149. HUB for SUCCESS made the point that care experienced learners have continually had a lower rate of retention compared to non-care experienced learners and that this underscores the need for enhanced support mechanisms at universities and colleges to support students. It stated ⁷⁰ —

” The need for increased support at universities to continue working not only towards SIMD recruitment targets, but also to improving retention of widening access learners could not be clearer.

150. Claire McPherson, representing Universities Scotland, made the point that retention issues relate mainly to the financial barriers and costs of being at university, alongside mental health issues, and that these issues also relate not only to widening access students but to the student population more broadly. ¹⁵

151. She highlighted some examples of the work being done by Universities Scotland on retention. She said ⁷¹ —

” Our learning and teaching committee is pretty alive to the issue. According to conversations that we have had with members, things such as timetable reorganisation have been considered, and we are looking at a longer period of induction for students so that they feel that they are more supported in that first period at university. We are developing peer support networks to make people feel that they have support from among their peers to continue, and we are focusing more on skills development alongside some of the more academic learning.

152. Fiona Burns, representing SFC, commented that their outcomes framework and assurance model refers to retention in some depth and where an institution has a reduction in retention rates, the SFC liaises with that institution to establish why retention rates have fallen and what is being done to address this. ³²

153. The Minister agreed that there was an argument for using retention statistics in addition to recruitment numbers as a measurement of widening access, although he argued that retention issues apply to all students not only widening access students due to factors such as the cost of living and the pandemic. The Minister agreed that there should be a formal measurement process for retention. ⁷²

154. Given the reliance on SIMD data and the fact that a number of institutions are in areas with limited numbers of SIMD20 students, the Committee agrees that the institutional COWA targets for 10% of full-time first-degree entrants to be from SIMD20 areas should be reviewed. The Committee agrees that progress by institutions with limited SIMD20 learners in their area should be measured by maintaining or improving SIMD20 numbers which would allow those institutions to continue to demonstrate positive progress towards widening access, whilst at the

same time recognising the broader context in which they are operating.

155. The Committee notes the evidence suggesting it is difficult to say whether the interim target, whereby students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 18% of full-time first-degree entrants to Scottish universities as a whole by 2026, will be met. The Committee also notes the evidence suggesting that the 2030 target for 20% of full-time, first-degree entrants to be from SIMD20 areas remains achievable.
156. The Committee acknowledges that the cost of living crisis and the pandemic, which have taken place since the target was initially set, has had an impact on progress towards the interim target.
157. The Committee understands that any progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap will have a knock-on effect on the ability of institutions to deliver on widening access targets. The Committee will continue to explore how both of these goals intersect, in the context of its Scottish Attainment Challenge post-inquiry scrutiny.
158. The Committee acknowledges the important role that colleges play in widening access for students from SIMD20 backgrounds, disabled students, care experienced students, BME students and adult learners to university via articulation. However, the Committee also recognises the importance of a college education in its own right.
159. The Committee notes the Commissioner's recommendation that its remit should be strengthened by including colleges, and that this suggestion has been rejected by the Scottish Government. Given the evidence heard during this inquiry, the Committee recommends that the Scottish Government extends the remit of the Commissioner to include colleges. Should the Scottish Government choose not to do this, the Committee would welcome an update on the reason for rejecting this proposal.
160. The Committee notes part-time students are not currently included in COWA targets and understands the need to recognise and support these learners. The Committee commends the work being done by the Open University in supporting part-time students from SIMD20 areas and its contribution to the widening access agenda. The Committee asks the Scottish Government to set out a timescale for the consultation on part-time study.
161. The Committee notes that the Part-Time Fee Grant is only available to part-time students earning under £25,000 per year. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government considers how part-time students might be recognised by widening access targets. The Committee also recommends that the eligibility criteria for the Part-Time Fee Grant is reviewed as part of the Scottish Government's forthcoming consultation.
162. Given the importance of ensuring that students not only gain access to university but that they thrive when there, the Committee agrees that retention should be a priority area in the context of widening access. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government should collate and analyse retention data throughout a widening access student's time at university, rather than maintaining the current

focus on the end of year one and on course completion. This will help provide a better picture of that student's experience, and potentially highlight any barriers that may arise throughout their time at university.

