Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 26 February 2025
7th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

Widening access to higher education

Introduction

1. The Committee is undertaking a short inquiry into progress on <u>widening access to higher education</u>. Scottish universities are currently <u>working toward a target to widen access</u>.

2. By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds (<u>SIMD 0-20</u>) 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 SIMD0-20 backgrounds by 2026.The inquiry will consider the following areas:

   - what is needed for colleges and universities to meet the next 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
   - which access challenges exist for disabled, minority ethnic and care experienced students outwith SIMD0-20 areas, and what might be done to address these challenges

Background

3. SPICe has produced a background briefing note which is attached at **Annexe A.**

Committee meeting

4. At its meeting today, the Committee will take evidence from:

Panel 1

   - Professor John McKendrick, Commissioner for Fair Access

Panel 2

   - James Dunphy Director of Educational Excellence, Advance HE
   - Lydia Rohmer, Principal, UHI North, West and Hebrides, representing Colleges Scotland
   - Rebecca Scarlett, Senior Policy and Information Officer, Lead Scotland
   - Claire McPherson, Director, Universities Scotland

Participation

5. The Committee was keen to speak directly to people with experience of accessing higher education. On 3 March 2025, the Committee will hold participation sessions with pupils, students and practitioners with this experience. The Committee plans to create an anonymised note of these sessions and this will be published on the website in due course.

Evidence

Written evidence

6. Written evidence provided by the following witnesses and organisation is attached at **Annexe B**—

   - 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

Next steps

7. The Committee will continue to take evidence on this inquiry at its next meeting on 5 March 2025.

Committee Clerks
February 2025

Annexe A

Education, Children and Young People Committee

26 February 2025

Widening Access to higher education

Introduction

This SPICe briefing has been produced to support the Committee's first evidence session of its short inquiry into progress on widening access to higher education. The briefing looks at the background of widening access and progress made toward the Commission on Widening Access's 2030 targets to widen access for young people in Scotland's least well-off communities. The paper also looks at access, retention and qualification rates for disabled and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students.

Background: Commission on Widening Access

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. In 2014, then-First Minister Nicola Sturgeon MSP set out the Programme for Government for 2014-15 in Parliament, stating:

> "I want us to determine now that by the time a child who is born today in one of our most deprived communities leaves school, he or she will have the same chance of going to university as a child who is born in one of our least deprived communities. That means that we would expect at least 20 per cent of university entrants to come from the most deprived 20 per cent of the population." – Official Report, 26/11/2014

The Commission on Widening Access (COWA), chaired by Dame Ruth Silver, was set up in 2015. COWA's final report was published in March 2016 setting out 34 recommendations around how equal access to higher education could be achieved. A 2016 Scottish Government motion accepted the recommendations.

The report stated that equal access is an economic and social good compatible with academic excellence and fundamentally about fairness. 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 toward targets initially, with the Scottish Government working with the sector to further develop measures to identify 'access' students 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 toward 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 education to track learners and share access data.

- 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 improvement data and data analysis around fair access.

Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is used to measure progress on widening access. 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 SIMD20 data zone contains the areas considered most deprived under this measure. Progress toward achieving widening access targets looks at the number of students from SIMD20 areas going to university. Further information on SIMD data and its uses can be found in the SPICe blog SIMD2020: The where of deprivation.

The COWA report 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. However, this has not yet been actioned despite further work being done in this area. This is explored further throughout the briefing.

Commissioner for Fair Access

The first recommendation of the COWA report was that the Scottish Government should appoint a Commissioner for Fair Access by the end of 2016. COWA set out the role of the Commissioner should be 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.

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. The role is non-statutory and the Commissioner cannot take forward individual cases.

The Scottish Government website describes the Commissioner's role as being "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."

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. Alongside this, Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP) was established to provide a forum for sharing and developing best practice. While the SCAPP network remains active, the

[Framework for Fair Access toolkit has been archived](#) as it had not been updated since 2019.

Commissioner's 2024 Annual Report

The [Commissioner's 2024 Annual Report](#) was published in January 2024 and the [Scottish Government response](#) was published in September 2024. The report noted that progress made on widening access had stalled in recent years (see 'Targets' section below for more information). It made 20 recommendations, which included:

- Withdrawal of SIMD institutional targets, to be replaced with commitment from institutions to increase proportion of access students. The Scottish Government agreed in principle with this, pending further discussion with SFC and institutions.

- Reporting evidence on deciles up to SIMD40. The Scottish Government agreed in principle, pending further discussion with SFC and institutions.

- Strengthening of Commissioner's remit to include colleges. The Scottish Government disagreed with this, highlighting the focus on access to higher education.

- 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 and a pilot in Aberdeen for school leaver applicants was also underway.

  o The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans, Graeme Dey also responded to questions from this Committee on limitations of SIMD as a measure of progress. [In a letter in response to the Committee's pre-Budget scrutiny](#), the Minister stated that officials were looking at barriers to allow free school meals data to be shared for the purposes of widening access. This work includes engagement with UCAS on applicants self-reporting their FSM status. Scottish Child Payment and School Clothing Grant were also being considered as possible measures.

  o The Minister's letter also stated of SIMD: "…continued use of a single measure has hit an inevitable ceiling." - [Minister's response to Committee pre-budget scrutiny letter, 31/10/24](#)

- The fair access agenda should give equal weight to entry, student experience and outcomes. The Scottish Government agreed in part with this, stating that it would consider how Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) datasets could be used to measure student experience, and more detailed evidence gathering from SFC would be needed.

- Students should have a unique learner number to help monitor progress on access – this was also a recommendation made in the original COWA report. The Scottish Government agreed with this in principle, stating further work was needed to understand the current landscape and any legal issues.

Targets

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 toward this goal, COWA set out 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.

The most recent data on widening access progress is contained in SFC's 2022-23 Report on Widening Access. Data from the report is shown in **Table 1** below. The 2021 target of 16% of full time, first degree entrants to 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 (SIMD0-20) and care experience (CE), 2013-14 to 2022-23

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

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.

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 SIMD0-20 areas by 2021, the SFC 2022-23 report finds this target has been met by 15 of 18 institutions monitored. 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.

SFC's Report on Widening Access 2022-23 also contains data on full-time, first degree entrants to Scottish universities by disability status and ethnicity. **Appendix B, Table 5** sets out data on entrants by disability status and **Table 6** sets out data on entrants by ethnicity.

- 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.

- In 2022-23, Black and Minority Ethnic (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.

Actions to widen access

Universities Scotland's Working to Widen Access document was published in 2017. This set out the university sector's response to the COWA recommendations, with 15 actions for universities to take toward their implementation. This outlined:

- Agreement of a sector-wide approach to access thresholds - often called Minimum Entry Requirements (MERs) - 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

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 SIMD0-20 area and/or be care experienced.

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.

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.

Care Experienced Guarantee

In 2019, Universities Scotland announced that universities would introduce guaranteed offers to care-experienced applicants, provided they meet MERs set by the institution for the course the student is applying for.

The offer applies to anyone who has been or is currently in care, included adopted children. There is no age limit on eligibility. Universities Scotland's guide to the offer states:

> "Wherever possible, the institution will guarantee you a place on the specific degree programme you have applied to, if you meet the programme's minimum entry requirements. Very occasionally, this may not be possible if, for example, you have applied to a course with lots of applicants eligible for a guaranteed offer and not many places, or because the course is not running. If the institution cannot offer you a place on the specific course you have applied to, they will work with you to identify whether there is an alternative course that is of interest and suitable to you." – Universities Scotland, 2019

Care experienced students in higher education (HE) 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

Articulation is the progression of learners from a Higher National (HN) qualification at college level into second or third year of university in certain subjects where agreements are in place between institutions.

Full credit articulation - also known as Advanced Standing - sees learners receive maximum possible credit for prior learning. A learner with a Higher National Certificate (HNC) may move into second year university, while a Higher National Diploma (HND) enables progression straight into third year.

Partial credit articulation - also known as Advanced Progression – 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.

It is important to state that college HNCs and HNDs are respected qualifications in their own right. However, for many learners, they are also important building blocks opening up opportunities for further study. COWA recommendations 8, 9 and 10 for full-credit articulation to be expanded and scaled up were intended to create more ways into university for those who leave school with few qualifications. As the COWA report states:

"Most standard routes into university depend upon achieving good results at Higher…But there is a significant cohort of disadvantaged learners who leave school with few, if any, formal qualifications. For these learners, articulation is a crucial alternative route into university." – COWA, 2016

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. This data is set out in **Appendix A, Table 4.** SFC's report states:

"A downturn is not totally unexpected as numbers qualifying from college with a HNC/D have been declining in recent years." – SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23, December 2024

Wider impact of access measures

SIMD by quintile

While COWA targets did not set out recommendations in relation to monitoring of non-SIMD0-20 quintiles, HESA does publish this data.

Table 2 below gives a breakdown of Scottish-domiciled, first degree entrants to Scottish HEIs by SIMD quintile. The table shows that over the last five years, while the number of SIMD0-20 students has generally increased, the percentage of entrants that are from SIMD0-20 areas has stayed at 16% or 17%. This is broadly the case for each SIMD area.

Table 2: Scottish domiciled first degree entrants to Scottish HEIs by SIMD quintile

	2018-19		2019-20		2020-21		2021-22		2022-23	
SIMD0-20	4,900	16%	4,970	16%	5,515	17%	5,595	17%	5,315	16%
SIMD20-40	4,970	16%	4,635	15%	5,270	16%	5,690	17%	5,300	16%
SIMD40-60	5,605	18%	5,505	18%	6,165	19%	6,120	18%	5,720	18%
SIMD60-80	6,835	22%	6,690	22%	7,150	22%	7,535	22%	7,355	23%
SIMD80-100	8,590	28%	8,435	28%	8,915	27%	8,915	26%	8,965	27%
Total	**31,065**	**100%**	**30,615**	**100%**	**33,285**	**100%**	**33,880**	**100%**	**32,705**	**100%**
Source: HESA										

Retention

While there is not a specific COWA target in relation to retention of SIMD0-20, the report did highlight the need to provide support for these 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 COVID-19 pandemic coming to an end, along with opportunities in the labour market.

The retention rate for SIMD0-20 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. SFC's report states:

> "This has resulted in the gap widening against overall retention, with retention for SIMD20 and care experienced students now 4.9pp and 4.4pp lower than overall retention." - SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23, December 2024

Background tables in SFC's 2022-23 report[1] 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. Retention rate broken by disability status can be found in the background tables.

Achievement

SFC's Report on Widening Access includes data on successful achievement of undergraduate level qualifications. It shows there were 3,010 SIMD0-20 full-time, first degree qualifiers in 2022-23, representing 13.6% of qualifiers at this level of study. This is down from the 2021-22 percentage of 14.4% - the highest recorded over the period from 2013-14 onwards.

Background tables in SFC's 2022-23 report[2] contain data on full-time, first degree qualifiers with care experience and by ethnicity and disability status.

The data shows that, of full-time, first degree qualifiers in 2022-23:

- 1% were care experienced – this is the highest recorded percentage over the period from 2015-16 when 0.2% of full-time, first degree qualifiers were care experienced.

- 9.3% were BME, down from 9.5% in 2021-22, but up from 7.1% in 2015-16.

- 20.8% were disabled students – the highest recorded percentage over the period from 2015-16 onwards, and up from 11.8% in 2015-16.

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[1] SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23 Background Tables – Background Table 3
[2] SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23 Background Tables – Background Table 15

Positive destinations

[Background tables in SFC's 2022-23 report](#)[3] also includes data on positive destinations 15 months after graduation. A 'positive destination' is defined as work or further study.

The data shows the percentages of full-time, first degree graduates in positive destinations in 2021-22 were as follows:

- 95.8% of all graduates.

- 94% of disabled students.

- 93.1% of BME students (compared to 96.1% of white students).

- 98.9% of care experienced students.

Summary of submissions

The Committee received nine stakeholder submissions ahead of this evidence session. Key themes raised are explored below.

A number of submissions received by the Committee acknowledged the challenges of meeting upcoming access targets, particularly if SIMD continued to be used as the main measure.

The submission from the Commissioner for Fair Access stated that while he had expressed disappointment following SFC's 2022-23 Widening Access report finding progress had reversed slightly "there are recent indications that we may be returning to positive trends, following this "levelling out" of progress." He said that while the 2026 target remains a challenge, he is not supportive of "crude interventions" that are "deployed simply in order to achieve the next interim target".

A number of submissions welcomed the Commissioner for Fair Access' 2024 report recommendation calling for the introduction of additional data measures – including free school meals and Scottish Child Payment eligibility, rurality and metrics for mature and part time learners. The Commissioner's submission stated he saw this as a priority action and bi-monthly meetings on this are being held with SFC and the Scottish Government.

The submission from Robert Gordon University (RGU) stated that, as most SIMD0-20 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 free school meals data, RGU stated:

> "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." - RGU submission

Support for individual-level indicators was also expressed by Colleges Scotland, pointing to work by the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) and the Scottish

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[3] [SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23 Background Tables – Background Table 18](#)

Government exploring how rural poverty can be captured accurately. The submission stated that this work is looking at distance to education and key services, availability of senior phase provision and availability of post-school tertiary provision.

Colleges Scotland also urged the Scottish Government to consider the unintended consequences of the existing widening access targets, and the admissions behaviours they may drive at institutional level.

Legislation to enable data sharing was also mentioned. RGU stated the lack of legislation made implementing data sharing arrangements difficult. Universities Scotland stated that at UK level, data on free school meals eligibility can be shared with UCAS due to legislation, adding that the regional pilot underway in the north east "is not an approach that could be scalable to the rest of Scotland".

