

# 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 improve 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.
  - 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.
  - 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 |
|---------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| <b>Total Entrants</b>     | 28,285  | 28,640  | 28,770  | 28,885  | 29,880  | 31,065  | 30,620  | 33,290  | 33,885  | 32,760  |
| <b>Entrants from MD20</b> | 3,850   | 3,965   | 4,015   | 3,965   | 4,650   | 4,900   | 4,970   | 5,515   | 5,595   | 5,310   |
| <b>% MD20 entrants</b>    | 13.7%   | 13.9%   | 14.0%   | 13.8%   | 15.6%   | 15.9%   | 16.4%   | 16.7%   | 16.5%   | 16.3%   |
| <b>CE Entrants</b>        | 145     | 170     | 160     | 170     | 255     | 320     | 370     | 510     | 545     | 585     |
| <b>% CE entrants</b>      | 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       |             |
|-------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| <b>SIMD0-20</b>   | 4,900         | 16%         | 4,970         | 16%         | 5,515         | 17%         | 5,595         | 17%         | 5,315         | 16%         |
| <b>SIMD20-40</b>  | 4,970         | 16%         | 4,635         | 15%         | 5,270         | 16%         | 5,690         | 17%         | 5,300         | 16%         |
| <b>SIMD40-60</b>  | 5,605         | 18%         | 5,505         | 18%         | 6,165         | 19%         | 6,120         | 18%         | 5,720         | 18%         |
| <b>SIMD60-80</b>  | 6,835         | 22%         | 6,690         | 22%         | 7,150         | 22%         | 7,535         | 22%         | 7,355         | 23%         |
| <b>SIMD80-100</b> | 8,590         | 28%         | 8,435         | 28%         | 8,915         | 27%         | 8,915         | 26%         | 8,965         | 27%         |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>31,065</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>30,615</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>33,285</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>33,880</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>32,705</b> | <b>100%</b> |

[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](#)<sup>1</sup> 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](#)<sup>2</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> [SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23 Background Tables – Background Table 3](#)

<sup>2</sup> [SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23 Background Tables – Background Table 15](#)

## **Positive destinations**

[Background tables in SFC's 2022-23 report<sup>3</sup>](#) 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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<sup>3</sup> [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 do 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

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**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)  |       | Wider Articulation Measure (count)   |       | Main Articulation Measure (count)  |       |
|---------------|--|---|-------|--|-------|--|-------|
|               |  | 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. |       | 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. |       | 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%  |
| <a href="#">Source: SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23, Background Tables</a> |   |   |  |  |

# 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 |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| <b>All entrants</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 28,285  | 28,640  | 28,770  | 28,885  | 29,880  | 31,065  | 30,620  | 33,290  | 33,885  | 32,760  |
| <b>Long standing illness or health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy</b>                                  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>A mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Physical impairment or mobility issues, such as difficulty using arms or using a wheelchair or crutches</b>                                      |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Social/communication impairment such as autistic spectrum disorder</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Blind or a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses</b>  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Deaf or a serious hearing impairment</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>A disability, impairment or medical condition that is not listed above</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Two or more impairments and/or disabling medical conditions</b>  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Development condition that you have had since childhood which affects motor, cognitive, social and emotional skills, and speech and language</b> |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Total Disability</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%   |
| <b>Total No Known Disability</b>  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%   |
| <a href="#">Source: SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23, Background Tables</a>  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |



**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 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| <b>All entrants</b>  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 28,285   | 28,640  | 28,770  | 28,885  | 29,880  | 31,065  | 30,620  | 33,290  | 33,885  | 32,760  |
| <b>Asian, Scottish Asian or British Asian</b>                                    |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Black, African or Caribbean</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Mixed or multiple ethnic group</b>  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>Other ethnic group</b>  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <b>White</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%   |
| <b>Total BME</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%   |
| <b>Unknown ethnicity</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 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%    |
| <a href="#">Source: SFC Report on Widening Access 2022-23, Background Tables</a> |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |