

Widening access to higher education

Introduction

1. The Committee is undertaking a short inquiry into progress on [widening access to higher education](#). Scottish universities are currently [working toward a target to widen access](#).
2. By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds ([SIMD 0-20](#)) should represent 20% of full-time, first-degree entrants to Higher Education. The next interim target is for 18% of full-time, first-degree university entrants to be from 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 the following witnesses from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC):

Panel 1

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

Panel 2

- Minister for Higher Education, Further Education; and Minister for Veterans

- Shirley Laing, Director for Lifelong Learning and Skills, Scottish Government
- Clara Pirie, Senior Policy Manager, Student Equalities and Fair Access, Scottish Government

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. The Committee plans to create an anonymised note of these sessions and this will be published on the website in due course.

Evidence

Oral evidence

6. At its meeting on 26 February 2025, the Committee took 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

7. The transcript from that meeting and associated written evidence is published on the [website](#).

Written evidence

8. Written evidence has been provided by SFC and is attached at **Annexe B**. The City of Glasgow College provided a late submission which is also attached at **Annexe B**.

Next steps

9. The Committee will consider a draft report at a future meeting.

Committee Clerks
February 2025

Annexe A



Education, Children and Young People Committee

5 March 2025

Widening Access to higher education

Introduction

This SPICe briefing has been produced to support the Committee's second evidence session of its short inquiry into progress on widening access to higher education.

The briefing includes information about Free School Meals data sharing arrangements elsewhere in the UK. It also includes a summary of evidence heard at the [Committee's 26 February 2025 evidence session](#), and a summary of the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) submission to the inquiry.

The [briefing for the Committee's 26 February 2025 evidence session](#) can be found on the inquiry webpage. It contains background information and data about widening access.

Legislation on data sharing

In evidence to the Committee, the potential need for the Scottish Government to legislate to enable data to be shared more effectively between local authorities and institutions has been raised.

There has been general consensus among witnesses that Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility could be used in addition to SIMD as a means of identifying students eligible for widening access measures. While a pilot using FSM data is underway in the North East of Scotland, in its written submission, Robert Gordon University (RGU) stated the lack of legislation made implementing data sharing arrangements difficult:

“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.” – RGU submission

During last week's Committee session, Universities Scotland's Claire McPherson stated that at the present time, sharing data on FSM eligibility involves one institution having:

"...multiple one to one arrangements with perhaps anything up to 18, 20, perhaps 20 plus councils..." – [Education, Children and Young People Committee meeting, 26/02/25](#)

Claire McPherson said that while the principle of exchanging FSM data could be beneficial, the North East data sharing pilot was not scalable:

"Our understanding from engagement with government is that due to the nature of the conditions regarding data gathering at the moment there would need to be some legislative vehicle to make that national data sharing happen. We'd be really keen to see that happen. It's something that we are continuing to engage with the Scottish Government on because I think one to one relationships between a local authority and a provider start to become bureaucratic and administratively burdensome." - [Education, Children and Young People Committee meeting, 26/02/25](#)

UK data

Data on FSM eligibility is shared with UCAS in the rest of the UK. Further information about this is set out below.

UCAS has a license from the Department for Education (DfE) to access individual-level FSM data for applicants to universities. [DfE publishes information about external data shares](#), and details of the UCAS' license are included in a table on data shares considered by the Data Sharing Approval Panel (DSAP). The brief purpose of the license is given as:

UCAS wishes to use pupil level school census, pupil level key stage 4 and pupil level key stage 5 data from the national pupil database to support their functions as the organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education (HE) courses in the UK.

This data will include information on pupils' background characteristics, such as ethnic group, free-school meals status, and gender. UCAS is committed to increase the information value of its data assets by analysing them in the context of other data sources and linking UCAS data to pre-higher education records facilitates better decision making by Government, universities, students, and other audiences.

The public benefit of the research will be: a) research to support sector understanding of HE entry of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, b) an update to and refinement of UCAS's multiple equality measure, c) research to support contextual HE admissions, d) providing free school meals data, and e) UCAS MEM (derived from NPD free school meals data) to universities to facilitate contextualized admissions of applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds. – [DSAP considered data shares](#), [DfE external data shares](#), [DfE](#)

The DSAP is the DfE's senior board responsible for ensuring all data requests for personal data meet [DfE data sharing principles](#) and are legal, ethical, proportionate and secure.