In response to a question on the impact of widening access measures on other SIMD groups, the Commissioner's submission stated:

> "It is inevitable that if the goal of fair access is to increase the proportion of entrants from one group (i.e., those from the 20% Most Deprived areas), then the consequence will be to reduce the proportion of entrants from some other groups." – Commissioner for Fair Access submission

The role of schools in widening access was highlighted by Universities Scotland. The submission stated that action to close the poverty related attainment gap in schools was needed in order to increase the number of qualified applicants from SIMD0-20 areas. The submission pointed to SQA attainment data showing the percentage point gap between those with an A grade at Higher from the most and least deprived quintiles was 22.1 in 2024 and 17.2 for those with grades A-C, similar to pre-pandemic levels.

Colleges Scotland's submission stated School College Partnerships offering part-time college courses for S4-S6 pupils provide some pupils with choices not available at school, pointing to the benefits of this. The Open University in Scotland's submission highlighted the benefits of the Young Applicants in Schools Scheme (YASS), working with SIMD0-20 participants across 31 local authorities.

Colleges Scotland also pointed to the role of colleges in ensuring information about the further and higher education courses they provide is communicated to school pupils to help them in their course decision making.

Colleges Scotland's submission highlighted roundtable events held with the Commissioner for Fair Access in September 2024, emphasising the role of colleges in widening access, tackling poverty and upskilling the workforce. On articulation, the submission pointed to Colleges Scotland's continued work as part of the Joint Articulation Group co-convened with Universities Scotland. Priorities of the group include developing more articulation routes and making student transitions smoother.

The Commissioner's submission stated development of a universal student identifier should be a priority action. A number of submissions supported this call. RGU's submission stated that while this had been discussed for years, it had not been progressed. Universities Scotland stated the sector had supported this proposal since 2015.

The submission from Hub for Success – an initiative supporting people with care experience to access university – highlighted the crucial role colleges play in education for care experienced young people due to the percentage leaving school in fourth year:

> "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 to not reach this group." – Hub for Success submission

HfS also said there is a need for institutions to provide consistent support for care experienced students while at university, as without this they are likely to be at risk of withdrawing from their studies. The submission stated that HfS work with partner institutions had helped bring about a 400% increase of CE students at those institutions over the last five years.

Despite being eligible for the recently introduced SAAS Special Support Loan, the HfS submission stated care experienced students faced difficulty accessing this:

> "Many care experienced learners experience barriers accessing the loan element of their SAAS entitlement, and so are left short changed, struggling to cope financially. The Hub for Success has highlighted why introducing a loan element to the financial package for care experienced learners is problematic in an open letter to the Scottish Government, however, have received no reply yet." – HfS Submission

The University of the West of Scotland (UWS) submission also stated concerns around student support, highlighting proposals to end SAAS cost of living support for students repeating a year of study. While these changes have been postponed for 2025-26, UWS states this policy decision is "not in keeping with the Scottish Government's widening access targets".

Funding for further and higher education was mentioned in a number of submissions. Universities Scotland stated:

> "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." – Universities Scotland submission

On future college funding, Colleges Scotland stated college students "deserve parity of investment" and longer-term funding.

> "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." – Colleges Scotland submission

The submission called for the Scottish Government to "accelerate activity" around the review of the college sector funding model.

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.

Universities Scotland's submission called for discussion on how part-time and mature learners – not captured under current COWA targets – might be recognised and supported in future. UWS' submission 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.

The Open University in Scotland also called for the inclusion of part-time students in future metrics. This could include data on students accessing the Part-Time Fee Grant. The submission stated the belief that widening access should not focus only on full-time, campus based undergraduates.

On supporting disabled students, Lead Scotland's submission set out the work the organisation had done to raise awareness amongst universities of the issues faced. The possibility of including disability as a contextual flag during the university admissions process was explored, 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. 13 universities include being a carer as a contextual indicators for a potential guaranteed offer.

Lead Scotland's submission states the complexity around consideration of disability:

> "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." – Lead Scotland submission

Lead Scotland's submission includes information gathered from a survey with 20 respondents about experiences and barriers for disabled people in accessing higher education in Scotland.

Universities Scotland stated that universities in Scotland 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.

RGU's submission stated more work was needed to understand access challenges for BME, disabled and care experienced students. Colleges Scotland highlighted other barriers to learning for a range of students included lack of access to affordable childcare, transport and adequate student support. The submission from Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) highlighted the intersection between demographics such as care experience and likelihood of living in SIMD0-20 areas.

Universities Scotland stated 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. While this gap is closing, it continues to exist and is unexplained. Universities Scotland highlighted work going on within the sector to attempt to address these issues.

The Commissioner's submission stated that fair access "should have a particular focus when multiple factors compound the disadvantage experienced by those who are socio-economically disadvantaged", adding:

> "However, 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." - Commissioner for Fair Access submission

Lynne Currie, Senior Researcher (Further Education, Higher Education and Children's social work, child protection and adoption), SPICe Research

20 February 2025

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Appendix A: Articulation data

Table 3 sets out articulation rates over time, looking at all articulating students irrespective of gap in learning, students enrolling in university within three years of completing any college course of SCQF 7 or above, and students enrolling in university within three years of completing an HNC or HND. Across all categories, the rates for 2022-23 were lower than in 2014-15.

Table 3: Proportions of Scottish-domiciled first degree entrants articulating via HE college routes 2014-15 to 2022-23 (WAM overall and countable, MAM countable)

Academic Year	Scottish domiciled first degree entrants	Wider Articulation Measure (overall) Includes college students enrolling at a HEI irrespective of gap in learning between completing college course and enrolling at HEI. Covers all qualifications at SCQF 7 and 8, including HNC and HNDs.		Wider Articulation Measure (count) Only includes college students who enrolled at a HEI within 3 years of completing their college course. Covers all qualifications at SCQF 7 and 8, including HNC and HNDs.		Main Articulation Measure (count) Only includes college students qualifying with HNC and HNDs who enrolled at a HEI within 3 years of completing their college course.	
2014-15	33,655	9,320	27.7%	8,200	24.4%	7,540	22.4%
2015-16	34,605	9,265	26.8%	8,060	23.3%	7,445	21.5%
2016-17	35,165	9,340	26.6%	8,030	22.8%	7,635	21.7%
2017-18	36,745	10,725	29.2%	9,045	24.6%	8,400	22.9%
2018-19	37,775	10,450	27.7%	8,635	22.9%	8,060	21.3%
2019-20	37,435	10,090	27.0%	7,615	20.3%	7,295	19.5%
2020-21	40,225	11,350	28.2%	8,220	20.4%	7,490	18.6%
2021-22	39,575	10,975	27.7%	8,385	21.2%	7,805	19.7%
2022-23	39,300	8,790	22.4%	6,150	15.6%	5,710	14.5%
Source: SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23, Background Tables							

Table 4 shows the percentage of students articulating from college to university with Advanced Standing (full-credit) articulation.

Table 4: Advanced Standing - % by Articulation Measure, 2014-15 to 2022-23

Academic year	Main Articulation Measure Advanced Standing	Main Articulation Measure % Advanced Standing	Wider Articulation Measure Advanced Standing	Wider Articulation Measure % Advanced Standing
2014-15	4,020	53.3%	4,570	55.7%
2015-16	4,220	56.7%	4,735	58.7%
2016-17	4,250	55.7%	4,590	57.2%
2017-18	4,655	55.4%	5,150	56.9%
2018-19	4,470	55.5%	4,925	57.0%
2019-20	4,210	57.7%	4,490	59.0%
2020-21	4,430	59.2%	5,000	60.9%
2021-22	3,895	49.9%	4,315	51.4%
2022-23	2,895	50.7%	3,250	52.8%
Source: SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23, Background Tables				

Appendix B: Full-time, first degree entrants by disability status and ethnicity

Table 5: Full-time, first degree students by disability status

2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
All entrants									
28,285	28,640	28,770	28,885	29,880	31,065	30,620	33,290	33,885	32,760
Long standing illness or health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy									
340	315	345	375	365	405	405	420	465	445
1.2%	1.1%	1.2%	1.3%	1.2%	1.3%	1.3%	1.3%	1.4%	1.4%
A mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder									
345	445	540	740	795	1,110	1,185	1,500	1,540	1,830
1.2%	1.6%	1.9%	2.6%	2.7%	3.6%	3.9%	4.5%	4.5%	5.7%
Physical impairment or mobility issues, such as difficulty using arms or using a wheelchair or crutches									
95	85	90	115	120	105	95	115	110	100
0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%
Social/communication impairment such as autistic spectrum disorder									
145	135	200	175	245	285	290	360	430	465
0.5%	0.5%	0.7%	0.6%	0.8%	0.9%	0.9%	1.1%	1.3%	1.5%
Specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D									
1,400	1,460	1,535	1,535	1,615	1,660	1,670	1,895	2,050	2,260
4.9%	5.1%	5.3%	5.3%	5.4%	5.3%	5.5%	5.7%	6.1%	7.0%
Blind or a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses									
35	45	35	40	50	40	40	50	50	40
0.1%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment									
55	55	60	70	80	90	100	100	110	110
0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%
A disability, impairment or medical condition that is not listed above									
285	305	275	290	315	365	395	465	430	375
1.0%	1.1%	1.0%	1.0%	1.1%	1.2%	1.3%	1.4%	1.3%	1.2%
Two or more impairments and/or disabling medical conditions									
160	195	220	210	280	390	405	520	705	1,135
0.6%	0.7%	0.8%	0.7%	0.9%	1.3%	1.3%	1.6%	2.1%	3.5%
Development condition that you have had since childhood which affects motor, cognitive, social and emotional skills, and speech and language									
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	5
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.0%
Total Disability									
2,855	3,035	3,310	3,555	3,860	4,450	4,590	5,420	5,890	6,765
10.1%	10.6%	11.5%	12.3%	12.9%	14.3%	15.0%	16.3%	17.4%	21.1%
Total No Known Disability									
25,425	25,605	25,465	25,330	26,020	26,615	26,030	27,865	27,990	25,330
89.9%	89.4%	88.5%	87.7%	87.1%	85.7%	85.0%	83.7%	82.6%	78.9%
Source: SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23, Background Tables									

Table 6: Full time, first degree students by ethnicity

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
All entrants										
	28,285	28,640	28,770	28,885	29,880	31,065	30,620	33,290	33,885	32,760
Asian, Scottish Asian or British Asian										
	1,165	1,190	1,300	1,275	1,420	1,510	1,565	1,815	1,730	1,980
	4.1%	4.1%	4.5%	4.4%	4.8%	4.9%	5.1%	5.4%	4.7%	6.0%
Black, African or Caribbean										
	345	295	355	370	465	560	540	650	660	725
	4.1%	4.1%	4.5%	4.4%	4.8%	4.9%	5.1%	2.0%	1.9%	2.2%
Mixed or multiple ethnic group										
	430	435	470	505	565	620	665	740	820	855
	1.5%	1.5%	1.6%	1.8%	1.9%	2.0%	2.2%	2.2%	2.3%	2.6%
Other ethnic group										
	190	100	160	160	165	205	225	335	265	360
	0.7%	0.3%	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	0.7%	0.7%	1.0%	0.8%	1.1%
White										
	25,945	26,435	26,305	26,355	27,020	27,865	27,340	29,300	29,995	28,375
	91.7%	92.3%	91.4%	91.2%	90.4%	89.7%	89.3%	88.0%	88.5%	86.6%
Total BME										
	2,130	2,015	2,285	2,315	2,615	2,895	2,995	3,535	3,475	3,915
	7.5%	7.0%	7.9%	8.0%	8.7%	9.3%	9.8%	10.6%	10.3%	12.0%
Unknown ethnicity										
	210	*190*	*180*	*215*	*245*	*300*	*285*	*455*	*415*	*470*
	0.7%	*0.7%*	*0.6%*	*0.7%*	*0.8%*	*1.0%*	*0.9%*	*1.4%*	*1.2%*	*1.4%*
Source: SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23, Background Tables										

Annexe B

Written evidence from Colleges Scotland

Introduction

Colleges play a critical role in enabling individuals, including those furthest from education, access via multiple routes into formal tertiary learning, and are key players in ensuring higher education is truly accessible to all.

In the [Report of Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape](#), James Withers called for "a revolution in how we think about learning", and parity of esteem for all types of learning and achievement, which we agree with and have long called for from the college sector. We need to create a culture founded on a core principle: all learning that contributes to a positive destination has parity of esteem. There is no 'golden pathway'; no learning journey or pathway that is more worthy than another. It is possible to recognise and value all educational and training opportunities as having equal value.

Colleges are a vital and critical provider of education and skills training in Scotland's tertiary sector, act as community anchors, and are the mechanism by which people in Scotland step out of poverty and into qualifications and work.

College Sector Role in the Fair Access Agenda

At the Colleges Scotland Conference held at City of Glasgow College on 24 April 2024, the college sector was joined by Professor John McKendrick, Commissioner for Fair Access, who delivered a keynote address on the widening access agenda in Scotland.

This presentation was delivered against the context of the recommendations laid out by the Commissioner in the [Renewing the Alliance for Fair Access: Annual Report 2024](#), with the college sector being invited to consider the recommendation for the Scottish Government to consider strengthening the remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access to assume responsibility for advising on fair access to the whole of tertiary education.

The Fair Access Commissioner also posed the following key questions for college sector leaders:

- How do we make the case for colleges to be included in the fair access agenda?
- Are we ready for the challenge this would create?

