

By Email

Our Reference: 25-014

Friday, 21 March 2025

Douglas Ross MSP
Convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Dear Convener,

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's Inquiry on widening access to higher education. We are grateful to the Committee for undertaking this Inquiry and the cross-party support for this agenda, which it clearly demonstrates. We view the timing of the Inquiry's key findings and recommendations to be strategically important as all parties consider their manifesto priorities going into the 2026 election.

During the session on 26 February, I committed to provide further details in response to questions from Mr Greer on housing and Mr Brown on veterans. You can find this below. I also offer a further reflection on data metrics, which was a strong theme throughout all panels and sessions. I hope this is helpful in informing the Committee's final output from this inquiry.

Housing

Mr Greer was keen to understand more about the role of student housing in widening access, specifically issues of access and affordability. We have no wish to homogenise a student demographic, but the evidence (from the pre-pandemic period) suggests that under-represented students are more likely to stay at home whilst studying and far more likely to be commuter students. It also showed that Scotland has a higher proportion of commuter students than the rest of the UK.

We have not had the opportunity to gather in a complete picture from our members in response to issues raised during this Inquiry. However, data we already hold on additional accommodation support, as tailored to the needs of different students includes:

- half of responding institutions (50%) offer a guarantee to first year students from underrepresented groups (it is worth noting that not all 19 HEIs own accommodation so this would never be a 100% response).

- Three quarters of respondents (11 HEIs/ 68%) make a commitment to offering year-round accommodation to care experienced students.
- The requirement for a “guarantor” can be a barrier to accessing student housing where there is no option of a parent or guardian to do so. This was reaffirmed as a concern by some of the students participating in our 40 Faces campaign, which heard the lived experience of underrepresented students. Institutions recognise this and the vast majority do not require a guarantor for their own accommodation (only two do) and one further institution requires a parental signature where the student is under 18 years of age. Further, 73% of institutions don't ask students for a guarantor for PBSA where the PBSA is owned by the university.

For those students who want or need to live in student accommodation, affordability is a key issue and there are two dimensions to this:

- The first is certainly about the market for student housing and rising costs. The mixed model of accommodation, where much is delivered by the private sector (private landlords and PBSA not owned by universities) means there are cost factors beyond universities' control. Rising costs of construction, utilities and costs related to staffing have driven up the price point of all models of provision, but the cost of university-owned accommodation has risen at a slower rate (and is priced across a broader spectrum of options) than for private PBSA.
- The second, is about a heavy reliance on loans within Scotland's student finance system for all students regardless of background. This risks those with least additional means to support themselves financially, accruing the most debt to cover living costs including accommodation. The findings of the 2024 *Student Finance and Student Wellbeing* survey found this to be the case for both undergraduate and HN students of underrepresented backgrounds. The study questioned the current balance between repayable (loans) and non-repayable (grants/bursaries) available to students and recommended a better targeting of resources, and more non-repayable sources of income for the most in need. Aspects of the current student finance system are not as progressive as they could be in support of important agendas like widening access.

Access support for former armed forces and children of those in the armed forces

- Ten of Scotland's universities are signatories of the Armed Forces Covenant. The Covenant is based on two principles: that former members of the armed and their families should face no disadvantage for having done so; and that in

some circumstances, special consideration may be appropriate for those individuals.

- The Covenant covers key areas such as healthcare, housing and education but is not specific to higher education.
- We can additionally advise that six institutions include “Armed Forces or parent in Armed Forces” as a contextual indicator for admissions to university. This helps to level the playing field for those applicants, recognising, for example, that a child of armed forces personnel can experience disruption to their education. It’s possible that more than six institutions have this as part of their indicators but the data set, we have on this is incomplete (five HEIs are yet to respond).

Ensuring simplicity in use of data metrics and targets

The session discussed the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) at length, including the benefits and drawbacks of using this as the primary target and measure of success for widening access. It was suggested that one major advantage of SIMD is its simplicity.

We are in favour of simplicity, but we’d argue that the key beneficiaries of any simplification in the use of metrics should firstly be the applicants and students looking to enter higher education and secondly the institutions looking to operationalise it. From a student perspective, SIMD certainly fails the test of simplicity. It is our experience, and this was reconfirmed during our direct engagement with the students and graduates with lived experience throughout 2024 that there is very low level of awareness amongst students that they live in an SIMD20 data zone and could therefore benefit from additional support on the journey to university. Whereas the learner is much more likely to be aware of and identify with other possible metrics and contextual indicators, such as free school meal eligibility, care experience and rurality.

From a university perspective, the Committee has already heard our evidence on the limitation that over-reliance of SIMD poses to institutions in the northeast of Scotland in particular and increasing concerns regarding the lack of precision in the measure as resources become increasingly scarce. In remote and rural areas, simplicity is not serving students or institutions, and much greater use is made of a wider set of relevant metrics.

We don’t challenge the continued use of SIMD as one metric amongst a basket of measures (as also discussed in Committee) but we do strongly believe that there should be a shift to an individual, person-centred metric as the primary metric, as

soon as it is possible to resolve the data sharing issues surrounding use of free school measures or the Scottish Child Payment or equivalent.

We'd be very happy to provide further information, if needed, to assist the Committee in reaching its conclusions. Please do contact us if we can be of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Claire McPherson
Director, Universities Scotland