[DfE have also published information on sharing the personal data of pupils at key stage 4 \(age 14 to 16\)](#). Section 12 of this mentions personal data can be shared with organisations including UCAS where it is “lawful, secure and ethical to do so”.

With regards to legislation, it states that data is shared under [article 6\(1\) of the UK GDPR](#):

DfE will only share data with a third party where we have a lawful basis for the data share under article 6(1) of the UK GDPR. In most cases, DfE relies on article 6(1)(e) ‘public task’ as the lawful basis where the task or function has a clear basis in law or 6(1)(f) ‘legitimate interest’ where the sharing of your data does not override your rights or when you expect us to share your data. When we share special category data, we have a lawful basis to data share under article 9(2) of the UK GDPR. - [Privacy information: key stage 4 and 5 and adult education, DfE, 2025](#)

Further information about the UK’s data protection framework is available in the background section of a [2022 House of Commons Library briefing on the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill](#).

Welsh regulations

The Welsh Government also shares data on FSM with UCAS. A 2022 privacy notice sets out how this is handled. In relation to the lawful basis for processing and sharing this data, the notice states:

The Welsh Government relies on the legal basis, as set in The Education (Information About Individual Pupils) (Wales) Regulations 2007, in receiving the data.

The Welsh Government relies on the lawful basis for processing data received in the statutory data collection exercises under Article 6(1)(e) of GDPR; the data is processed in line with our public task and in the official authority vested in us to undertake the core role and functions of the Welsh Government. - [Data sharing to support UCAS in matching free school meals data to higher education applications: privacy notice, 19/07/22](#)

The [Education \(Information About Individual Pupils\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2007](#) were made under powers in the [Education Act 1996](#). The regulations make provision that require schools to provide individual pupil information as prescribed:

- Regulation 5 sets out UCAS is a ‘prescribed person’ to which individual pupil information may be provided.
- Schedule 2, Part 1, section 8 of the regulations sets out FSM information is included in information that can be provided.

Summary of evidence

SFC submission

SFC has provided a submission to the Committee ahead of giving evidence. The submission states that while there have been challenges in recent years:

“The two most significant pipelines for universities’ ability to meet the next 2026 CoWA interim target are school leavers (38%) and college leavers (46%). Our

analysis found that while there have been some challenges for these pipelines, early indications suggest that growth is likely in 2023 and 2024.” – SFC submission

In relation to outcomes of SIMD20 students, SFC highlights there has been progress in relation to the proportion of SIMD20 full-time students achieving a 1st class or 2.1 honours degree, and has risen from 66% in 2015-16 to 75% in 2021-22 “with particular growth for those achieving a 1st”.

SFC notes that it invests just under £5m per year on [access programmes](#), including the National Schools Programme (supporting around 50,000 learners per year); the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), which works in partnership with colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to provide routes into higher education for adult learners with no/few qualifications; and the Scottish Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP), which provides peer support for access practitioners.

On equality, diversity and inclusion, SFC highlights its partnership with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) via a 2020 [Memorandum of Understanding](#) intended to advance equality for college and university students and staff by strengthening joint working between the EHRC and SFC.

In 2023, EHRC and SFC published the [Tackling persistent inequalities together report](#) setting out National Equality Outcomes for Scottish institutions to contribute towards as part of their Public Sector Equality Duty. These outcomes focus on known access challenges for those with protected characteristics and provide a commitment to address them, with institutions reporting progress in their Public Sector Equality reports.

The access challenges identified include: retention rates; satisfaction levels of disabled students in relation to reasonable adjustments; gender balance on courses; mental health of staff and students; and safety of staff and students and steps taken to address harassment, particularly in relation to protected characteristics. A progress report is due to be published this spring.

The SFC-led Care Experience National Group advises on interventions for care experienced people. As a result of the work of this group, an FE Care-Experienced Bursary was introduced by SFC.

Evidence heard 26 February 2025

Progress so far

The Commissioner for Fair Access (the Commissioner) began by pointing out the links between the widening access agenda, tackling child poverty and narrowing the poverty related attainment gap. He said that recent data on the poverty related attainment gap was unhelpful in terms of fair access, as evidence suggested that narrowing the attainment gap would make fair access easier to achieve.