To take forward this agenda, and working collaboratively, Colleges Scotland convened three roundtable events in Autumn 2024 which were attended by the Commissioner and a range of Principals, Vice Principals and Student Support colleagues across the sector.

The purpose of these sessions was to gauge support for the Commissioner's recommendation and discuss the role of the college sector in supporting the fair

access agenda, with this paper summarising the key points and recommendations stemming from these discussions.

Scottish Government Position

In its response to the recommendations outlined in the Fair Access Commissioner's Annual Report for 2024, the Scottish Government disagreed with the recommendation that The Scottish Government should consider strengthening the remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access to assume responsibility for advising on fair access to the whole of tertiary education. The Scottish Government's view is that given the focus on the Commission on Widening Access' 2026 and 2030 targets, the primary focus of the Commissioner's remit should continue to be higher education.

The Scottish Government supports a tertiary approach to post-school education, but states that this work will be progressed separately as part of wider consideration of the post-school system.

Tertiary Perspective for Fair Access

At the roundtable events in September, college sector attendees expressed their disappointment that the Scottish Government was not supportive of the recommendation to consider strengthening the remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access to assume responsibility for advising on fair access to the whole of tertiary education.

Collectively, there was a desire for the college sector contribution to the fair access agenda to extend beyond facilitating access for those learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds to access Higher Education through Articulation and other forms of university-college collaboration.

There was support for the Commissioner's view that there was a need to focus on access to further education, independently of that which facilitated entry to higher education. The Commissioner emphasised the critical role of further education in attending to the Scottish Government's central mission of tackling child poverty through our work in upskilling the workforce.

It was opined that – although those from disadvantaged backgrounds are already 'over'-represented in further education, there was likely to be more from disadvantaged backgrounds who would benefit from, but were not currently accessing, further education. The Commissioner also stressed the importance of further education in tackling poverty through upskilling adult returners.

College Sector Position and Key Points from Roundtable Discussions

Across all three roundtable events, attendees were supportive of the Commissioner's recommendation, whilst highlighting a different approach may be needed for colleges to recognise the work already being undertaken by institutions in support of the Widening Access agenda.

Crucially, attendees recognised the impact on learners if the recommendation is not implemented, and the supportive role this recommendation could play in further raising the profile and value of further education.

The key themes from the discussions are outlined below:

A Holistic Approach to Fair Access

There was an overarching view that widening access for learners into both Further and Higher Education is something colleges do intrinsically. Colleges, unlike schools or universities, have the widest possible reach across society, supporting the needs of a very wide range of learners across multiple stages of their learner journey, including those in school, community, workplace, or adult learning or up and re-skilling settings into further and higher education and work-based learning.

It was contended that there needs to be a holistic approach to access, which includes changed methods of measuring learner retention and evidencing success, as opposed to just simply getting learners 'through the door'.

This holistic approach to Fair Access would also require work to be progressed on the existing credit-based funding model for the college sector in Scotland, which due to the focus on input as opposed to output is driving a focus on full-time learning when learning demographics are shifting away from this. If the funding model is reviewed and a greater focus is placed on the provision of part-time learning, the college sector will have an even greater opportunity to drive progress against the Scottish Government targets and ambitions for Widening Access: it would also be better placed to support the Government's anti-poverty work by easing pathways to access for adult returners, and adults seeking to enhance their skills while holding down employment.

Such a measure would take account of the changing learner profiles coming into the college sector as well as the good work institutions undertake in relation to Community Learning and Development focused activity and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Whilst the college sector has a critical role in providing access to multiple learning routes to the widest profile of learners, those learners are uniquely disadvantaged by the college sector attracting the lowest funding per learner when compared to schools or universities.

A Scottish Parliamentary answer (S6W-01165 published on 28 July 2021) shows the stark differences in the baseline amounts invested in college students. It should be noted that the figures in the parliamentary answer have not included tuition fees.

Extract from parliamentary answer:

Average expenditure per place for each education level in real terms (2020-21 prices)	
Education level	*2019-20*
Pre-school	£7,397
Primary School	£6,143
Secondary School	£8,278
College	£4,321
University	£5,913

College students deserve parity of investment and Colleges Scotland has consistently called for stronger, longer-term funding to help colleges thrive. 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.

In order to develop a truly holistic approach to Fair Access across tertiary education in Scotland, there needs to be clearer recognition of the college sector's role, and mindset, in driving forward widening access initiatives, such as the recent partnership developed between New College Lanarkshire and University of the West of Scotland and the many innovative strategic partnerships between colleges and universities enabling college learners to progress to undergraduate degrees through 'articulation' – covered in the section on 'articulation' below.

This recognition also has to extend to the school system. A key point made across the sessions was that the role of colleges in providing access to Further and Higher Education has to be more clearly communicated to school learners to inform their decisions around Post-School Learning, and that the existing range of careers information, advice and guidance services available to school learners has to recognise and reflect opportunities available in colleges, which includes supported pathways into university education.

The post-school education system needs to be redeveloped so that articulation opportunities are embedded across institutions, rather than presenting as individual instances of good practice, in support of the widening access agenda. The Joint Articulation Group is focusing on increasing Articulation opportunities and in considering the current definition of Articulation to improve levels of understanding and will have ongoing dialogue with the Commissioner on these agendas.

Commission for Widening Access Targets

There is a need for a further stakeholder discussion around the unintended consequences of the widening access targets as currently in place, due to some of the behaviours this was driving in terms of student recruitment. This has to be progressed with an end goal of ensuring that learners are being directed to the appropriate learning levels and destinations for their needs, and to move away from the risk of learners being displaced in the wider tertiary system. The exclusive focus on access to higher education risks learners being directed to institutions that are less well suited to them at that point in their learner journey.

Effective Measures of Deprivation

Some colleagues highlighted that the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation measure does not work effectively in rural areas, and that there needs to be a broader range of metrics used to provide a fuller picture and identify where the gaps are, in terms of ensuring access to Further and Higher Education for those learners from deprived backgrounds within those geographical regions with less deprivation more generally.

The UHI and others are currently working collaboratively with Scottish Government to explore how rural poverty, in addition to SIMD measures, can be accurately captured, as part of their recruitment and admissions processes. This will include consideration of factors such as distance to education and key services, availability of senior phase provision and availability of post-school tertiary education provision.

The college sector is supportive of the Commissioner's recommendation to use individual-level indicators to measure deprivation and expand the evidence base for decision making, as we recognise that area-based measures have their limitations, especially given the geographical spread of the college sector across Scotland.

Role of Career Services

Colleagues felt that career services should play a more active role in promoting positive destinations other than University and showcasing the value of a college education. Simultaneously there should be a greater role for careers services in evidencing the learner routes that are available for individuals to progress into Further and Higher Education through college and university.

The 'Pathways App' enables learners in the east of Scotland to search agreed pathways that can take them from college to degree level study in the regions of Stirling, Clackmannanshire, Fife, Falkirk, West Lothian, City of Edinburgh, Midlothian, East Lothian, and the Scottish Borders. An expansion of this initiative nationwide would provide equity of information for learners across Scotland around the pathways available to them, which would support the goals of the Widening Access agenda.

Partnership Working to Support Skills Planning

The Widening Access agenda should be interlinked with the wider reform work underway in relation to Skills Planning at both Regional and National level. Attendees across the roundtables noted the opportunities to work in partnership with the health and social care sector, and other local agencies, to tailor their college offering to the needs of their local community.

These opportunities to address current and future skills requirements provides the possibility of widening access with a purpose for local and regional economies. Potential pilot approaches should be considered to enable those learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds to be directed into opportunities which address the needs to employers within their regions.

Barriers to Accessing Further Education

Colleges are welcoming and highly accessible learning environments, but further engagement with the Scottish Government is required to consider what barriers exist

to individuals accessing Further Education and how these can be resolved to facilitate both the recruitment and retention of those learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Examples raised across the roundtables included a lack of access to affordable childcare, transport, and a student support funding system for further education which falls very much short of what is available to a learner studying higher education.

College Sector Role in Contributing to Fair Access Targets

Colleges play a significant role in contributing to fair access targets, offering individuals opportunities for progression and pathways into university, particularly those from under-represented groups. This is illustrated in the figures below taken from the Scottish Funding Council's Report on Widening Access 2022-23.

- In the college sector, 4.0% of enrolments to full-time HE courses were care-experienced individuals, which is a record high for this publication.
- Of those who successfully qualified from college courses in 2021-22, 92.4% of care experienced leavers from full-time HE courses with known destinations were in work or further study 3-6 months after qualifying.
- Of the 5,310 Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants from SIMD20 areas, 33.5% (1,780) entered via college routes.
- In 2022-23, 8,790 students enrolled at a university first degree course in Scotland having previously achieved a HNC or HND qualification at college, forming 22.4% of all Scottish domiciled first-degree entrants.
- For those entering university within three years of achieving their college qualification, 2,895 (50.7%) entered via Advanced Standing, receiving full credit for their prior learning and entering directly into year two with a HNC or year three with an HND.
- 25.8% of students articulating to University with Advanced Standing declared a disability.
- 2.2% of entrants articulating to University with Advanced Standing were care experienced.

Despite the key role of colleges in contributing to fair access targets, the numbers of care experienced and SIMD20 learners entering University with Advanced Standing has reduced in 2022-23. It is crucial that funding provision reflects the efforts of the sector if targets set by the Commission on Widening Access are to be met.

Articulation

The Joint Articulation Group, co-convened by Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland, is one of the main conduits for developing nation-wide approaches to articulation. The Group's members have agreed five key priorities and ambitions for both sectors in a post pandemic world, which are being progressed collaboratively by the college and university sectors. If these priorities and ambitions are met, then students across Scotland will benefit from a greater diversity of study routes.

1. ***Develop more routes from wider range of qualifications***. Historically, articulation routes have used Higher National qualifications (HNQs). HNQs are important, but other qualifications exist too. The Group will work to expand the

definition of articulation and help to develop articulation routes from other qualifications.

2. ***Enable students to find articulation routes***. The [Pathways](#) portal shows articulation pathways across the Lothians, Borders, Fife, Stirling, and Clackmannanshire. We want to expand this to the whole of Scotland.

3. ***Work to support future articulation***. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is developing the Next Generation of HNQs, and we will be working with SQA to ensure these new qualifications continue to support and expand articulation.

4. ***Making student transitions smoother***. We will focus on supporting transitions for articulating students and we will work with students to do this. We recognise that the pandemic has had an impact on the learning of future students, so additional support to help with the transition between at college and at university is required.

5. ***Improve information about articulation.*** Potential learners are not always aware of articulation as an option, and we want to change that. We will work with the provider of careers advice to school pupils and college students, Skills Development Scotland, to ensure that articulation is clearly signposted as a route from college to university with careers advisors, teachers, and lecturers.

School College Partnerships

Schools College Partnerships offer a wide range of part-time college courses for S4-S6 pupils and provides greater choice in a variety of subjects which may not be available at school. Doing a college course while at school provides senior phase learners with additional skills and qualifications to boost their employment prospects and enhance their pathway as a first step into college and/or university.

The [Co-creating the Learner Journey Research Report](#) shows that high school students make up an average of 17.5% of all college enrolments. The distribution of secondary school School-College Partnership enrolments in 2019 shows that 71% of pupils participating in School College Partnerships were in Senior Phase.

School College Partnerships are crucial in rural communities as this enables provision of equitable access to subject choice in senior phase and post-school pathways for rural and island learners, as well as for schools in the most deprived communities. The role of these partnerships and their role in the widening access agenda for learners should be subject to further discussion.

Scottish Wider Access Programme

The Committee should also be aware of the key role of the Scottish Wider Access Programme, which focuses on enabling access to higher education for adult learners who have few to no qualifications or who have been out of education for some time.

SWAP access programmes run at colleges across Scotland and are a proven route into hundreds of degree courses at partner universities. Their programmes are specifically designed for adults who are returning to education after a gap, and who

have the motivation and ability to go on to study at university or for a higher-level qualification at college.

SWAP provides full-time, one year access programmes across a range of subject areas. This includes programmes relating to science, engineering, social sciences, humanities, education, languages, business, law, social work, nursing, allied health professions, medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine. Programmes are run by partner colleges across Scotland. Successful completion of a SWAP access programme enables students to progress to a range of degrees at SWAP partner universities.

In 2023-24, 110 SWAP Access programmes were delivered by Scottish colleges, with 1,800 learners enrolled. This evidences again the key role of the college sector in enabling the delivery of the widening access agenda.

Next Steps and Recommendations

Colleges Scotland will progress discussions with Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council on the themes raised across the roundtable sessions, whilst engaging with the Commissioner to inform the development of his next Annual Report. This sits alongside ongoing engagement with the Commissioner through the Joint Articulation Group, working in partnership with Universities Scotland.

We would make the following recommendations for the Scottish Government to consider:

- Scottish Government to revisit the Commissioner recommendation that the Scottish Government should consider strengthening the remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access to assume responsibility for advising on fair access to the whole of tertiary education and accept this, in line with the strong view of college sector attendees in the roundtables.
- Scottish Government to accelerate activity around a review of the existing funding model for the college sector, to ensure this delivers fully for part-time learners, whilst enabling further access into education for this cohort. Parity of funding for learners across school, college and university should be determined by level of learning rather than by institution type. There is also a need to revise student support funding in this context to ensure equity of opportunity for all learners to access learning
- Scottish Government to consider the current unintended consequences of the existing Widening Access targets, with a view to developing future targets which address these behaviours and approaches.
- Scottish Government to consider an expansion of the Pathways App with a view to supporting equity of information for learners around the learning routes available to them through college and into university.