163. In addition, the Committee notes the evidence it heard, which suggests that if universities wish to improve retention amongst widening access learners, the focus should be on tackling financial barriers and improving mental health support. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government factors this evidence into its own work on widening access and retention.

Widening access measurements

164. The Committee considered the use of SIMD20 as a means of assessing eligibility and tracking progress for widening access to higher education. The Committee also considered the alternative approaches suggested by witnesses and in written evidence.

SIMD and a basket of measures

165. A number of submissions received by the Committee acknowledged the challenges faced in meeting the upcoming widening access targets, particularly if SIMD continued to be used as the main measure for widening access to higher education.

166. The Commissioner highlighted the difficulties associated with using the SIMD measure in relation to rural areas. He commented that in Orkney and Shetland there are no areas in the 20 per cent most deprived category and said that if the remote and rural aspect was removed, there are families there who would be economically disadvantaged, but they would not come under widening access measurements. He said on SIMD ⁷³ —

” Although it is a helpful indicator to a degree, it is not the right indicator. The right indicator would measure individual circumstance. I understand why the indicator was introduced in the first place, but we are now at a more mature stage in our fair access work, and it is time to rethink, in that we can have an optimal indicator rather than a convenient indicator.

167. The Commissioner argued that any measurement for widening access should be done on individual circumstances and needs rather than an area-based level. ⁷⁴ He said that, although there was merit in using SIMD, it was not the best measure to use and that the inconsistency associated with this measure would become more apparent the closer it gets to the widening access target. ⁷⁵

168. The Minister acknowledged the usefulness of SIMD as a measure but recognised that there were potentially young people in non-SIMD20 areas who would otherwise qualify under the widening access umbrella. He said that, in relation to Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles who have no SIMD20 areas, that "it is beyond the realms of credibility to think that there are absolutely no young people living in those areas—particularly on remote islands—who might qualify." ⁷⁶

169. The Commissioner expressed concerns that having a single indicator "undersells the fair access work that we do in Scotland." He told the Committee of the broader range of circumstances that pose challenges for people in accessing higher education and that fair access is only measured in terms of the 20 per cent most deprived areas. He argued for a basket of measures and told the Committee ⁶⁵ —

” Therefore, the two dimensions in which we have to make progress are that, ultimately, we need a better single, headline indicator, and we need a basket of indicators that tells the broader story of the range of work that we are doing to facilitate access for all with talent, to get the most from their talent in higher education.

170. Lydia Rohmer, representing Colleges Scotland, said that SIMD should remain a measure of widening access however it was not sufficient on its own and the use of a basket of individualised measures had to include rural learners and reflect rural poverty more effectively. She said ⁷⁷ —

” Rural postcodes are huge and simply do not reflect population density, which is reflected in SIMD 20 measures. That does not mean that SIMD 20 is not valid; it is simply that it does not bite in rural and island contexts. That needs to be reflected and better amended in the targets.

171. Fiona Burns, representing SFC, said SIMD is a valuable and helpful measure at a national level, but she too highlighted its limitations in relation to rural areas for institutions. ⁷⁸

172. Claire McPherson, representing Universities Scotland, also explained the limitations of using SIMD as a measure and said that it was vital that a basket of measures is introduced to help to identify person-centred characteristics. She commented ⁷⁷ —

” We know that many people who live in poverty do not live in a SIMD20 postcode. Likewise, there are people who live in a SIMD20 postcode who do not have the same needs. If that is the only measure that we are applying our minds to, we are therefore missing out on cohorts of people who really need support to stay and thrive in a university setting. We are therefore very much aligned with the fair access Commissioner’s view that that basket of measures is vital, and we are keen to work with him, the Government, colleges and other stakeholders to develop those measures and bring them to life.

173. The Commissioner highlighted his recommendation that there should be a broader basket of indicators. He said individual institutions already take into account a range of factors such as having an armed forces background or coming from remote and rural areas during the admissions process. However, he highlighted the continued need for a central measure of progress— ⁷⁹

” I am strongly supportive of having a broader range of indicators to give a more rounded picture of our fair access work, but—and it is a big “but”—I would combine that with the continuing need for a central measure to provide a focus for the agenda.