The Commissioner highlighted the progress that had been made, stating the number of SIMD20 people progressing to HE at college and university has increased in each of the past six years. He said that while ten to 12 years ago there were three times as many entrants to HE from the most affluent areas compared with the most deprived areas, there were now twice as many.

The Commissioner said there had been a renewed energy in relation to fair access in the past six months following two years of no progress toward targets.

The Commissioner plans to publish his next report in March 2025. On his 2024 report recommendation that his remit be expanded to cover all of tertiary education, the Commissioner stated he still believed this was the right thing to do, but understood why the government did not accept this.

On the impact of fair access on other SIMD groups, the Commissioner described the notion that learners from better off areas are missing out on places due to learners from SIMD20 areas as a “dangerous fallacy”. He said that while the proportion of students from the most well-off backgrounds had reduced, the number of students continued to increase.

During the second panel session, Universities Scotland’s Claire McPherson said that the Covid pandemic and cost of living crisis had had an impact on the fair access agenda, and that the 2030 target had initially been agreed with the expectation of the attainment gap closing. She said Universities Scotland wanted to know what role it could play in work toward closing the attainment gap.

Lydia Rohmer of Colleges Scotland said that the recent drop in the number of students studying HN qualifications at college was impacting on colleges’ contribution to fair access. She said there were a number of reasons for the drop, including a buoyant labour market, and more students going to university straight from school during the Covid pandemic due to funding being provided for additional university places at that time.

On funding, Lydia Rohmer pointed to tight funding settlements within the college sector, stating this is impacting course provision and learner numbers.

James Dunphy of Advance HE stated that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students still received lower degree outcomes than their white peers, and considering the support needs of BME, disabled and other groups of students outwith SIMD20 was important.

Role of colleges

The Commissioner highlighted the role of college, not only in terms of widening access, but in relation to work they do in their own right at all levels. Lydia Rohmer of Colleges Scotland also emphasised this throughout the second panel session.

Lydia Rohmer said that the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) had been working on the next generation of Higher National qualifications, but this work had not progressed because of SQA reform. This has an impact on articulation between college and university.

Unique student identifier

On the establishment of a unique learner number for students, the Commissioner said progressing this was central to tracking progress. He said resource, commitment and leadership would be needed and would welcome the Committee’s support in arguing for this. He compared the identifier to that used by the NHS.

On whether legislation is needed to implement the unique student identifier, the Commissioner said he did not know, but if legislation is required then it is worth making.

SIMD and a 'basket of measures'

During both panels of evidence, there was a great deal of discussion around the need to move away from SIMD as a single measure of progress. Its limitations in terms of identifying rural poverty were highlighted, with witnesses stating that certain universities in Scotland would not be able to meet their fair access targets due to smaller numbers of SIMD20 learners in their areas.

The Commissioner said that removing institutional targets on SIMD20 and instead measuring progress by maintaining or improving SIMD20 numbers would be fairer for institutions with limited SIMD20 learners in their area. The national target of 20% by 2030 would be retained. However, the Commissioner also noted there was a danger that by having this ambitious target, there was a risk that failing to achieve it would be seen as failure when in fact progress had been made and universities in Scotland were more diverse than they had been previously.

The Commissioner said that while SIMD was helpful to a degree, an indicator measuring individual circumstances would be better. He said that progress toward using free school meals (FSM) data as an individual measure was needed, and he would be disappointed if firm progress was not made on this soon.

The Commissioner also stated that a "basket of indicators" was needed alongside a headline indicator to better measure the range of access work going on in the sector. Data already collected could be used as part of this, including data on retention and achievement.

Rebecca Scarlett of Lead Scotland spoke of campaign work her organisation had carried out to try to get disability included as a contextual indicator in the university application process. She emphasised that the disadvantage facing disabled students could not be underestimated, and said while a disabled person may not live in an SIMD20 area they may face poverty due to their support needs. She also highlighted the issue with looking at disability as a homogenous group, stating that an overall increase in students presenting with disabilities was hiding issues such as a lack of progress on admissions among visually impaired people. Rebecca Scarlett drew a link between issues around Additional Support for Learning in schools and access to university.