Colleges Scotland
18 February 2025

Written evidence from Professor John McKendrick, Commissioner for Fair Access

I look forward to engaging with the Inquiry on February 26th. In advance, I wish to provide an overview of work to promote fair access to higher education in Scotland, and share some thoughts on the issues that the Inquiry identifies as of particular interest.

Overview

- I am currently finalising my second annual report on fair access in Scotland.
- In my original report, I commended the wide range of actions that have been introduced by the sector[4] to promote fair access. I also commend the political commitment – expressed across the political spectrum – for this work.
- I sense a renewed energy and sense of purpose to further fair access in Scotland, in recent months.
- Although there is much to commend, I am of the opinion that there are actions that we must prioritise in order to make progress to achieving our fair access objectives, and to strengthen our focus on fair access beyond 2030. It particular, there is a need:
  - To recalibrate our indicators to target disadvantage more effectively.
  - To improve our ability to evaluate success, and make greater use of the data already at our disposal
  - To focus more keenly on the experience in, and outcomes beyond, higher education

  And in the medium term
  - To adopt a tertiary perspective on fair access

What is needed for colleges and universities to meet the next interim target

- I welcome the interest of the Committee in ensuring that progress is being made toward meeting the interim (and final) target.
- I had expressed my disappointment in October 2024 following the latest release of the Report on Widening Access (for 2022-23), which indicated a second (small) annual fall in the proportion of entrants[5] to higher education from Scotland's 20% Most Deprived Areas
- More positively, there are recent indications that we may be returning to positive trends, following this "levelling out" of progress.
- However, it remains a challenge to achieve the next interim target, given current levels of access to higher education.
- I would not be supportive of crude interventions, which were deployed simply in order to achieve the next interim target.
- I am supportive of the wider sector continuing its current and strengthening its current work and commitment to the agenda.

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[4]   Throughout this note, the "sector" refers to all stakeholders actively engaged in promoting fair access
[5]   Throughout this note, "entrants" refers to Scottish-domiciled, full-time, first-degree entrants to Higher Education Institutions

What access initiatives are showing success

- There are two answers to this question.
- First, there is evidence that suggests that many of the initiatives that have been introduced to promote fair access are delivering what is required. There is some evaluation work to support these conclusions. Furthermore, there is much promising practice that intuitively would be expected to impact positively on fair access.
- However, we lack the means to systematically track the long-term and system-wide impact of the interventions that we are deploying to promote fair access. To achieve this, we need to improve our tracking across the system, which would require the adoption and utilisation of a universal student identifier.
- In my opinion, the adoption of a universal student identifier and the establishment of a national tracking system should be a priority action.

What impact widening access is having on other SIMD groups

- It is inevitable that if the goal of fair access is to increase the proportion of entrants from one group (i.e., those from the 20% Most Deprived areas), then the consequence will be to reduce the proportion of entrants from some other groups.
- Until recently, increases in the number of students entering higher education meant that the number of entrants from all cohorts (of SIMD) were increasing, although the number of entrants from the Most Deprived Areas increased more to the end that the proportion of entrants from this group also increased.
- If we take evidence from 2016-17 (introduction of the Fair Access commitment) to 2022-23 (most recent data), the proportion of entrants from the Most Deprived 20% Areas and the proportion of entrants from the 20-40% Most Deprived Areas has increased, with slight reductions in the proportions of entrants from the 60% Least Deprived Areas.
- Although there are risks in over-interpreting annual changes, it should be acknowledged that between 2021-22 and 2022-23, the only SIMD cohort to increase numbers of entrants was the 20% Least Deprived Areas: the number and proportion of entrants from the 60% Most Deprived Areas fell.

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

- I have identified this as a priority action. Bi-monthly meetings are now being convened between myself, the Scottish Government policy team, and the Scottish Funding Council to monitor progress.
- In my opinion, this is a priority action

What access challenges exist for disabled, minority ethnic and care experienced students outwith SIMD0-20 areas, and what might be done to address these challenges

- In my opinion, fair access should have a focus on facilitating access for those with potential among the socio-economic disadvantaged, and this should be the primary focus of fair access work.

- Fair access work should have a particular focus when multiple factors compound the disadvantage experienced by those who are socio-economically disadvantaged.
- However, 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.

Written evidence from Glasgow Caledonian University

Glasgow Caledonian University
A success story of embedding widening access

Headlines

Glasgow Caledonian University, the leading and largest modern university in Scotland, is a major contributing institution to widening access in Scotland. We have the demand and potential to grow, to offer more opportunity to Scottish-domiciled students and to enhance our contribution even further.

This is testament to a commitment not simply to access, but enabling access to success. It is an holistic and consistent part of everything that we do, from student support to tailored approaches to careers and mentoring.

Our success is demonstrated through our leading retention rates and our graduate outcomes – we are committed to transforming lives.

Access isn't simply outreach; it is a universal feature of our University, from our partnerships with schools and colleges, to our approaches to student recruitment, international mobility and student support, coupled with sustained commitment from outreach work right through to employment.

It requires a culture of understanding and knowledge, along with investment in support that enables student success in order that they are in a position to make a significant contribution to sustainable economic growth.

Our Strategy 2030 – released in October 2024 – has at its heart the principles of access, excellence and impact.

It is who we are; not an afterthought.

Access at Glasgow Caledonian University: by the numbers

At Glasgow Caledonian University, our commitment to widening access is unwavering.

We have had the **highest number of SIMD20 acceptances in Scotland for two years in a row** and **over 20% of the intake for the whole sector in 2024-25**.

We welcomed almost **1,300 SIMD20 undergraduate entrants this year**, representing **27%** of our Scottish student intake.

Our role in delivering to the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) ambitions cannot be understated and, based on available data, **our University's contribution to sector growth in the numbers of SIMD20 entrants constitutes over 60%** since 2022-23. (UCAS, 2025).

Students from **SIMD20 areas enter the full breadth of our subject areas** from nursing and social work to physiotherapy, from computing and cyber security to law. The most recent college to university transitions data from the SFC shows **the University was the largest recruiter of college and articulating entrants** in 2022-23 as was the case in 2021-22 (SFC, 2024). We have continued to recruit strongly from colleges in the years since, and enjoy strong partnerships with colleges to ensure curriculum mapping and associate student support.

The University serves the region and offers opportunities to students who may not be able to travel far or leave home to study - **70% of our undergraduate students are from the Greater Glasgow area; including over 80% of our SIMD20 undergraduate students**.

As we look to academic year 2025-26, UCAS data show that **demand for Glasgow Caledonian from Scottish applicants overall and from SIMD20 applicants has again increased at a higher rate** than the sector.

Our student intake is diverse in other ways

A substantial proportion of our entrants have single and multiple demographic factors that are under-represented in higher education:

- **Over 30% of our entrants are mature students**, aged 21 or over on entry, with about half of these aged 25 or over.
- **Just under 10% of our entrants have dependants** (predominantly young dependants), and 5% are carers.
- Around 2% of our entrants are care experienced and 4% are estranged.
- There has been growth in recent years in the proportion of entrants who are **disabled**; this is the case for over **20% of our undergraduate** entrants.
- There has also been growth in recent years in the proportion of our Scottish UG entrant population who are **Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic** students. This was the case for **17% of entrants in our most recent intakes**.

We are proud to have strong retention of widening access students - **86.8%** of GCU Scottish first degree full-time entrants from the 20% most deprived backgrounds **return to study in Year 2**, a notably higher rate than the Scottish sector average (83.1%). (SFC, 2024)

We look to widen access beyond undergraduate level and to further advanced study. For example, the University is part of the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science, and fully supports the introduction of the **'Whole Person Approach' to assessing postgraduate research potential** through its studentship awards process. This approach supports widening access, and is designed to attract and recruit PhD applicants from underrepresented groups.

Glasgow Caledonian understands the complexities of widening access

There are a number of areas of **intersection between these demographics**. For example, those with dependants, those who are carers, those who are care

experienced or estranged, those who are Black, those who are mature, and those who do not have a parent with experience of HE, **are all more likely than the overall student population to be from SIMD20 areas**. The prevalence of disability is higher amongst carers, care experienced students, estranged students, and mature students, than the overall student population.

While SIMD20 is the main 'widening access' indicator, and one that tends to be the focus, within this population there are a variety of other factors that could complicate a student's life and potentially require **additional support or flexibility** to manage the various competing demands or other study related challenges.

We have also been supporting students who have had their school or college education disrupted by the covid pandemic or industrial action, and have arrived at university less well prepared than they would have been. The University therefore has to be strongly committed **not just to bringing students in but in supporting them to success**.

Thinking differently about international mobility for students

Having secured Turing funding and Scottish Education and Exchange Programme (SEEP) government funding, **we have pivoted our international mobility opportunities to focus on widening access students for 2024-25**.

Recognising both the level of transformation and impact that international mobility can have on these groups of students, and that they will often have less opportunity to travel out with University.

This pivot not only speaks to who we are as a University but was very clearly aligned with Turing objectives. Our international partnerships team completely shifted its approach to student communications to encourage much larger numbers of widening access students to consider these opportunities and support them to work through barriers.

Virtual mobility experiences, in the form of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) projects, are also being explored, particularly as a route to address both the accessibility and sustainability challenges that can come with physical mobility.

Supporting the work of the Committee

We are very supportive of the Education, Children and Young People Committee's decision to hold an inquiry and hear from students and sector representatives – signalling the importance of widening access to the work of the Committee and the Scottish Parliament.

We believe that widening access to higher education should continue to be a key priority for the Scottish Government and, in turn, should drive the agenda of the Scottish Funding Council as it seeks to ensure that there are places and opportunities for students from the widest diversity of backgrounds to access a university education and to benefit from its transformative impact.

A key challenge for the higher education sector is that there are many unfilled places for Scottish domiciled undergraduate students, and some universities, like Glasgow Caledonian University, have the desire and ability to offer more places and particularly to widening access students, while supporting those students to succeed. We support the work of the Scottish Funding Council to continue to align funded places with student demand with a focusing on enhancing widening access.

We would be pleased to provide any further information to aid the work of the Committee.

https://www.gcu.ac.uk/aboutgcu/strategy2030

Written evidence from HUB for SUCCESS

The Hub for SUCCESS – a unique widening participation initiative - Supporting people with care experience to get in, stay in and return to education
Each year, a key publication for understanding the challenges facing care-experienced young people in Scotland is released by the Scottish Government. This data is provided separately from the rest of the system-level information that the government collects, which means that it focuses entirely on the experiences of those who have been looked after (care experienced) and the impact that it has had on their primary and secondary level education.

The figures are awful.
Even in areas where progress is being made, enormous gaps remain between those who do and do not have experience of the care system – and in some areas, things seem to be going backwards. The situation is much better than it looked a decade ago, but progress is painfully slow and, it seems, in some areas, stalling.
Whether we look at literacy and numeracy figures, qualification attainment levels, post-school destinations or school exclusions we find that care experienced young people are having to fight against massive, systemic disadvantages.

The Scottish Government educational outcome statistics[6] (2024) tell us:
1. 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 to not reach this group**.
2. Care experienced entrants are much more likely to be from more deprived areas. In 2022-23, 32.8% of Scottish-domiciled care experienced entrants to full-time first-degree university courses were from the 20% most deprived areas, compared to 16.0% of those not declaring themselves as care experienced.[7]
3. Looked after young people were more likely to be in further education (47.3%) compared to all school leavers (26.6%) and **considerably less likely** to be in higher education -8.6% compared to 40.3% - this is a huge and unacceptable gap. These findings are linked to looked after young people tending to leave school at earlier stages, coupled with their lower attainment levels when compared to all school leavers.
4. Therefore, further education (college) is a crucial (and often only) route for care experienced young people who want to go to university.

The transformative power of education shouldn't end with formal schooling, but for many care experienced people it does and it's socially unjust. Therefore, successful widening access initiatives such as the Hub for SUCCESS should be available for *all* care experienced people and not just for those across our current partnership area. Find out about Suzannes inspirational learning journey. Through college into university

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6https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-outcomes-for-looked-after-children-2022-23/pages/school-leavers-post-school-destinations/

[7] Report on Widening Access 2022-23 - Scottish Funding Council

Context and History of the Hub for SUCCESS

Now celebrating its 7th year in operation, the HUB for SUCCESS (HfS) was established as an innovative approach to address the low numbers of care experienced students progressing into higher education. The HfS won the Herald Higher Education Widening Access award 2024. The Hub for SUCCESS is hosted by Edinburgh Napier University.

The HfS is a unique partnership between Edinburgh Napier University, Heriot-Watt University, the University of Edinburgh, Queen Margaret University, the Open University in Scotland, Edinburgh College, West Lothian College, Newbattle Abbey College, and City of Edinburgh Council. Using an 'Each and Every Child' approach, the HfS's aim is to provide impartial, tailored support and continuing support on topics such as courses, accommodation and finance to help people with care experience get in, stay in, or return to education.

Since its establishment, the HfS has evolved in scope from a from a one-stop support service for individual learners to a strategic and highly valued collaborative partnership run by two full-time staff, three part-time staff and 30 care experienced student ambassadors. The organisation has transformed hundreds of lives by amplifying the voices of care experienced students and tackling the barriers they may face. The HfS has supported over 700 care experienced people with over 1700 tasks related to getting in and staying in education. Read more about our work in our independent evaluation here.