174. Rebecca Scarlett, representing Lead Scotland, also cautioned against focusing solely on SIMD and spoke of the importance of including disability in widening access measurements given the level of disadvantage that disabled people face. ⁵⁵
She commented ⁸⁰ —

” Disabled people experience poverty more than non-disabled people. They have fewer qualifications and are twice as likely to be unemployed. We are thinking about this as a preventative measure. They might not live in an SIMD household, but a lot of families who have disabled children face poverty because of what they have to go through to get the right support. It is important not to focus solely on the SIMD.

175. When asked if using a basket of measures instead of SIMD alone would increase complexity, for example, in relation to eligibility criteria or measuring progress

towards meeting widening access targets, Claire McPherson, representing Universities Scotland, argued that "any system that involves people is complex." She told the Committee ⁸¹ —

” People have complex needs. As we have grown in confidence, we want to expand our ambitions and make sure that we are assuring ourselves that we are doing everything to meet those needs... There is still a need for a galvanising measure, but sitting alongside that, as is commonplace in many other systems, should be a series of other ways in which we can track and understand progress and think about other interventions that we need to develop in order to meet students’ needs while they are in the system, whether they are at the college end of the spectrum or as they are graduating.

176. Fiona Burns, representing SFC, confirmed that SFC records data on widening access in relation to other characteristics such as disabled and BME students, and referred to the setting of quality outcomes which institutions are asked to contribute to. She said that this data allows the SFC to work with institutions on where they should target progress in relation to protected characteristics. ⁸²

177. In its previous work on [colleges regionalisation](#) undertaken in 2023 and on its [pre-budget scrutiny 2025-26](#), undertaken in 2024, the Committee considered the limitations of SIMD as a widening access measure and the proposal that a basket of measures, including data on Free School Meals, should be used as widening access measures.

178. In its college regionalisation report, the Committee acknowledged the limitations of the SIMD metric as a tool for identifying disadvantage, given it is based purely on geographic area rather than on individual circumstances and recommended that the Scottish Government revisits the widening access framework, with a view to ensuring additional factors are included, and that support measures are targeted appropriately across Scotland.

179. In its response to the report, the Scottish Government said ⁸³ —

” The Access Data Short-life Working Group was formed in February 2023 to explore additional individual-level data sources. The group includes representation from colleges and universities, as well as the SFC, US and CS. The data sources of particular interest are Free School Meals and Scottish Child Payment data. The group is expected to provide recommendations to the Access Delivery Group and Ministers in September 2023.

180. During this inquiry, the Minister said there was a strong argument that universities would benefit from having a basket of measures they could use in widening access measurements. ⁸⁴ The Minister again acknowledged the limitations of using SIMD as a single measure for widening access. The Minister told the Committee ¹¹ —

” We all know that we have targets to meet, and that the next interim target in 2026 looks to be challenging. We are at risk of hitting a ceiling due to the single measure of SIMD that is being used. We know that the SIMD can be a blunt tool; our role is to help universities to overcome those challenges, and as part of that, we are progressing work to transition towards individual measures such as free school meals.