Lydia Rohmer spoke of 'hidden poverty' within huge rural postcodes making SIMD a less useful measure in these areas. She said that local authorities in the Highlands and Islands have experience in 'rural proofing' policy and considered factors including distance to key services, distance to educational establishments, subject availability in schools, and post-school access to further and higher education when making decisions.

Universities Scotland's Claire McPherson said that SIMD so far had helped to drive progress, but a basket of measures was now necessary.

James Dunphy of Advance HE said very few institutions would only be looking at SIMD when making admissions decisions, and factors such as refugee status, care experience can also be considered. On wraparound support, he said 17 institutions in Scotland run Advance HE-accredited programmes to equip staff to meet student needs. In relation to supporting students earn and learn, he said institutions looked at aspects such as timetabling to help support success and retention.

Claire McPherson said that peer support networks were also being developed by institutions to help support students.

There was also discussion during the second panel around the COWA focus on full time students only. Lydia Rohmer pointed out that part-time student support was not equal to support offered to full time students.

Legislation

Universities Scotland's call for legislation in order to progress data sharing on free school meals was discussed – this is explored in more detail in the 'Legislation on data sharing' section of this briefing.

Student support

The Commissioner stated that while there was nothing wrong with students undertaking paid work during their studies, many students were working more hours than was reasonable and an honest conversation about student financing was needed.

Claire McPherson said that universities can use discretionary funding to help students needing support, but the decrease in funding per student meant universities had less resource to allocate to this, and this made providing wraparound support for students more challenging.

James Dunphy said Advance HE member institutions had worked to provide wraparound support for their students.

Rebecca Scarlett said that a review of support for disabled students that began in 2019 had been impacted by the Covid pandemic, and while the report was published in 2023, none of the recommendations had been implemented.

Additional points

During the session, witnesses also mentioned:

- The need to ensure students are supported to remain in and succeed on their courses. The Commissioner noted that the graduation figure for SIMD20 was lower than the 16.4% figure for entry and said retention should be another priority area going forward.
 - The Commissioner mentioned that in Australia, a higher levy is paid to an institution by the state for teaching fair access students in recognition of their need for more support.
- The knowledge and experience of widening access practitioners in supporting learners into university, and the importance of their role.
- A number of examples of positive work going on at various colleges and universities in relation to fair access.
- On whether the 2030 target can still be met, the Commissioner said it was realistic, but he would rather an individual target was used. On the interim target, he said that a few months back he was unsure, but indications more recently had indicated progress was being made. Claire McPherson also said the targets were not unachievable, but would take a huge collective effort to get there.

- On housing and fair access, Lydia Rohmer said that the University of the Highlands and Islands gave priority to SIMD20 and care experienced learners.

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

27 February 2025

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

Annexe B

Written evidence from the Scottish Funding Council

About SFC

1. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is the national, strategic body that invests around £2bn annually in tertiary education, research, and knowledge exchange, through investment in Scotland's 24 colleges and 19 universities.
2. Colleges and universities are major national assets, with significant social, economic, and cultural impact. They employ over 64,000 people and provide opportunities for over 541,000 learners; they help to shape local communities; and they address social inequality and disadvantage.
3. SFC is committed to widening access and this has been a long-term commitment for the organisation since it was established in 2005. Widening access promotes fairness, levels up opportunities for under-represented social-economic groups in society and can disrupt cycles of deprivation. It is in Scotland's social and economic interests to have a highly skilled workforce, and for people to achieve their full potential through education, regardless of their background.
4. Our 2021 Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability set out ambitious plans to take our widening access work further, including the way we measure and invest funds, set targets and track widening access.

Overview

5. It is testament to the focus of SFC, the Scottish Government, and committed staff across the sector that there has been significant collective progress on the widening access agenda, including the achievement of the CoWA 2021 interim target - that students from the most deprived communities should represent at least 16% of full-time first-degree entrants – ahead of time.
6. The two most significant pipelines for universities' ability to meet the next 2026 CoWA interim target are school leavers (38%) and college leavers (46%). Our analysis found that while there have been some challenges for these pipelines, early indications suggest that growth is likely in 2023 and 2024.
7. In addition to meeting the 2021 interim target, significant progress has also been made in other areas; for example, there have been improved outcomes for learners, with the proportion of SIMD20 full-time students achieving a 1st class or 2.1 honours degree rising from 66% in 2015-16 to 75% in 2021-22, with particular growth for those achieving a 1st.