HfS has pioneered work on collaborative corporate parenting and continues to bring substantial benefits for care experienced learners, partners, and wider policy and practice. The HfS was established in 2018, following the Commission on Widening Access's [8] (COWA) final report, *A Blueprint for Fairness* (2016) which noted;

> **"***The Commission is conscious that the particular challenges faced by those with care experience, both by their nature and magnitude, set this group of learners apart. Scotland must therefore be* **much bolder** *in its ambition for, and commitment to, those with care experience if we are to deliver fairness for this group of learners".*

Significant rise in number of care experienced students across HfS partnership

1. **The Hub for SUCCESS advocate that Scottish Government provide grant funding to support a Scotland wide Hub for SUCCESS initiative.**

The introduction of increased support for care experienced (CE) learners has led to a significant rise in the number of CE students across Scotland's colleges and universities. In the academic year 2022-23, 1,795 care experienced students entered undergraduate Higher Education, representing 2.1% of the student population. Simultaneously, representation from SIMD20 communities decreased (Report on Widening Access, ROWA 22-23).

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[8] https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/

In HfS partner institutions, undergraduate HE has seen a 400% increase of CE students over the last 5 years, a reflection on the success of our widening access work across the partnership.

This positive development has not been met with increases in resources to support students from widening access backgrounds, a consequence of this is that the increase in recruitment is not necessarily translated to graduation. Whilst overall, retention rates have increased, and the gap has narrowed between SIMD categories, care experienced learners have continually had a lower rate of retention – down 6.4 percentage points compared to their non-care experienced peers. This crossover of socioeconomic disadvantage and care experience underscores the need for enhanced support mechanisms at universities and colleges to support students.

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. Yet, funding per student has fallen year on year, and, ten years on, is now 19% below its real terms figure in 2013-14. (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2024[9]). With universities strapped for cash, they are forced to take extreme measures such as recruitment freezes, introducing voluntary redundancy schemes and cutting frontline staff who work directly with students.

2. Care experienced students require consistent support -the HfS advocates for consistent support for care experienced students

Care experienced students require access to permanent staff who are able to designate time to meet their needs. They form a core part of the scaffolding which CE learners lean on to achieve success whilst at university. Without this, students feel they are unsupported which has a direct correlation to low retention rates. Care experienced students are likely to face financial issues throughout their study, and so institutions need to be resourced (both in terms of staff and finance) to support this group of learners.

Renewing the Alliance for Fair Access, Lifelong Learning and Skills Directorate [10] (2024) highlights the significant difficulties universities face in relation to meeting Commission on Widening Access targets, and in large, this is due to retention and it is suggested that investment is needed to ensure that young people have sufficient exposure to higher education settings in order to portray accurate expectations of post-school study.

Four widening participation initiatives under the National Schools Programme have shown success, however, they are largely geographically and subject dependent. Again, if universities are to be able to conduct outreach activity with school-age learners, they require the time and staffing resource to do this.

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[9] https://ifs.org.uk/scotland
[10] chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.fairaccess.scot/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Sixth-Renewing-Alliance-for-Fair-Access-annual-report-January-2024.pdf

3. Student Support Loan - Hub for Success advocates for the absorption of the Special Support Loan into the Care Experienced Students Bursary.

The introduction of the Care Experienced Students Bursary (CESB) in academic year 2017-18 was a welcomed support in encouraging care experienced learners to undertake study within higher education. In recognition of increased living costs in recent years, SAAS offered a Special Uplift Loan to CE students, worth £2,400, and in addition to the CESB, worth £9,000. The Special Support loan was intended to raise student's financial support package to be in line with National Living Wage. Many care experienced learners experience barriers accessing the loan element of their SAAS entitlement, and so are left short changed, struggling to cope financially. The Hub for Success has highlighted why introducing a loan element to the financial package for care experienced learners is problematic in an open letter to the Scottish Government, however, have received no reply yet. Additionally, the living wage has once again increased, pushing CE learners further into relative poverty. The Care Experienced Bursary is one of the least expensive forms of cost-of-living support given to students by SAAS. In 2022-23, £13.8m was paid out for students claiming the CESB, compared to £511.1m for living cost loans.

Yours Sincerely
Lorraine Moore (Director)
Jake Douglas (Student Ambassador)
Jessie Crawford (Hub Co-Ordinator)
www.hubforsuccess

Written evidence from Lead Scotland

Lead Scotland is pleased to have been invited to submit written and oral evidence as part of this inquiry and indeed are pleased disabled students are being considered as part of this work.

Lead Scotland is a charity supporting disabled people and carers by providing personalised learning, befriending, advice and information services. We have learning projects and befriending projects in Scotland and a national disabled students' helpline and information service. Our local services are community and home based, one to one or in small groups so that people have the right support to learn and participate. We support people with ambitions of personal development, learning, volunteering and work. At a national level, we provide information and advice on the full range of post-school learning and training opportunities for disabled people, as well as influencing and informing policy.

In 2019, Lead Scotland launched a campaign to make access to university fairer for disabled people. We launched a petition on change.org which was signed by almost 500 people, and we spoke about it at our parliamentary reception. In response Daniel Johnson MSP submitted the following question in Portfolio Questions,

> "To ask the Scottish Government whether it will consider including disability as a criterion for widening access to university and contextualised admission and, if so, what work it will undertake to give effect to this."

Following this, we were invited to present at University Scotland's Admissions Policy Group about our campaign. As a result, in 2020 a piece of work was commissioned by Universities Scotland to explore the issues further in a short-term working group, which Lead Scotland and a disabled student campaigning with us, were part of. It was made clear from the outset however, that including disability as a contextual indicator would not be within the scope of the work.

The work has focussed instead on developing a new sector wide statement and set of principles for supporting and welcoming disabled students and a specific disabled student applicant guide. While the statement and principles have all been agreed on and signed off by the sector, to date, none of this work has been published.
In 2019, three Scottish universities stated on their website they considered disability or ill health as a contextual indicator, potentially eligible for a guaranteed minimum entry offer. Five years later, no additional universities have made the decision to include disability as a contextual indicator.

 Interestingly, in the same time frame, we are delighted to see an additional seven universities are including 'being a carer/young carer' as a contextual indicator, on top of the six which were already doing it. This means 13 Scottish universities consider having experience of being a carer as evidence of disadvantage, in comparison to three universities which consider being disabled as a disadvantage in the context of widening access.

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. Ultimately, the sheer breadth and depth of public debate, discussion and consultation related to the level of inequality and disadvantage children with additional support needs at Scottish schools experience, should be a clear indicator that disabled young people need more support to get into higher education. Looking at the most recent Report on Widening Access for 2022/23, statistics related to disabled students do not feature in the main report. Instead, it is necessary to access the background tables, a series of 25 detailed background tables and figures, containing further data. It is in there, hidden away, that we can start to interrogate what the picture of access looks like for disabled people.

It is at first encouraging to see the percentage of full-time first-degree entrants who disclosed as disabled now sits at 21.1%, up from 10.1% in 2013/14. However, in that same time period, entrants disclosing a mental health condition has increased from 1.2% to 5.7%. There has been very little increase for most other impairment types, so there is a real risk that more marginalised groups experiencing persistent inequalities are being left behind, with an increase in mental health disclosures skewing the data. For example, in 2012/13, 0.1% of entrants were blind or had a serious visual impairment, and in 2022/23, 0.1% of entrants were blind or had a serious visual impairment. This is despite the Scottish Government's Pupil Census showing a significant increase in the number of pupils with a visual impairment, going from 2,005 in 2010 up to more than double that at 4,735 in 2019.

At the same time, the number of specialist and qualified ASN teachers is falling dramatically, cut by 15.6% between 2012 and 2020. This is just one example for one impairment type. Disabled people are not homogeneous, so it is vital the Scottish Government and the whole of the admissions sector disaggregates data to understand where the real inequality lies.

It is completely non-sensical to think disabled applicants do not face disadvantage in the context of gaining qualifications in Scotland, when we are seeing steep rises in the number of pupils presenting with additional support needs at the same time as a sharp drop in the amount of investment and availability of specialist teachers.
Getting into higher education is only the beginning of this story as well, as disabled students experience poorer outcomes in comparison to non-disabled students with participation, retention, completion, results and moving into positive destinations.

Disabled Student Survey

We reached out to our networks to ask about experiences and barriers for disabled people in accessing higher education in Scotland. We ran the survey for two weeks and received 20 responses. Of those:

17 said they got lower grades than expected for a reason related to being disabled.

> "Yes. Was unable to attend school and unable to sit exams owing to mental health related to a late autism diagnosis."

> "Yes I struggled to study through exhaustion."

> "Yes. Lack of resource to support at school was horrific."

> "Yes, I was out of school for a year meaning I only got Highers when I was capable of Advanced Highers, I also got lower marks in my Highers than predicted as I wasn't always able to make it to school."

When asked if anything connected to being disabled had made it harder for them to go to university, 16 respondents said yes.

> "A lot of negative attitudes when I first started due to my mobility issues and the physical aspects of the marine biology course."

> "Yes I am immune compromised and classes have moved to entirely face to face."

> "Yes. The lack of support for multi complex disability – only support is those that a box can be ticked for."

> "I have struggled to keep up with university due to having limited energy and capacity for work but being unable to move to a part-time degree as it would limit/change the funding I have access to."

> "Had to pick a university close to home due to needing to live at home."

> "Language and communication. Can't hear well. Profoundly Deaf."

> "My mobility makes it extremely difficult to go on campus, if it wasn't for remote learning I would not be able to do higher education."

> "Further Education is impossible for Learning Disabled to follow any sort of education post school. Both in courses that meet needs plus accessibility."

We asked respondents what their experience of the application process had been like,

> "Eldest daughter applied but school and college has stated her poor attendance caused issues, uni then said that you need to attend at all times. Which for disabled students isn't always possible. It became an issue as they kept saying unless she could guarantee being there at all classes then she wouldn't be suitable for the course."

> "The application process didn't help me as a disabled person to apply. Where is the dyslexia support to apply? Where is the voice recording application? None existence. We are not progressive as a country in being disability aware. It's not about just the minimum to be legal!"

> "It was amazingly accessible and removed barriers allowing me to attend."

> "I struggled with applying as I didn't have the support and advice from school that most people have however the university was very supportive, I wasn't able to give much background on the application so was anxious my application would be viewed badly as I couldn't explain gaps in my education."

"I have struggled to get meetings with disability services at a few universities, and asking other people at the uni (staff, students) hasn't been helpful as they all admitted to not knowing much about what the staff are like or what help they can offer."

"Yes, my disability was addressed in a positive way when applying for university."

"n/a wasn't diagnosed yet, didn't realise I could get help without a diagnosis."

"Awful. Felt patronising because I was Profoundly Deaf. Treating me as a special person. I didn't want to be special. I just wanted to go to university without any barriers or issues."

"There was a tick box for disabilities but no opportunity to expand on this."

We asked respondents if they felt Scottish universities welcomed and encouraged disabled applicants. 15 people said no, comments included,

"Learning disabled with complex needs are excluded in Scotland from further education both from colleges and Universities."

"Not so much for practical courses due to the attitudes that I encountered from some staff."

"They actively encourage but don't always understand the barriers a persons health may have on attendance if the coursework is done and available online it should not be an issue."

"No they do not have processes in place to address individual disabilities."

"I think it largely depends on the university, some are very welcoming making accessibility no big deal and making sure not to alienate disabled students however, others make disabled students feel like burdens for expressing their access needs and try to put them off from attending their institution."

"I wouldn't say they are unwelcoming necessarily, but it's very difficult to find information about how accessible they are for various access needs."

"uhi perth welcomed me and helped me with my journey."

"I think they may actively welcome them, but then in reality don't have the resources/infrastructure/support that disabled students need to have the same uni experience as their peers."

"No! People still think that all disabled people are mentally disabled and sit in wheelchairs. Universities like a stereotypical student for photographs. The handsome lad with mental health issues or the beautiful woman with the lovely figure diagnosed with Crohn's disease, don't convey the message of inclusivity and diversity."

When asked what they thought universities should do to remove the barriers disabled people face in accessing higher education, comments included,

"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 remote courses!!"

"They need more resource and funding and educate staff so disabled aware."

"Make accessibility the norm, don't exaggerate how good they are at helping or how annoying it is that they have to adapt, just do it like it's no big deal cause it isn't. Let students explain their own access needs and listen to them, often we know ourselves and what we need best, if you have something to offer we haven't mentioned sure suggest it but don't push things on us."

"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.
Testimonies from students with various disabilities from complex health needs, specific learning disabilities, mental illness, D/deaf and HoH about how the university has been for them would be brilliant for applicants to get a feel for how they can be supported at uni.
As a science student, I have also found it difficult to learn about what support that I can get to be able to attend lab classes, especially. I think it would be helpful for universities to display this information on their websites, and/or for students to have a non-biased platform to publically post accessibility reviews and recommendations."

"Employ more Deaf people. Role models."

"more funding for their disability support departments to allow them to provide support. more/any training for teaching staff to give them a better understanding of disabled students. better adjustments systems in place that don't put all of the burden of getting accommodations from each lecturer etc on the student."

When asked for any other comments, respondents said,

"Lack of formal qualifications mean the only courses I can access are at a far lower academic level than my own reading and study, so I feel higher education is not open to people like myself."

"Education as a whole needs to understand that students need different approaches to learning. Some need longer. Some need to be able to access online tutorials yes face to face is needed but not all students can learn that way or are able to physically be present. During Covid it was all online work was completed. Yet now they are back to pushing the attendance is a necessity, which again for some isn't possible.