Free School Meals

181. The [COWA report](#) also identified limitations with SIMD data, stating that, as an area-based measure, it does not capture individual circumstances. The report recommended further measures such as Free School Meals data should be added to help identify individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.
182. There was a general consensus among witnesses that FSM eligibility could be used in addition to SIMD as a means of identifying students eligible for widening access measures. The Commissioner's 2024 Annual Report recommended a transition toward individual level indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage. The Scottish Government agreed with this recommendation, stating work is being taken forward by the Access Delivery Group. A pilot in the North-East for school leaver applicants using FSM data was also underway.
183. The Commissioner highlighted the trial being undertaken in the North-East of Scotland to understand whether FSM could be used more effectively as an indicator of widening access. He said that progress towards using FSM data as an individual measure was needed, and he would be "disappointed if firm progress was not made on this soon." He said ⁷³ —
- ” I understand that there are challenges to overcome in terms of data agreements and permissions to be sought, but those are surmountable, and the public would be very surprised if they found out that we were not using such data to optimal effect.
184. He acknowledged that FSM may well not be the perfect measure but was the most promising. He said ⁸⁵ —
- ” Many of the fair access population entering higher education are adult returners, for whom we will not have that ready free school meal data. After all, school is not their entry point back into education. Therefore, it is not a perfect indicator, and we must ensure that we do not replace one imperfect indicator with another. As I said, there is work to be done. I think that that looks like the best indicator just now, or the most promising of all that are there.
185. In its [pre-budget scrutiny](#), the Committee noted the work of the Scottish Government's Access Data Short-life Working Group, which was formed in February 2023 to explore additional individual-level data sources. It reported in [July 2024](#) and recommended—
- FSM and Scottish Child Payment continue to be considered as widening access measures;
 - Exploration of possible legislative approaches to FSM data sharing;
 - Scoping work for the implementation of the proposed data sharing; and
 - Continued emphasis on meeting the 2026 and 2030 SIMD20 targets.
186. At that time, the Committee asked the Scottish Government whether it intended to introduce legislation in this area which would allow other measures, such as FSM, to be used in relation to widening access. The Scottish Government responded

saying ⁸⁶ —

” Officials are now progressing work to overcome data sharing barriers, including rolling out a free school meal data sharing pilot in the North-East. Evaluation of any outcomes will provide important evidence for any national data sharing protocols as well as for the suitability of FSM as a possible nationwide additional measure.

Officials continue to explore all possible options that may be available, including, engaging with UCAS on their recently introduced approach for applicants to self-report FSM status. Other individual level metrics such as the Scottish Child Payment and School Clothing Grant, which would contribute to a basket of measures, are also being considered as well as the impact of rurality on access to higher education.

187. Robert Gordon University (RGU) stated that, as most SIMD20 school leavers are located in the central belt, RGU’s geographical location makes meeting the 10% institutional target 'extremely challenging'. As a participant of the regional pilot looking at the use of FSM, RGU stated ³⁵ —

” The proportion of pupils registered for FSM in the region is higher than the proportion of local school pupils from SIMD20 areas. Including free-school meal registered pupils within access targets would grow the pool of eligible students by enabling a wider group of learners to benefit from access support to university.

188. When asked about the pilot in the North-East on FSM, Claire McPherson, representing Universities Scotland, welcomed it but stated that it was not scalable across Scotland because sharing data on FSM eligibility currently involves an institution having “...multiple one to one arrangements with perhaps anything up to 18, 20, perhaps 20 plus councils...”. ⁸⁷

189. Claire McPherson said that Universities Scotland’s understanding from discussions with the Scottish Government was that legislation would be required to allow data sharing across Scotland. She said ⁸⁷ —

” Our understanding from engagement with government is that due to the nature of the conditions regarding data gathering at the moment there would need to be some legislative vehicle to make that national data sharing happen. We would be keen for that to happen, and we are continuing to engage with the Government on that, because one-to-one relationships between local authorities and providers can start to become bureaucratic and administratively burdensome. It is great to see that exchanging data about free school meals could have some benefit, but we have significant issues with scalability.

190. The Minister updated the Committee on the use of FSM as a single measurement and on the North-East pilot. The Minister said ⁸⁴ —

” There are difficulties with scaling that up, which the universities have identified. The pilot has, self-evidently, given us a bit of a test bed to look at how it might work in practice. We ought to use free school meals as a measure if we can, notwithstanding the data-sharing issues.

191. The Minister said that the FSM pilot is now in the delivery phase and it is expected that it "will be up and running fairly quickly, and that we will probably be in a position to assess its success or otherwise by late autumn, which would give us a sense of how it has worked." ⁸⁴
192. Again, the Minister was asked if legislation would be required to enable FSM data to be shared. The Minister said the Scottish Government is exploring other possibilities for sharing this data, including discussions with officials in the UK, Wales and Northern Ireland governments and that primary legislation may be required. ⁸⁸

