

Universities
Scotland



Universities Scotland's response to the call for evidence by the Scottish Government's Commission on Widening Access

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Universities Scotland

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Commission on Widening Access

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Universities Scotland welcomes the Commission on Widening Access and is fully supportive of the work it is taking forward. We particularly welcome the opportunity it creates for Scotland to take a truly holistic and joined-up look at the challenge of widening access. This has not been done before. We believe this approach offers Scotland the best opportunity to deliver on the ambition, shared by all, to see a step change in widening access. Neither the problems, nor the solutions for widening access can be isolated to just one part of our society or education system.

Scotland's universities believe in creating opportunities for people with the potential to succeed. Widening access is well established as a core activity for Scotland's 19 higher education institutions which means a deeply-held commitment to addressing underrepresentation within the student body. There has been steady progress at a sector level as well as notable successes at institutional level and on specific projects. Universities want to build on progress already made and deliver more. To us, underrepresentation includes people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and care leavers and extends to other protected characteristics.

1. **Barriers**

What are the main barriers to access and how can these be overcome?

Barriers are wide-ranging and not mutually exclusive.¹ We understand the main ones to include:

Differential educational attainment. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds fall behind their more advantaged peers in literacy/numeracy at a young age². This attainment gap is sustained throughout primary and secondary so that only around one-fifth of leavers from Scotland's most deprived areas qualify for entry each year, compared to around two-thirds of those from the most affluent areas³.

Information, advice and guidance⁴ (IAG). Under-represented groups have less access to IAG and instead turn to informal sources such as their immediate family and social network.⁵ Time needs to be spent raising awareness and understanding of HE within members of this network. IAG needs to be delivered earlier, it needs to be personalised to the individual and needs to be intensified around transition points.

Availability of places. Demand for university places in Scotland from highly qualified and able applicants far outstrips the availability of places. Additional funded places for access have been a welcome way of easing this pressure so far. However, additional places have been limited to only some institutions. Care must be given to ensure that such an approach does not give rise to inadvertent competition between institutions for SIMD40 students rather than growing the total number of SIMD40 entrants.

¹ See for example http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/Research%20briefings%20and%20fact%20sheets/SB_10-07.pdf

² <http://www.irf.org.uk/publications/closing-attainment-gap-scottish-education>

³ Compare SIMD20 and SIMD80 in Table A1.11 at <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/leavedestla/follleavedestat>. 'Minimally' qualified here means the achievement of at least 3-4 qualifications at SCQF Level 6; minimum entry requirements for many courses will be higher than this.

⁴ Evidence shows this is important – see, for example, <http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/uploads/WideningAccessToHE-CREID.pdf> (page 20).

⁵ HEFCE

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2013/Literature_review_of_WP_to_HE/Literature%20review%20of%20research%20into%20WP%20to%20HE.pdf p17

School subject choice. This is an important factor in determining access inequalities. Access to some university courses requires particular subject choices and there is some evidence to suggest that more disadvantaged pupils tend to study fewer academic subjects at school.

Funding for widening access – evidence shows that for widening access to succeed it requires proper funding at national level, together with clear policy frameworks/evidence and clear national expectations of what is to be achieved.⁶ There are already nationally funded initiatives in Scotland, but there is space for development.

Other significant barriers include:

- family/caring responsibilities;
- course availability and curriculum fit;
- access to student support (and debt);
- work-related issues;
- awareness of learning opportunities and the (e.g. financial) returns to these; and
- narrowly defining what it means to be ‘underrepresented’, including overreliance on SIMD at the exclusion of other measures where SIMD has noticeable limitations. This can close-off opportunities for some groups of underrepresented students. This is covered further in section three on data.

What can be done to generate more applications?

- Recent UCAS data over ten years shows a 50 per cent increase in applications from people living in SIMD20 areas to 15.1 per cent of all applications. This increase is positive and marks a fall in the proportional difference between most and least deprived areas. However in 2015 people from the most advantaged areas of Scotland are still three and a half times more likely to apply.⁷
- Data indicate progress in increasing the volume of applications from underrepresented students is translating into higher numbers of **successful** applications in Scotland.
- A good example of a focused initiative delivering results in the form of more successful applications is REACH. REACH aims to widen access to the professions including medicine. Data on applications, offers and acceptances from SIMD40 pupils to medical courses over the last five years show a 60 per cent increase in applications, a 20 per cent increase in offers (which is set against a decrease in the total number of offers made) and a 50 per cent increase in acceptances.
- Neither the REACH data nor the UCAS data provides the tariff levels of applicants which may account for the lower rate of increase in offers. It would be helpful to understand this in more detail.

⁶ See (for example) 1.18 at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2013/WP,international,research/2013_WPeffectiveness.pdf

⁷ <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/analysis-note-2015-03.pdf>

What actions can support successful completion?

- Widening access and retention have to go hand-in-hand as a responsibility to the student.
- Universities have significantly improved retention of SIMD20/40 students in recent years, and this is now approaching the overall retention rate in the HEI sector⁸. Between 2009/10 and 2012/13 retention rates for SIMD20 student rose by 3.3% to 87.3% (compared to 91.3% overall).
- Retention is a complex issue. The data show lower rates of retention for SIMD40 students but at an individual level research shows that with the right support underrepresented students can achieve more academically than their more advantaged peers.
- A sense of belonging has been identified as core to retention.⁹ Initiatives including the 'associate student status' in articulation programmes have looked to build a sense of belonging from an early stage. Peer support can also be helpful here.
- We understand that institutions will submit evidence on their own support services.