My youngest daughter physically at times can not be upright due to her disability has always planned on uni but school has pushed so hard for attendance put barriers in her way she is now thinking uni is a pipe dream or it will take her much longer as school have scared her into belief that uni will ask her to leave. Learning is no longer fun it's all about bums on seats and attainment. If courses were done on marked on all work handed in rather than exams after two years or so of work there would be higher attainment, some people have poor brain function due to severe pain or chronic fatigue so forget a lot struggle to find the information. But when they are doing unit assessment coursework they do well as it's as they go."

"I am concerned we improved through covid and seem to have gone backwards."

"Appalling experience of DSA in Scotland. Needs to be a government enquiry into the misuse of public funds as you will then see the real problems that stop students as they try and study."

"It needs to be also said that SAAS dsa is good but cumbersome and they don't use the money correctly. Uni's don't top up and so you get what SAAS pay due to sorry state of uni finances. Also SAAS are out of touch with the real world and aren't on top of things and slow and make life so much harder for disabled people. That's before we get to the fact they don't pay the helpers properly or on time or even in real time ! Again lack of funding and people so they say."

"Flagging up support required at application stage."

Written evidence from The Open University in Scotland

About The Open University in Scotland

The Open University in Scotland supports people across Scotland to develop their knowledge, acquire new skills and achieve life-changing qualifications.
In 2022/23 we were proud to help over 19,500 students study around their professional or personal life at a pace and level that worked for them. The most recently published HESA data (2022-23) shows that apart from The University of Glasgow we teach more Scottish domiciled students than any other university and by far the largest provider of flexible, part-time study (discounting adult education provision).

Flexible study is core to our offer with 73% of our students working either full-time or part-time in 2022/23.

Most of our graduates (85%) remain in the location where their study is undertaken, which means their talent and skills benefit local communities.

We offer high-quality distance learning to students, lifelong learners, communities, employees and businesses and this is evidenced in our NSS feedback and TEF Gold rating. Our students range from school age to 92. We have formal partnerships with 16 regional colleges and collaborate with local authorities, the NHS, social care, the third sector and employers across Scotland. Our innovative national schools programme, Young Applicants in Schools Scheme, helps S6 pupils access a broader curriculum and bridge school to university level study.

We are committed to widening access to higher education building on our founding principle of being open to everyone, regardless of age, income, geography and background. The majority of our undergraduates in Scotland are eligible for a part-time fee grant to help towards their tuition fees.

In Academic Year 2022/23 of our undergraduates in Scotland:

- **28%** declared a disability

- **22%** live in remote or rural areas

- **23%** joined with qualifications below standard university entrance level

- **21%** were resident in the most deprived areas of Scotland

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As part of the UK's only four nations university, we are funded to teach students resident in Scotland by the Scottish Funding Council. Over 150 staff operate from our Edinburgh offices with over 400 associate lecturers working across the country.
OU research ranks in the top third of UK universities according to the Research Excellence Framework and we are a trusted partner of many leading organisations for teaching and research including the BBC, NASA, and the United Nations. Our free platform, OpenLearn, reaches over 300,000 learners in Scotland.
Find out more: open.ac.uk/scotland

Scotland

Widening Access

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. We believe widening access should not solely focus on full-time campus-based undergraduates.
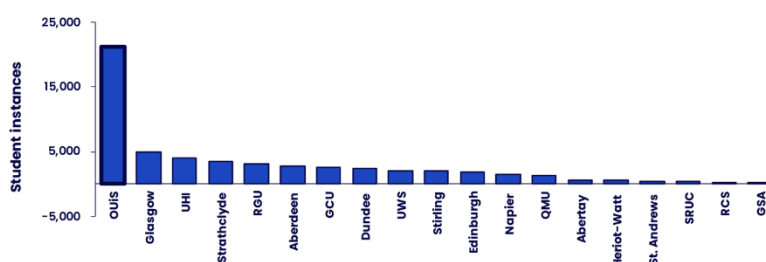
As a four-nations university, the Open University in Scotland's data on widening access forms part of the university's Access and Participation Plan for the OfS. This includes an Equality of Opportunity Risk Register based on the University's analysis of data from its student population across all four nations. The university places significant institutional focus on improving student outcomes and reducing inequality gaps. Data-informed support mechanisms and interventions are implemented throughout the student journey to support student success.

Metrics which include part-time students

When we met with the Commissioner for Fair Access last year we discussed possible elements of an adult learners basket of measures. We continue to explore these ideas and to test against unintended consequences. They focus on readily accessible data sources:

- Student accessing PTFG (indication of personal income to £25k – although anecdotally varied advice given by DWP with respect to impact of PTFG on benefits)

- Prior educational qualifications

- Rural and remote, using Scottish Government definitions. This is, of course, spatial like SIMD and could therefore sweep up some non-eligible learners.

However, SIMD doesn't serve rural areas and this is available, so it could be considered as one measure.

Shona Littlejohn, our Depute Director for Student Experience and Widening Access, chairs Universities Scotland's short life working group on widening access.

Access Modules

Access modules provide the perfect introduction to distance learning and studying with OU. Students can get a broad overview of the subjects that interest them, refresh their learning skills and build their self-confidence.
The OU offers four Access modules, starting in February, May and October. They are usually 30 weeks long, and most students study for about 8–10 hours a week. There are also fast-track options available, which can be completed in 18 weeks by increasing study time to 16–20 hours a week.

The four access modules are:

1. Arts and languages (Arts and languages fast track available)

2. Business and law

3. Psychology, social science and wellbeing (fast track available)

4. Science, technology and maths (fast track available)

The four modules have skills development built into them through focusing on refreshing study skills and techniques and using computers and technology for learning. Student also experience peer support, peer learning and working collaboratively.

Students who start with an Access module **are more likely to be successful** when they advance to OU Stage 1 study. In the academic year 2022-23 **515 Access Modules** were studied in Scotland.

College Articulation

Collaboration with colleges is an important element of widening access to HE in Scotland and increasing students' employability. The Open University is proud to have formal articulation partnerships with all colleges in Scotland other than those within the University of Highlands & Islands network.

In addition to a range of degree programmes in specific subjects, the University's unique Open Degree is also available to all HN students, regardless of the HN qualification they have studied at college. This allows the student to gain credit for previous study, whilst building a degree programme more tailored to their own pathway development needs, or the needs of their employer.

We currently operate two Collaborative Teaching Provision partnerships with Fife College & City of Glasgow College. These arrangements permit students in both Local Authority areas to progress from HND studies at both colleges to degree level study seamlessly.

Students benefit for continuity of teaching staff from SCQF level 5 up until degree level study. Due to mapped pathways, all students who apply to join either programme are guaranteed a place at Level 3 Studies and can complete the final 120 credits toward an OU degree. Student ages vary from 17-52.

We see a module pass rate of between 65-70% in excess of the national rate of 58% across our on-campus offering at Fife College and City of Glasgow College. In Fife College particularly this enables many in rural as well as SIMD 20/40 areas to stay in the local area to complete degree level study.

Young Applicants in Schools Scheme

We are proud to see our Young Applicants in Schools Scheme (YASS) recognised for its contribution to the Scottish Funding Council Widening Access Report. We include targets for SIMD 20 participants within YASS. Over 40% of our YASS students are from the two most deprived areas of Scotland (SIMD40).

YASS has continued to meet a clear academic need for pupils in their final year. In 2022/23 we had 956 students registered from 160 schools across 31 local authorities. YASS not only prepares pupils for independent learning but also provides a curriculum broader than they have access to in schools.

YASS currently offers 22 OU courses, in multiple subject area, including those that are not offered at schools (e.g. law, statistics, accounting), and language at beginner and Intermediate level (Spanish, French, German), that may be entirely new to students, depending on what the school is available to offer. It has been of particular value to pupils in rural and remote areas of Scotland.

We also offer a very flexible course, YXM130 which allows students to effectively create own course, in their chosen subject, using the hundreds of courses on Open Learn to make their own course, and tailor it to their study interests, consolidating and reflecting on the learning they do on OpenLearn. We provide a number of suggested subject pathways for students e.g. Sport and Exercise, or Health and Social care, both again unlikely to be available to the students at school level.

Community Learning and Development

At the OU in Scotland we have experience of the transformational potential of learning. We know that community learning and development can be an accessible pathway to upskilling, reskilling, confidence building and learning journeys that enhance the lives of individuals and communities. Our concern is that accessibility and availability will decrease in the current funding environment. Our hope is that creative and innovative approaches are explored to ensure accessibility and availability is maximised.

We provide learning that is accessible and available to every individual in Scotland through a digital offer, largely open entry and part-time fee grant to support those on low incomes. We would like to see community learning and development similarly open to all. We also wish to increasingly see CLD learners aware of the many pathways available to them to continue their learning journeys.

The OU in Scotland supports an Open Learn Champions Programme which supports those working these client groups, including CLD practitioners and those supporting employability. Open Learn Champions have access to a training module, resources, networking events and CPD sessions.

In 2022 we undertook independent research into the barriers and challenges accessing informal and formal education for those living in disadvantaged areas in

Scotland. We used the findings to co-create interventions, which we tested in collaboration with the South Lanarkshire Community Planning Partnership. A network of OpenLearn Champions was created, and we promoted and ran a series of OpenLearn Taster and Access Sessions in Springhall and Rutherglen, South Lanarkshire. Around 265 people enrolments on OpenLearn courses with the most popular subject areas being were mental health, children's wellbeing and employability. Although the numbers are small, access registrations for the area have increased at a greater rate than the rest of Scotland (+43% vs +20%).

Our Open Pathways resource is designed for learners to plan their pathways into accredited learning from informal and online learning, including a specific pathway for those undertaking the Adult Achievement Award (SCQF6). We also have a module called Making Your Learning Count (SCQF7) which allows learners to convert 150 hours of informal, online and community-based learning into credit through reflection and group activities while developing skills for formal study.

Partnerships with Local Authorities

Our partnership with SOLACE, established towards the end of 2023, has now evolved into a collaboration with 9 Local Authorities across Scotland. An approach has been designed to support and enhance local efforts to increase participation and improve access to educational learning and support, implement focussed community-based interventions in SIMD areas and work with schools to support pupils currently disengaged from the education system.

This approach has also enabled us to work with local authority partners to develop and curate practical, long term and sustainable solutions to the recruitment and retention challenges being faced across key local authority services. We have also placed a strong emphasis on providing learning pathway opportunities for their own internal workforce to grow and develop.

Written evidence from Robert Gordon University

Robert Gordon University (RGU) is pleased to respond to the Education, Children and Young People's Committee Inquiry into Widening Access to Higher Education. The University would welcome the opportunity to expand on the points made in this submission if the Committee would find that useful.

As part of its inquiry, it will be important that the Committee considers the wider context in which widening access to university is taking place. Widening access requires ongoing and coordinated focus at all levels of our education and skills systems, including addressing the poverty-related attainment gap from the earliest years and through Scotland's schools. Universities are grappling with significant financial challenges, including a decade-long erosion of public funding for teaching while also having to meet increasingly complex student support needs. This operating environment needs to be borne in mind as we consider how we can continue to widen and extend access to university regardless of an individual's background or circumstance.

RGU approach to engaging with schools and colleges

The University is highly-committed to widening access and to contributing to national ambitions to support individuals to access higher education and to achieve positive outcomes throughout the student journey. The University has continued to invest in school engagement and widening participation activity in the face of considerable financial challenges. We would highlight that our engagement with schools is not predicated on widening access to RGU, but on widening access to higher education. This is an important point and means that our sustained engagement with schools will not necessarily be recognised in RGU's student enrolment figures as the learners we work with may choose to study at other universities and colleges.

The University engages extensively with secondary schools throughout Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire regions. Out of 28 local authority secondary schools across these regions, 27 participate in RGU's distinctive Schools' Hub initiative. The hub approach involves RGU staff being based in schools on a fortnightly or monthly basis, working directly with schools and learners on a sustained basis on a range of outreach, application and subject-specific activities. The programme is tailored to the needs of individual schools, and provides personalised guidance to learners from widening participation backgrounds as they consider tertiary education options. These sustained connections mean we can ensure learners, schools and careers advisors have a good understanding of different career pathways, and support learners into them, whether that be into RGU or other post-16 destinations.

The school hub approach is closely linked to the University's 'ACCESS TO' programme which provides senior phase S5 and S6 learners across Aberdeen City and Shire with an in-depth campus experience through participation in 13 subject-specific courses. The programme includes making transport available to make it as convenient and accessible as possible for school learners to come on to campus. The 2023/24 ACCESS TO programme had its largest student cohort with more than 1,000 S5 & S6 students enrolled on their programme.

Additionally, the University's 'Northern Lights' programme provides in-school and on-campus engagement activities for S1 and S2 pupils, providing learners with a taster of university life.

Our widening access activity is also supported through the University's articulation arrangements with colleges across Scotland. Notably, our sector-leading partnership with North East Scotland College (NESCol) enables one of Scotland's largest cohorts of articulating students to enrol at the University each year having first completed an HNC or HND at the College. Our longstanding strategic partnership with NESCol enables students to study at the College before progressing to the University to complete a degree without any time loss. The University has also developed a substantial number of Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) progression routes to promote access to university to adult returners to education.

Meeting the Widening Access Targets

The sustained school engagement outlined in the previous section has resulted in the University increasing its applications from prospective students from SIMD20 backgrounds. As at the January 2025 UCAS deadline the University had reached an eight-year high of 846 SIMD20 applications, an 11% year-on-year increase. Notwithstanding, the University has been unable to meet the CoWA institutional target that students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10% of full-time first-degree (FTFD) entrants to every individual Scottish university. In AY2022/23, 7.1% of full-time first-degree entrants (150 students) at RGU were from SIMD20.