SFC's Approach to Widening Access

8. We take the following approach in support of our widening access aims:
 - i. **Report annually on progress:** We have reported on access since 2005 and, in AY 2017-18, this became an official statistical report incorporating the CoWA measures. Our most recent report for 2022-23 is available here.
 - ii. **Outcomes and Assurance:** Through our Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model (OF&AM), we set our expectations for widening access for colleges and universities and monitor their progress.
 - iii. **Funding approach:** Widening Access is one of our underpinning policy drivers for our annual funding allocations to both the college and university sectors.

- iv. **Target investment:** We target investment within our core funds for colleges and universities, alongside dedicated funding via Widening Access and Retention Funding and a Disabled Students Premium in the university sector, and Access and Inclusion premium and student support funding in the college sector.
- v. **Invest in access and inclusion programmes:** We invest just under £5m per year in the following programmes:
 - o We deliver the National Schools Programme (NSP), which supports around 50,000 learners every year.
 - o Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP): SWAP coordinates and provides access to Higher Education courses in colleges and is a proven route into hundreds of degree courses at partner universities.
 - o Scottish Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP): SCAPP provides a network of peer support for those working in widening access and participation in Scottish colleges, universities and other organisations.

SFC's Approach to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

- 9. Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are fundamental to our work and integral to our expectations of colleges and universities. Our key initiatives in support of our EDI commitments are:
 - i. **Outcomes and assurance:** Equality, Diversity and Inclusion underpin our OF&AM, and there are a basket of measures on access and equality.
 - ii. **Partnership with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC):** We have a groundbreaking partnership with the EHRC, and through our Memorandum of Understanding, we are working together to increase understanding of the progress being made by colleges and universities to advance equality, diversity and inclusion, and to support improvement.
 - iii. **National Equality Outcomes:** In January 2023, we published a joint report with the EHRC on Tackling Persistent Inequalities Together which introduced the National Equality Outcomes (NEOs) for colleges and universities. The NEOs evidence the known access challenges for those with protected characteristics and provide a commitment to address them. The sector is expected to contribute towards these improvements and report their progress in their Public Sector Equality Reports. We are scheduled to publish the progress made on this approach and our National Equality Outcomes in Spring 2025.
 - iv. **Report annually on progress:** While our annual report on widening access is an official statistical publication that monitors CoWA measures, we also provide extensive data on a range of other categories, including ethnicity, disability, and care-experience.
 - v. **National Ambition for Care-Experienced Students:** Our vision, first set out in 2020, is to see no difference in the outcomes between care-experienced students and non care-experienced students by 2030. This is overseen by the SFC-led Care Experience National Group which evaluates and drives progress, and advises on current interventions; for example, SFC established an FE Care-Experienced Bursary which is a higher-rate of student support funding available to Care-Experienced students. Since setting this national ambition we have seen a record intake of this group and are committed to continue working with the sector and other key agencies and charities.

Written evidence from City of Glasgow College

City of Glasgow College welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Education, Children and Young People Committee's inquiry on widening access to higher education. As Scotland's largest college, with a diverse and inclusive student base of up to 40,000 learners, many from marginalised, challenged, ethnic and neuro-diverse backgrounds, we are firmly committed to providing multiple pathways to safeguard access to further and higher education to all. We contend that the inertia and indifference within the current bifurcated FHS towards learners from working class and vulnerable backgrounds condemns them to a narrower set of choices and restricted life chances system particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We offer a purposeful and cost-effective alternative to traditional university academic education, with personalised practical, technological, experiential, digital learning for a cosmopolitan student body of 150 nationalities; engaged in a diverse learning environment across nearly 2,000 courses from Access level to Under-graduate degree. Alongside all this, our college has a global reputation with approximately 4,000 international students annually and partnerships across 26 countries.

Furthermore our submission builds on our extensive work in supporting the tertiary education reform programme, including as co-authors of the Cumberland-Little Report which we still believe will go a long way to enhancing Access to Higher and Further education and our enthusiastic engagement in reviews including the Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape the Withers Review and the Independent Review of Qualifications & Assessment. We are particularly focused on highlighting the need for cost effective reform which maximises the benefit to learners; this is in the context of the recent Scottish Parliament Information Centre briefing which outlined a reduction in college real term budgets of 17% since 2021/22 resulting in 11 colleges reporting a deficit in 2022/23.