Unique learner number

193. The Commissioner's 2024 Annual Report recommended that students should have a unique learner number (ULN) to help monitor progress on widening access. This was also a recommendation made in the original 2016 COWA report. The Scottish Government agreed with this in principle, stating further work was needed to understand the current landscape and any legal issues.
194. A number of written submissions supported the call for the introduction of a ULN. RGU stated that while this had been discussed for years, it had not been progressed. It said— ³⁵
- ” The COWA report in 2016 was clear on the need to improve mechanisms that would enable data to be shared and learners tracked. A unique learner number, potentially linked to the Scottish Candidate Number has been discussed on-and-off for many years but it has not been sufficiently progressed to-date. The most recent report from the Commissioner for Fair Access calls for this ask to be revisited so that we have a much better understanding of individuals' progression across different levels of education, including supporting more robust evaluation of widening access activity. The University would strongly endorse the Commissioner's call.
195. Universities Scotland stated the sector had supported this proposal for a ULN since 2015. Claire McPherson, representing Universities Scotland, highlighted its interest in a ULN and said that it would allow for an understanding of where a person has been in their educational journey and identify their needs. She said ⁸¹ —
- ” The sector has wanted that for many years. We would be fully behind any investment in a system that delivers that, because we are using other things as a proxy...The Commissioner for Fair Access and the sector are keen to have a conversation with the Government about how to design something that would work for the learner and for the institutions.
196. The Commissioner also argued that a ULN was central in order to track progress and understand more fully the education journeys of students and to understand what works regarding transitions in the longer term. He said ⁸⁹ —

” I am not the only one who has been arguing for it; such a system was argued for by the first commissioner, by Universities Scotland and by others in the sector. That system requires resource being committed... I think that there is commitment to the proposal in the sector; I do not think that anybody thinks that it is a bad idea. However, it requires resource, commitment and leadership if we are to introduce a universal student number.

197. When asked if legislation would be required to introduce a ULN in relation to data sharing and GDPR, the Commissioner was unsure but said if that was the case then it would be important to explore that. He said—⁶⁷

” If we want to understand what works, we need a much better data system than we currently have. Many of the initiatives that are undertaken are plausible. Many of those that are undertaken in schools are well regarded by schools. They seem to do the right things, but we genuinely know whether they are doing the right things only if we have the data to track that through time, so there are very good reasons to introduce the identifier.

198. The Commissioner pointed out that many students go to work from school and then go to college and then will articulate into university at a later stage. He explained that a lack of data relating to pupils' journeys beyond school into higher education makes it difficult to track these cases despite them being positive examples of widening access to higher education.⁹⁰

199. Erica Russell-Hensens, representing SFC, said SFC strongly supports the use of a ULN which would help better understand both the long-term benefits of the investments and the progress that learners and students are making through the education system. She highlighted that it would help to support more accurate reporting of student journeys, particularly with regard to different demographics and journeys through education, bearing in mind protected characteristics. She went on to say⁹¹ —

” For many of those reasons, we also highlighted the unique learner number as being beneficial in our recent review of the national schools programme. We believe that it would enable us to better analyse the impact of the national schools programme and of all the activities that take place within that, and, therefore, to better direct our investment within that.

200. She commented that introducing a ULN would involve significant investment and may require legislation to be implemented and that the SFC would support the introduction of any such legislation should the Scottish Government determine that this was required.⁹¹

201. Daniel Proudfoot, representing SFC, highlighted that the introduction of a ULN would not only be hugely beneficial in identifying learner journeys and pathways, but it would also help track articulation from college to university and improve the data held in relation to articulation and in relation to retention.⁹²

202. The Minister acknowledged the benefits of having a ULN where students can be tracked through their education journey. The Minister said it would allow the Scottish Government to conduct more robust analysis that "would help us evaluate

our policy decisions; it would help us carry out work to identify access students earlier; and it would make it easier to share data to support learners at key points in their journeys." ⁹³ —

203. The Minister said the principal barrier in introducing a ULN was in relation to data sharing, not resource issues. The Minister did not provide any details of the costs of introducing a ULN but reiterated his view that the costs were not the principal barrier. He said ⁹³ —

” I make it clear to the committee that, as we work through some of the challenges in this area, we are doing so not because we do not want to implement this measure, but because we want to overcome those challenges. Ultimately, a unique number is a solution, so we are committed to taking it forward.