This position is explained by there being a smaller number of SIMD20 postcodes in the North of Scotland compared with other regions. RGU has a strong focus on regional recruitment in a region with low numbers of SIMD20 school students. Approximately, only 8-9% of the City (around 60 secondary school leavers per year) and 3-4% of the Shire postcodes are SIMD20, and there are three tertiary education institutions in the North-East recruiting from this pool. The majority of SIMD20 school leavers are located across the central belt, notably within the Greater Glasgow area. Analysis indicates that 60% of FTFD SIMD20 students entered universities in the Glasgow area, whereas only 5% were entrants to universities in North East Scotland. To meet the institutional target the University, which largely recruits its Scottish students from within the local region is reliant on attracting SIMD20 students from outside the local area. This is a significant challenge for the University given the competitive recruitment environment for SIMD20 students, and for Scottish students more generally. We also need to acknowledge that it might not be in the best interests of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to expect them to move away from their family and support networks, and study at an institution far from home.

It will remain extremely challenging for RGU to meet the institutional target that 10% of all Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants should come from SIMD20 postcodes as a result of the University's geographical location and the very competitive recruitment environment for SIMD20 students despite increased offer to study rates.

Developing a wider basket of measures

The current approach to defining widening access does not take account of regional differences. SIMD is a blunt tool for identifying disadvantaged learners. As an area-

based measure, it cannot distinguish between deprived and non-deprived individuals living in areas classified as low/high deprivation. Nor can it distinguish those learners who would benefit from contextualised admissions from those who would progress to university without any widening participation support. Current institutional targets based on SIMD do not recognise the diversity of disadvantage nor the breadth of universities' activities aimed at increasing entry to higher education from under-represented groups. Progress needs to be made on implementing measures that can more appropriately identify individualised markers of disadvantage.

For some years now, the University has strongly advocated that widening access measures and targets for institutions need to take account of different regional contexts and the different dimensions of widening access. This would help to ensure that widening participation to university among under-represented groups is as inclusive as possible, while recognising the breadth and totality of actions universities are taking in this regard.

Both the current and previous Commissioner for Fair Access recognised that SIMD is not a useful target, and recommended that the SIMD institutional target should be withdrawn. The University welcomes recognition of the need for greater flexibility around indicators of disadvantage, particularly the inclusion of individualised measures. Such measures could include Free School Meals, the Scottish Child Payment, rurality-based, and metrics for mature and part-time learners. This would have the benefit of enabling a broader range of learners to benefit from universities' support for widening access, while also providing a more comprehensive approach to assessing and recognising institutions' progress towards fair access.

Free School Meals Pilot

RGU, along with the University of Aberdeen, NESCol, City and Shire Councils, is currently participating in the regional pilot in the North East of Scotland on the use of Free School Meal (FSM) data as an additional, individual-level widening access measure. 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. Notwithstanding the commitment of the regional partners, the data sharing issues experienced in the regional pilot illustrate the significant challenge in implementing data sharing arrangements nationally in the absence of legislation.

Rurality

The inclusion of rurality as an access measure in a wider basket of measures is gaining wider attention, including from the Commissioner and from the Scottish Government. SIMD, though area-based, is often too broad-brush to identify rural disadvantage. The Scottish Government's School Leaver Survey data suggests a link between remote rural communities and a lower university access rate. The data suggests a link between inaccessible communities and lower attainment level at SCQF level 6. We believe this is an area that would benefit from further analysis, and would be in line with CoWA which highlighted a need to look at rurality.

Unique Learner Number

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. The implementation of a unique learner number would help to provide much more robust data at an individual level. It would allow for much greater understanding of learners' progression through post-16 education and skills pathways. It could also be used to help gain a better understanding of the efficacy of specific access initiatives.

Relationship between access and disability, minority ethnic and care experience

Currently, there are no specific targets to increase representation at university of disabled students, students from minority ethnic backgrounds and students with care experience. It would, however, be insightful to generate a better understanding of what access challenges exist for disabled, minority ethnic and care experienced students outside of SIMD20 areas, and what might be done to address these challenges.
As a starting point, the Scottish Government's School Leaver Survey data[11] does suggest there is a strong correlation between access to higher education and additional support need. The data for 2022-23 indicates that while 50% of secondary school learners with no additional support need progressed to higher education, only 25% of those with any additional support need entered HE. The data provides more granular detail on specific categories of additional support (e.g. physical impairment, mental health, autism, among others) and how this relates to various post-school destinations, including HE.

The University proudly holds our corporate parenting responsibilities for our care-experienced student community. Indeed, our widening access initiatives, including our schools engagement activities, contextual admissions policy, student accommodation offer and scholarships include care-experience as a key eligibility criteria, with a focus on promoting equitable chances to participate in higher education.
The University supports disabled students through our dedicated Inclusion Centre, which offers advice, needs assessments, and support for students with disabilities.

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[11] Table L3.1: School Leaver Survey 2024, supplementary tables

Written evidence from Universities Scotland

Key messages

1. **Progress.** Scotland's higher education institutions are fully committed to widening access and are pleased to have made significant progress since 2016, in what is without question an important and complex societal and educational objective.

2. With five years remaining to get to the 2030 goals, there are some signs that progress is plateauing. As such, the timing of this short inquiry is significant and important. It offers a constructive opportunity to connect all parts of the education sector together behind this goal, whilst there is still time to realise the ambition. Universities remain determined.

3. We suggest it would be a missed opportunity not to include the perspectives of teachers and school leaders within the scope of this inquiry and to connect a post-school analysis to that of school attainment data. Learner success and progression from school is a key route into university and will remain so even as demographic changes from 2033 will mean school-leaver numbers decline.

4. **Data.** Universities and Government both share a frustration about the obstacles to better data sharing in support of access. In a time of straightened resources, progress on the data front is one of the few no cost/low? cost actions that could make a meaningful difference. Legislative routes might be necessary to overcome this, and if necessary, we ask for cross-party support going into the next election to better enable universities' (and others) to achieve more.

5. **Looking beyond the 2030 goals.** It is also timely to consider the types of learner Scotland should be supporting to deliver greater fairness over the next ten to twenty years, in order to account for shifting demographic patterns as well as to review where aspects of our current post-school landscape could be more progressive in support of all students.

6. **The role of student finance in enabling widening access.** Student finance is an important element to both the perception and affordability of university and is a core to supporting widening access. Elements of the current model are arguably not as progressive as they could be. More non-repayable financial support and more targeting to those who need it most would be more aligned with the access agenda.

7. Access to education for learners with a disability, for Black learners and People of Colour is fundamentally important and protected, along with the other protected characteristics, on a statutory basis, under the Equality Act. We recognise the intersectionality between the protected characteristics and socioeconomic deprivation.

Widening access (socio-economic factors)

Progress achieved:
- Universities led their own process of reform to deliver, in 2019, the most progressive admissions policies in the UK (contextualised admissions, minimum

entry requirements and the care experience guarantee) with aim of doing as much as possible to level the playing field for applicants.

- Universities met the Commission's 2021 sector-wide interim access target that 16% of Scottish-domiciled entrants should be from SIMD20 backgrounds.

- The latest data from UCAS, for entrants starting university in September 2024 is also very positive.[12] It shows a record number of 6,500 SIMD20 applicants were accepted, which is an 11.4 per cent increase on the previous year. This is a 17.8% entry rate for SIMD20 18 year olds, which is an increase on 16.5% in 2023.[13]

- Data released by UCAS in February is also positive, with demand from SIMD20 applicants looking strong for entry in Scotland in autumn 2025 (up 1.6% amongst all SIMD20 age groups and up 4.4% amongst SIMD20 18 year olds). This is in marked contrast to the picture in England, where the only growth in applicants has come from the most privileged quintile[14].

- Additional support for people with experience of care has been a specific dimension to universities' collaborative access agenda since 2016. Universities' care experience guarantee of an offer, as linked to achievement of the minimum entry requirements (as adjusted from standard entry requirements), was launched in 2019 and was welcomed by Who Cares? Scotland. Entrant numbers have consistently grown over that period. Overall numbers are still low, which result in annual fluctuations but overall entrants to full-time first degrees have doubled over the last six years (to 585 in 2022/23).

Areas that require priority attention:

Whilst it is important to note the progress already made, a number of challenges sit between institutions and making further progress toward the goals:
- The pace of progress in closing the poverty related attainment gap in schools is a major issue in terms of the need to increase the overall number of qualified applicants from SIMD20 data zones who can apply to university. Amongst those achieving Highers, the percentage point gap between those with an A grade from the most and least deprived quintiles is 22.1 in 2024 and 17.2 for those with A-C, which is broadly where it was on both counts pre-pandemic.[15]

- Recognition that students who meet widening access criteria are far less likely to have linear pathways to university. Colleges have a role in widening access too. As well as enabling many students to gain qualifications and skills for the workplace, colleges also offer pathways into universities. This includes access courses like SWAP (Scottish Wider Access Programme) which is an important

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[12] There is a time-lag on HESA data, which makes UCAS data on applicants and acceptances more up-to-date, if not a final picture.

[13] The entry rate for 18 year olds is a calculation by UCAS, which tracks accepted applicants as a percentage of 18 year olds in the population. We want to be clear is not the same metric as that used by the Commission of Widening Access to determine success against the targets but it is a reliable metric we can provide the Committee in near-to-real time.

[14] To note that applicant numbers themselves do not indicate whether the applicant pool is suitably qualified/projected to be suitably qualified for entry.

[15] See table 14. https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/equalities-monitoring-report-2024.pdf

route for mature learners. It also includes HN qualifications and articulation, which is a major route into Scottish universities and is what SFC calls a fair route in that participation is much more evenly spread amongst the SIMD quintiles.

- Finally, given the extent of funding pressures facing universities we need to register the risk that the Scottish Government's pattern of under-investment in every Scottish student over the last decade now presents to the widening access agenda. Public investment in every Scottish student's education and wider experience has fallen in real terms by £3,000 since 2014/15.[16] 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.[17]

The role of data

There are a number of data asks that can be taken in support of further progress, with little or no cost attached, which we would want to see expedited in pursuit of the 2030 goals. The lack of access to precise, reliable and timely data in many areas of widening access has undoubtedly hampered progress and has been a source of shared frustration. Four different actions would be helpful:

1. **The lack of a person-centred metric that can be used by universities.** SIMD has been the primary means by which universities are measured and held accountable on access since 2016, this metric influences the approach universities take to outreach and admissions support, making undergraduate offers, the availability of summer-school and other bridging support. SIMD is not person-centred, is deeply flawed for remote/rural areas and this lack of precision becomes even more problematic in a context where university resources are more limited and places at university are in high-demand. Local authorities (LAs) have access to a number of person-centred data metrics such as free school meals, the Scottish Child Payment, and the school clothing grant, which could support the access agenda in universities. Data sharing between LAs and universities is not possible under current arrangements, and though a regional data sharing pilot on free school meals is taking place between colleges, universities and the local authority in the northeast, it is not an approach that could be scalable to the rest of Scotland. We understand the most viable solution to secure data sharing arrangements is via legislation. We would like to see a manifesto commitment from all parties to legislate on data sharing to overcome this obstacle. This data is available for students in the rest of the UK, where different legislation allows this data to be shared via UCAS, for example on free school meal eligibility.

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[16] Universities Scotland (2024) https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/US-Budget-Case-25-26.pdf

[17] There is a widening access retention fund, which operates based on the evidenced understanding that access students require additional resource, however it is not available to all HEIs and those in receipt of it have not seen it increase in real terms over the period since CoWA.

2. **A need to change the CoWA targets for individual institutions.** The Commissioner recommended the removal of SIMD institutional targets in his 2024 report, highlighting how this could be managed for individual institutions within a basket of wider indicators**.** 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. We need to prevent a situation where a relatively static pool of qualified applicants and the need to meet institutional targets results in intra-sector competition for SIMD20 students and a circulation of SIMD20 students between HEIs rather than growing the total number of SIMD20 students benefitting from a higher education. 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. Under proposed changes, institutions will still be required to make use of SIMD and grow SIMD20 numbers overall. Whilst doing this we think that work should continue to introduce additional measure to identify disadvantaged applicants we are currently overlooking by using only SIMD 20.

3. **Introducing a unique learner number or single student identifier for Scottish domiciled learners**. Being able to track the progress of learners and the impact of widening access activity is crucial. It would enable end-to-end tracking of learners who meet access criteria, supporting more effective long-term evaluation. It would also help identify previous disadvantage in adult learners returning to education or progressing through to PGT. Universities have been in support of this since 2015[18] and its enormously helpful that both the Commissioner and the Scottish Government have agreed this should be introduced.

4. **Address the lack of sufficiently robust and disaggregated data on school attainment.** In our submission to the Education, Children and Young People Committee on the Attainment Challenge in February 2022, we highlighted the need for more granular data.[19] The school leaver statistics data on attainment is based on achievement of only 1+ qualifications at a given Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) level. Whilst this may be a useful marker for attainment for other purposes, it is not helpful in judging the attainment gap in regard to leavers' prospects of progression to university because most undergraduate degree courses (except Open University which does not have conventional entry requirements) require more than one Higher qualification (or equivalent) . The Scottish Government's school leaver statistics that tell us what proportion of SIMD20 learner achieve at least one pass at Higher offer no indication of how many SIMD20 learners may be qualified for university entry. In 2018, the Scottish Government released data looking at both the number and grades of (Higher and Advanced Higher) qualifications and an updated draft version has recently been shared with the sector. We believe that regular updated data would enable institutions to better understand the attainment gap.