The Pivotal Role of Colleges in Widening Access

Colleges continue to play a critical and uncelebrated role in expanding access to higher education by offering alternative pathways for those for learners for whom university is not an attractive option. In Glasgow, where over 55,000 residents have no formal qualifications and 43% of the population lives in the most deprived areas of Scotland, City of Glasgow College and our partners, Glasgow Colleges provide a vital bridge to higher education and employment through:

- Flexible learning routes, including Higher National qualifications, accelerated degree pathways; and articulation agreements with regional and national universities.
- Micro-credentials and short courses, enabling upskilling and lifelong learning opportunities for non-traditional learners, woman returners and adults (many of whom are in employment)
- Industry-aligned education enabling learners quickly acquire practical skills that enhance employability career progression and ultimately livelihoods; and
- Support for underrepresented groups, including financial aid, mentoring, and tailored services to improve retention and success rates.

Barriers to Higher Education and Proposed Solutions

1. Financial and Funding Constraints - Colleges have been consistently deprioritised in favour of their University peers and these now operate under chronic financial pressure, limiting their ability to expand provision and invest in digital pedagogy. We urge the Scottish Funding Council and Student Awards Agency Scotland Scottish Government to urgently review the balance between college and university funding streams to support 'parity of esteem' and ensure a more equitable distribution that supports – rather than threatens - widening access initiatives. To illustrate the point, for 14 years now the Scottish Government has frozen the fees colleges receive for delivering higher education, eroding the value of the that funding to value well below inflation. In addition, the dominance of traditional academic degree pathways too often overlooks the value of the technological, professional and higher skills of college qualifications. We advocate for much greater recognition of alternative and vocational routes into higher education and employment. Across the UK some 97.55% of those in the workforce are being denied systematic upskilling and reskilling
2. Flexible Learning and Employer Engagement - Scotland's economic transformation requires a skilled workforce. Colleges should be empowered to rapidly expand micro-credentials, new micro-apprenticeship models, and symbiotic industry partnerships that facilitate rapid upskilling, reskilling and lifetime skilling. These programmes are developed based on employer engagement and future skills needs.
3. Articulation Pathways and Collaboration with Universities - Seamless transitions between college and university remain a challenge, with articulation agreements varying significantly across institutions. We recommend a standardised, nationally coordinated approach to articulation that maximises opportunities for learners.
4. Digital and Technological Access – The Pandemic highlighted the lack of access to many learners without their own laptops or digital device to enable a more personalised learning approach. Sadly, Digital poverty remains a barrier for many learners. Investment in digital infrastructure, including free or subsidised access to devices and broadband for disadvantaged students, is essential to widening access. Being a pathfinder institution committed to enabling every individual learner to flourish we invested in over 3000 laptops to lend out to our students. We are merely addressing the tip of the proverbial iceberg in tackling this barrier to learning in the 21st Century within Scotland's largest Metropolitan City.

We have however developed the world's first Adult Literacy App which is used extensively across Glasgow and internationally (as it is free on the Apple App store).

Economic and Social Impact of Widening Access

City of Glasgow College 15 years post-merger remains fully committed delivering a polytechnic portfolio of courses, target for excellence rather than competence standards.

An economic impact study by the Fraser of Allander Institute found that eight cohorts of City of Glasgow College graduates (2011/12 – 2018/19) will contribute £6 billion to the Scottish economy, equating to £56,000 per graduate. This highlights the

substantial return on investment in college education and its role in addressing skills shortages and driving social mobility. Moreover, our collaboration with IPPR Scotland on social value assessment underscores the wider benefits of college education, including improved community resilience, economic inclusion, and support for lifelong learning.

Conclusion

City of Glasgow College strongly supports the Committee's focus on widening access to higher education. Scotland's colleges are uniquely positioned to deliver on this ambition, but we require greater Cabinet support not only national appropriate funding, more than lip-service policy support, and target systemic tertiary reform to maximise our impact. At City of Glasgow College, we are solutions focussed rather than problematic centric. Whilst others especially in policy circles, "admire" the problem we offer frontline solutions, albeit within a constrained funding envelope.

We welcome further engagement with the Committee to explore practical solutions and policy interventions that will ensure all learners, regardless of background, can access and succeed in higher education.