204. When asked if legislation would be required to implement a ULN, the Minister replied saying he was unclear as to whether legislation would be required. The Minister said—

” I am being a bit vague, but that is because we have been completely focused on whether we can implement it in the first instance. We would then look at how we would do that. ⁹⁴

Personal data sharing under GDPR legislation

205. The Committee was aware that data on FSM eligibility is shared with UCAS in the rest of the UK where UCAS has a license from the Department for Education to access individual level FSM data for applicants to universities. The Welsh Government also shares data on FSM with UCAS and a 2022 privacy notice sets out how this is handled.
206. The Committee wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to seek further information on the barriers in relation to what data sharing is permissible under GDPR, specifically in relation to the FSM pilot in the North East of Scotland, looking at a means of identifying students eligible for widening access measures in addition to SIMD data. The Committee asked for further information on the data sharing barriers in relation to the establishment of a ULN. The Committee also asked the Cabinet Secretary if there were any plans to legislate in this area. ⁹⁵
207. The Cabinet Secretary set out the Scottish Government's approach to data sharing, saying it was necessary to establish a legal gateway or power which enables the Scottish Government or any other public body to share or process personal information. The Cabinet Secretary listed examples where personal information is already shared across the education sector, underpinned by a number of pieces of legislation and said, "as well as establishing a legal gateway, it is necessary to ensure compliance with data protection legislation." The Cabinet Secretary stated ⁹⁶ —

” I want to be clear that I am supportive of data sharing across the education sector. I understand the impact that making best use of our public data can have on public service delivery and, crucially, on the lives of our children, young people and learners. It is also essential, however, to ensure that personal information about citizens – including that of children and young people – is handled securely and in line with legal and data protection considerations. That is why it is a requirement to identify a legal gateway and lawful basis for processing data and why robust and thorough analysis must be undertaken before individuals’ personal data is shared.

208. Given the lack of clarity during evidence on whether the Scottish Government must legislate to enable data to be shared more effectively between local authorities and institutions in relation to FSM and the potential establishment of a ULN, the Committee wrote to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) seeking its views on whether the barriers in relation to FMS data sharing could be overcome by introducing legislation in Scotland and on the potential for establishing a ULN. The Committee also asked how the ICO could work with the Scottish Government to assist with the development and implementation of these measures.⁹⁷

209. The response from the ICO stated that they had not had any discussions with the Scottish Government, local authorities or institutions on how data can be shared fairly and proportionately to support widening access to university or any engagement on the North-East Scotland pilot nor on the establishment of a ULN. It stated⁹⁸ —

” We do, however, stand ready to provide advice and guidance should the Scottish Government, Local Authorities or institutions approach us on these issues.

210. The ICO sent a further letter of clarification highlighting that it had an early-stage discussion with the Scottish Government on the widening access policy ambition in March 2024. It stated⁹⁹ —

” At the time of the meeting, there was not enough detail available about the data protection challenges the relevant institutions were facing for us to provide a specific regulatory steer. We have reiterated our offer to provide regulatory input on this issue. The Scottish Government team have informed us that they are engaging with relevant stakeholders to gather more detail on available options and will take up our offer once they have this.

211. In supplementary evidence to the Committee, the Minister confirmed that Scottish Government officials are "still very much in the early stages of considering afresh how a ULN could be delivered for Scotland." The Minister stated—²⁴

” To consider afresh requires careful consideration of data protection legislation, including legal gateways and use of information sharing agreements. Data sharing on this scale, and on a consistent basis, is a lengthy process and one which my officials will need to work through. To be clear, however, this will not be resolved in the short or even medium term.