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[18] Universities Scotland (2015) Submission to the call for evidence to the Commission on Widening Access.

[19] Universities Scotland https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/briefing-evidence/attainmentchallenge/

Looking beyond the 2030 goals.

Whilst the emphasis is rightly on the 2030 goals, Scotland needs to start looking beyond that and consider the impact that demographic change will have the access agenda going forward. As noted above, it has largely been centred around young (under 21) undergraduates who want to study full-time. As the demographic profile of school leavers starts to fall in Scotland from 2033 onward, and Scotland's need for highly-skilled people continues to grow, it is timely to start thinking about the model of funding and student finance can do more to support the diversity of learners who could and should benefit from a higher education, many of whom do meet the socio-economic profile, if not the age, of the CoWA's focus.
Two main issues to highlight:

- **Part-time learners are not included within the CoWA targets.** This fails to recognise and better support a significant minority community within the student population, and one which does not have access to free tuition nor the same level of student finance. This should be addressed within a wider piece of work to re-set the access targets.

- **Move to develop a person-centred deprivation metric for mature learners.** All of the metrics under consideration for a person-centred data set relate to childhood-based benefits or are linked to parental income. Scotland should develop a robust person-centred metric that is applicable to mature students (aged 21 and over) and this should count towards achievement of the CoWA targets (with readjustment if necessary). "Mature" students are currently 27% of first degree students[20] in Scotland but applicant numbers have been steadily falling and this is a pattern institutions are keen to see reversed. Universities Scotland has created a small, sector group to progress this, starting with universal credit.

Student finance is a key element to the access agenda
- **Longer-term: growing evidence that existing student finance support should be better targeted.**

  We want to lend support to suggestions that the student support system could be more progressive and be aligned more closely to the shared goals of the widening access agenda. The evidence base for this comes in the form of a significant piece of research published in December 2024. The *Student Finance and Wellbeing Study* was commissioned by the Scottish Government[21]. It surveyed nearly 2,500 students from colleges and universities and made a number of findings and recommendations off the back of that insight:
  - It highlighted that the financial circumstances are particularly precarious for students unable to rely on the support of others (care experienced/estranged), those with caring responsibilities and those from low-income backgrounds.

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[20]HESA Student Record 2022/23 Scottish domiciled first time first degree students https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he
[21]https://www.gov.scot/publications/student-finance-wellbeing-study-sfws-scotland-2023-2024-main-report/pages/18/

○ It suggested consideration be given to the balance between repayable income (loans) and non-repayable income (bursaries, grants and scholarships). Noting that if student finance support continues to be offered predominantly in the form of loans, "it may hamper on-going efforts to widen access…".[22]

○ It made the suggestion that the Scottish Government consider the balance between the provision of universal and targeted support in the student finance model.

Beyond socio-economic factors

Disability

- Pre-admissions advice and guidance is available to any potential applicant interested in university study and universities encourage disclosure in the pre-application stage so support can be offered throughout. All universities in Scotland recognise that the transition to university for disabled learners can be different and have agreed a shared set of principles to help improve their policies and processes. Universities will use these principles to regularly review their services and will act upon applicant and student feedback. Next month, Universities Scotland will also publish a guide for disabled applicants which offers information and guidance on the admissions process.

- One of the biggest obstacles faced by disabled entrants to university is the current system requires young people to repeatedly disclose their disability as they transition between stages and providers of study, with their needs assessed and reassessed to suit different institutions and funding providers (even if their needs have not changed). To that end, we supported the intent behind the principle of the Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill and were disappointed when the Bill fell in 2023. We note (as we do above) that the Bill approached post-school education with the narrow perspective that university is for young learners only as the transitions support will end aged 26 and should legislation on this be considered again in the future we would welcome a wider approach to transitions. More than a third (38%) of Scottish students with a known disability are 25 or older.[23]

Race/ethnicity

- Representation of Scottish-domiciled BPOC community at undergraduate level in Scotland's universities has been increasing in recent years, with 12.0% of FTFD entrants in 2022/23 from 9.8% in 2019/20[24]. In 22/23 27.4% of BPOC entrants were SIMD 20. While this representation is positive, the sector has recognised there is

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[22] SFWB. Policy considerations. https://www.gov.scot/publications/student-finance-wellbeing-study-sfws-scotland-2023-2024-main-report/pages/18/

[23] Based on data from 2020/21

[24] SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23 - Scottish Funding Council Note: SFC use the term BME, however for consistency we have chosen to use BPOC.

a problem in regard to race/ethnicity in relation to the degree awarding gap. At a UK level in 2022/21 there is an 8.8% gap between the percentage of white and BPOC students awarded a First or 2:1 in their degree[25]. This has closed from a 13% gap between white and BPOC students getting the two highest achieving degree classifications as was the case in 2017/18.

- Whilst this progress is encouraging there are two things to acknowledge: the continued existence of any unexplained gap is an indisputable inequality for BPOC students and, there are larger disparities for individual ethnic groups sitting underneath the aggregate figure for the BPOC community. In 2022/23, 90.3% of BPOC progressed from year 1 into year 2, compared to 88.0% of white students. 93.1% of BPOC were in a positive destination 15 months after graduation (2017/18 entry cohort) compared to 96.1% of white students[26].

- Work to address this has been led for the sector by Universities UK in partnership with the National Union of Students, with an initial report in 2019, followed up by a review in 2022.

- In response to the Equality and Human Rights Commission's report Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged (published October 2019), Advance HE launched its Tackling Racism on Campus project in February 2020, funded by the Scottish Funding Council. QAA Scotland and AHE have since worked with the tertiary sector to develop and curate resources, learn from current practice, and recognise effective practice in Scotland and beyond as an Enhancement Theme topic. The project also has support from sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland) and the College Development Network. Outputs include a series of webinars and blogs, a suite of resources for use in institutions, and research on fostering a diverse workforce.[27]

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[25] UUK Closing ethnicity degree awarding gaps: three years on | #ClosingTheGap Note: UUK use the term BAME however for consistency we have chosen to use BPOC.
[26] SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23 - Scottish Funding Council
[27] https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/resilient-learning-communities/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/anti-racist-curriculum-project

Written evidence from University of the West of Scotland

University of the West of Scotland (UWS) is the nation's leading institution for widening access. Intrinsic to our mission in creating educational opportunities for all and empowering individuals to reach their full potential. UWS is engrained in our communities, with a direct positive impact on the lives of our students across the South and West of Scotland at our four Scottish campuses.

Overview

- 29% of our Scottish undergraduates are from SIMD20 areas (SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23)
- Ranked first in Scottish Social Mobility Index 2024 (HEPI, 2024)
- Ranked first in Scotland for social inclusion, and first in Scotland for the number of students from state schools (Times/Sunday Times Social Inclusion Rankings 2024)
- Ranked 16th in the world for reducing inequalities (THE Impact Rankings)
- 44.8% of all our students are the first in their family to attend university, compared to Scottish sector average of 35%
- 2.3% of our Scottish undergraduates are care experienced (compared to the national average of 2%)

What is needed for colleges and universities to meet the next interim target?

UWS is confident that as an institution we will be playing our role in meeting the next interim target. Whilst the current targets are laudable, the focus on using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as the leading metric is not comprehensive. As a blunt instrument, it measures geographical areas, rather than individual circumstances. This presents challenges for our campuses in more rural settings, or in measuring our impact in rural communities. We would welcome a move for more metrics that consider individual circumstances as well as their location.

UWS is concerned that policy decisions are being taken that are not in keeping with the Scottish Government's widening access targets. For example, the recent proposed changes announced by the Scottish Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) that they will end cost of living funding for students doing a repeat year will likely have a disproportionate impact on students from widening access backgrounds, who are largely, more likely to rely on receipt of those funds. We welcome the recent move to postpone implementation of this change for 2025/26.

UWS works in close partnership with a range of colleges. The different funding models in the various elements of the tertiary sector need to be updated to reflect the ambitions of the current reform agenda. As this is likely to take some time to establish, in the meantime support via the Scottish Funding Council and from Scottish Government officials, can help address these in the short term.

An additional challenge in providing opportunities for mature students who may be in work is that the current funding model – for student and for institutions – does not work. Part-time education could be a viable option for many, however the funding regime mitigates against their participation with the Part-Time Fee Grant only eligible

to individuals who earn less than £25,000. The Part Time Fee Grant threshold has not changed since 2013.

What access initiatives are showing success?

UWS Foundation Academy

As part of our commitment to widening access, the UWS Foundation Academy was launched to support senior school pupils from schools across the West of Scotland with low progression to higher education. Since the pilot in 2022, the UWS Foundation Academy has engaged with over 2,500 senior pupils across more than 30 schools in ten different local authorities and continues to expand. Head teachers and other senior management within schools have been enormously supportive of the Academy and its potential benefits.

Developed in partnership with local secondary schools, the unique 12-month transition to university programme aims to bridge the gap between school and university by providing immersive opportunities. It allows senior school pupils to experience university-level study, improve their academic skillset and enhance their university applications.

Participating pupils engage in online and on-campus activity across the year, including completion of a credit-bearing module within the school setting over a 10-12 week period. The Academy's highly flexible delivery model can be developed to suit regional requirements and is delivered at no cost to the local authority.

Working in partnership with colleges

We work in partnership with colleges across our regions to widen access:
- **Undergraduate School at New College Lanarkshire**: Established Scotland's first joint Undergraduate School, addressing below-average degree attainment rates in North Lanarkshire and creating important new opportunities for local students to achieve degrees tailored to specific skills demands in areas such as Dental Nursing, Health and Social Care, Digital Development and Cyber Security.
- **Dumfries and Galloway College pathway**: Students can now start their journey with Dumfries and Galloway College from S5 and move up to degree level, all while studying in the same building. The designated pathway courses — designed to broaden access to university degrees — gives learners the experience and skills to move seamlessly through to a degree with UWS in either Business Studies (BA Hons), Computing Science (BSc Hons) or Cyber Security (BSc Hons).
- **Responding to regional skills needs with Ayrshire College:** Delivering a comprehensive skills portfolio in partnership with Ayrshire College aligned to areas of strategic importance within the Ayrshire Growth Deal and Regional Economic Strategy. Skills areas include digital, aerospace, healthcare and nursing, creative industries and enterprise.

SWAP

UWS works closely with the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) and receives a large percentage of applications through the programme. UWS provides support for SWAP students to support transition from college to university, including information sessions for specific courses; events focused on the transition process; delivery of a 'Next Steps' transition support module, providing pre-entry support; and development

of an online transitions toolkit. UWS's Student Success team also works directly with SWAP students to provide support in relation to transition or retention concerns.

WeCare

At UWS our dedicated WeCare team supports care experienced students, student carers and estranged students, from pre-application through to after graduation. The WeCare team also acts as a key point of contact for students who are asylum seekers and refugees and military veterans and their families.

UWS has a strong tradition of working with care experienced applicants and students. This commitment is embedded in all of our provision and is a strategic priority for UWS. UWS will continue to work in partnership, both internally and externally, with other corporate parents to provide support to ensure that our care experienced students have a positive experience at UWS throughout their university experience. We work in partnership with WhoCares? Scotland to provide annual corporate parenting training to staff at all levels within the university. The content of this training is fully informed by the voice of care experienced people to support UWS staff knowledge and understanding of care experience.

As one of the first Scottish institutions to take the Stand Alone Pledge, and in light of the closure of the Stand Alone Charity, UWS pledges to continue to support estranged students in their journey within higher education from pre-entry to graduation. UWS has been celebrated for its support to estranged students and was awarded in the categories 'Pre-entry Information Advice and Guidance' and 'Estranged Students' Voice & Engagement' at the Stand Alone Pledge Awards in 2023. UWS was delighted to receive the 'Going Higher Award for Student Carers Recognition Award' from Carers Trust Scotland in 2021 for its commitment and hard work in supporting student carers. The WeCare team also works closely with external organisations, such as carer centres across the West of Scotland and assists in signposting students to various local support organisations where appropriate.

What impact widening access is having on other SIMD groups?

Due to the nature of UWS's mission and student demographic, we are seeing no impact on other SIMD groups as a result of widening access initiatives.

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

Through Universities Scotland, we would like to see these additional data measures progressed in a timely manner, with sector-wide buy-in.

What access challenges exist for disabled, minority ethnic and care experienced students outwith SIMD0-20 areas, and what might be done to address these challenges.

At UWS, we recognise that students may benefit from personalised support to experience the full range of university activities and achieve their full potential as an independent learner.

Support for disabled students is provided on an individual basis, rather than a 'one-size fits all' approach. As an example, our dedicated Disability team can provide flexible and bespoke solutions to suit student needs and develop the right support for lectures, individual study, and assessments. This includes liaising with academic staff about any reasonable adjustments, recommending exam support, providing support in accessing funding for equipment or support, and providing assistive technology. The Disability team can also arrange diagnostic assessments at the University for

neurodiverse conditions, such as Dyslexia and ADHD, for students who do not have a diagnosis.

We also provide personalised transitional support for students on the basis of demand. The support can include summer schools and bespoke on-campus experiences beforehand. These are made available depending on personal need.

Our innovative Student Success Model reimagines how students interact with and are supported by the University throughout their studies. Recognising the diversity of our student community, the model offers a personalised approach to academic, professional and personal development, promoting student engagement and supporting successful outcomes. By focusing on the individual needs of the student, the model shifts from a deficit-based approach – where resources are allocated to struggling students – to one that creates an environment where all students can thrive. Using learner analytics and engagement data, we proactively identify and reach out to students, supporting their unique journeys and co-creating success.