2. The identification and scaling up of best practice

What can be learned from Scottish access programmes?

- Programmes which are integrated with other practices are more beneficial e.g. summer schools, which can lead to compensated admissions awards;
- Early years programmes support enhanced educational attainment and increase aspiration for higher education;
- Information, advice and guidance for teachers, parents, college advisers. More could be done to support them in giving fair, accurate and up-to-date advice;
- Dedicated programmes (and resources) to support retention and progression are required;
- Collaborative programmes involving multiple universities and other partners have success in 'raising the bar' on attainment or aspiration across the sector rather than promote particular institutions; *and*
- Programmes which have sustained funding (and clear futures) are able to steadily embed practice.

International practice

Universities Scotland has submitted a paper to the CoWA on international practice in widening access. The two examples below are not, to our knowledge, currently implemented in Scotland and are worthy of consideration:

- AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination). A US programme with an elective course where participants are encouraged to take at least one of their school's most 'challenging' classes. It targets students scoring B, C and D grades in 4,800 schools across the USA and places them in classes run by dedicated AVID teachers, who work on accelerating their

⁸http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Statistical_publications_SF CST062015_LearningforAllMeasuresofSuccess/SF CST062015_Learning_for_All_2015_Measures_of_Success.pdf (pages 36-7)

⁹ Pg 42

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2013/Literature,review,of,WP,to,HE/Literature%20review%20of%20research%20into%20WP%20to%20HE.pdf>

learning and supporting them with academic work alongside activities designed to improve their self-image and self-confidence.

- Talent Development. This model in the US targets some of the most troubled schools. Its approach is to change curricula and organisational structure of middle and high schools. Early findings show substantial gains in attendance, academic performance and high school graduate rates for participants.

Scalable activities

Universities' responses will outline where specific opportunities for scaling up programmes exist. Genres which may be scalable include:

- Summer Schools. There may be value in considering closer integration between institutions in delivery of summer schools. More coordination of standards has the potential to permit (as is currently the case with some) guaranteed links to admissions for every Scottish HEI.
- Online support and development. The development of resources which can be accessed by pupils, parents and teachers can be effectively scaled up by greater partnership across Scotland.
- School programmes. Systematic school programmes are in place across Scotland with funding from SFC, universities and local authorities. Evaluation suggests they are delivering results.

3. Data and measures

What evidence or data is required to effectively measure Scotland's progress on widening access?

We would like to see a broader metric or set of metrics used to measure progress. Universities Scotland has developed a measurement framework with input from practitioners in admissions and widening participation, the SFC and others. It includes:

- A measure of household income. This is as close as possible to the ideal of individual identification of socio-economically challenged learners. Household income via SAAS, at the point of application, would be the optimum but proxies such as Educational Maintenance Allowance or Free School Meals may be required.
- low progression schools and low average attainment schools (for young students only)
- care leaver/looked after status – again these are valuable indicators of an individual's status (though the small number of individuals from these backgrounds in higher education means that progress should be measured at a national rather than institutional level).

The following measures could also be included, though more work is needed:

- carer status (at a national/sector level)
- a measure of rural disadvantage (not currently available)

The framework does not cover every underrepresented group and requires further development for measuring widening access to part-time study. The measures could also be developed into a widening access index.

What evidence or data should be considered as part of the admissions process?

The sector is almost universally committed to the use contextual admissions.¹⁰

There is wide variation in what data universities use as part of contextual admissions reflecting the various stages different institutions have adopted this practice. Socio- and geo-demographic data is relevant, as is information on participation in local, regional or national widening access initiatives. Admissions are particular to institutions and this needs to remain the case.

There are shared concerns about the availability and quality of data available to inform contextual admissions which are currently being resolved with support from Scottish Government. This is important as institutions need to rely on the data.

There is also work ongoing with Equality Challenge Unit to explore how admissions might respond to linkages between widening access and equality and diversity, and this could point to further enhanced data requirements.

Do we have enough evidence on the effectiveness of existing widening access programmes and initiatives?

- Evaluation is a feature of many widening access programmes at individual and national level.
- Universities Scotland is supportive of monitoring and evaluation in this area.
- Evaluation is clearly identified as an area for further development at individual initiative and systems levels, and there is international practice to learn from here.¹¹
- It is important to recognise there are challenges in determining causal links in projects that span many formative years of a child's education.
- A helpful development would be to explore the interoperability of Scottish Candidate Numbers with Unique Learner Numbers (which the Higher Education Data and Information Improvement Project¹² is trying to introduce to higher education). This would enable end-to-end tracking of widening access participants supporting more effective long-term evaluation.

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¹⁰ The two exceptions to this are the Open University in Scotland, which has an open admissions policy and the West of Scotland where SIMD 40 students account for around 47 per cent of the student population.

¹¹ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2013/wpeffectiveness/>

¹² <http://www.hediip.ac.uk/the-uln-in-he/>