212. The Committee notes the usefulness of using SIMD as a widening access measure, however, it also notes its limitations - particularly in relation to rural areas - and recommends that the Scottish Government works with stakeholders and the Commissioner to introduce a basket of measures to identify person-centred characteristics for widening access measures.
213. The Committee notes that there was a general consensus among witnesses that free school meals (FSM) eligibility could be used in addition to SIMD as a means of identifying students eligible for widening access measures.
214. The Committee notes the ongoing work in relation to the FSM pilot in the North-East aimed at understanding whether FSM could be used more effectively as an indicator of widening access. The Committee understands the barriers in relation to data sharing under GDPR and notes the uncertainty as to whether legislation would be required to allow for this.
215. The Committee also notes evidence from witnesses that the North-East pilot on FSM data is not scalable at national level, and recognises the limitations of what can be learned from the pilot. The Committee therefore requests that the Scottish Government sets out how it will take forward plans to introduce FSM data as an access measure at a national level, including timescales attached to this work and any legislation required.
216. The Committee was concerned to hear that the Scottish Government has had only one early-stage discussion on personal data sharing under GDPR legislation with the Information Commissioner's Office and that, at the time, there was not enough detail available about the data protection challenges for them to provide a specific regulatory steer.
217. The Committee welcomes the offer from the Information Commissioner's Office to work with the Scottish Government and institutions on these issues and recommends that the Scottish Government accepts this offer as a matter of urgency.
218. The Committee strongly agrees with the value of introducing a Unique Learner Number (ULN) to track students' educational journey and allow a better understanding of what works regarding transitions in the longer term. The Committee was extremely disappointed in the apparent lack of progress in relation to the introduction of a ULN, and that the Scottish Government has said this will not be introduced in the short or even medium term, despite this being raised by COWA almost 10 years ago. The Committee was also disappointed that the Scottish Government was unable to provide indicative costs for this or to confirm whether legislation would be required for this to be introduced. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government now commits to the introduction of a ULN, and outlines how this will be achieved.

Annexe

219. Extracts from the minutes of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, notes of the informal session and associated written and supplementary evidence

[7th Meeting, Wednesday 26 February 2025](#)

Widening Access Inquiry:

The Committee heard evidence from—

Professor John McKendrick, Commissioner for Fair Access;

and then from—

James Dunphy, Director of Educational Excellence, Advance HE;

Lydia Rohmer, Principal and Chief Executive, UHI North, West and Hebrides, representing Colleges Scotland;

Rebecca Scarlett, Senior Policy and Information Officer, Lead Scotland;

Claire McPherson, Director, Universities Scotland.

Evidence Session (In Private):

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 2.

Written evidence:

[Colleges Scotland](#)

[Commissioner for Fair Access](#)

[Glasgow Caledonian University](#)

[HUB for SUCCESS](#)

[Lead Scotland](#)

[The Open University of Scotland](#)

[Robert Gordon University](#)

[Universities Scotland](#)

[University of the West of Scotland](#)

[Supplementary evidence from Universities Scotland](#)

[8th Meeting, Wednesday 5 March 2025](#)

Widening Access Inquiry:

The Committee heard evidence from—

Jacqui Brasted, Interim Director of Access, Learning and Outcomes, Erica Russell-Hensens, Deputy-Director, Student Interests, Access and Quality, Fiona Burns, Assistant Director, Student Interests and Access, and Daniel Proudfoot, Senior Data Analyst, Scottish Funding Council.

and then from—

Graeme Dey, Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans, Shirley Laing, Director for Lifelong Learning and Skills and Clara Pirie, Senior Policy Manager, Student Equalities and Fair Access, Scottish Government.

Evidence Session (In Private):

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 1.

Written evidence:

[Scottish Funding Council](#)

[The City of Glasgow College](#)

[15th Meeting, Wednesday 7 May 2025](#)

Widening Access Inquiry (In Private):

The Committee considered and agreed a draft report.

Correspondence:

[Letter from the Convener to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills of 10 March 2025](#)

[Letter from the Convener to the Scottish Information Commissioner of 13 March 2025](#)

[Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to the Convener of 24 March 2025](#)

[Letter from Acting Head of Scottish Affairs, Information Commissioner's Office to the Convener of 28 March 2025](#)

[Letter from Acting Head of Scottish Affairs, Information Commissioner's Office to the Convener of 4 April 2025](#)

[Letter from the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans to the Convener of 4 April 2025](#)

Informal session with with pupils, students and practitioners - Monday 3 March 2025

[Note of discussion](#)

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