

Universities Scotland response to Scottish Government consultation on measuring the attainment gap and milestones towards closing it

Q1: Have we based these proposals on the right principles?

Yes. Universities Scotland supports the outlined principles. In particular, we welcome the commitment to monitor the attainment gap from 3 to 18, and to avoid a limited approach based on a single measure. We know that a gap exists from an early age, and addressing this will be important to closing the gap amongst learners of all ages, including school leavers.

Q2: Do you agree with having a basket of key measures to assess the progress made?

Yes. A basket of measures is vital to build a meaningful picture of the attainment gap as it stands, and progress towards closing it.

Q3: Are the proposed key measures the right ones?

No. Whilst Universities Scotland welcomes key measures focused on attainment in the Senior Phase, we believe the specific measures proposed are too limited.

Scotland's universities share the Scottish Government's strong commitment to widening access to higher education for the most disadvantaged learners. To be successful, it is critical not just that the attainment gap is closing, but that **it is closing in a way that is increasing the proportion of disadvantaged learners attaining qualifications enabling access to higher education** (and other opportunities requiring Highers).

The key measures proposed will not allow any monitoring of progress in this respect. The most stretching measure of Senior Phase attainment is one or more qualification at SCQF level 6 or above, offering no differentiation. In reality, we know there is a significant gap in the numbers and grades of qualifications achieved beyond this, and this is important in post-school destinations.

For example, a report recently published by the SFC¹ outlines achievement of Highers by the end of S6 for learners in S4 in 2007-08 and 2008-09 (the only data provided). It shows that 60.3 per cent of SIMD41-100 learners achieved BCCC or above at Higher, as opposed to just 24.9 per cent of SIMD20 learners. Similarly, 29.0 per cent of SIMD41-100 learners achieved AABB or above at Higher, as opposed to 8.4 per cent of SIMD20 learners.

A credible basket of measures for the attainment gap must, therefore, include Senior Phase attainment levels that support realistic progression into further study and skilled employment opportunities. This information is vital to provide a holistic picture of progress towards closing the attainment gap amongst Senior Phase learners, in line with the principles outlined in the consultation document. In addition, for universities, more detailed data on the attainment of prospective SIMD20 applicants is essential to inform our widening access work and to understand its potential impact.

In view of the range of entry requirements for different higher education courses (and the principle that key measures should be relatively simple) we suggest that the Scottish Government adds to its basket of measures the proportion of learners in each SIMD quintile who achieve a defined set of specific levels of attainment. To provide an illustrative example, this could be CCC or better, BBBB or better, and AABB or better at Higher. However this is approached, it is critical that the attainment gap in schools is measured up to a more ambitious level.

¹ *Mapping and evaluating the use of contextual data in undergraduate admissions in Scotland, Report 4*
(<http://www.sfc.ac.uk/access-inclusion/contextualised-admissions/evaluating-contextual-admissions.aspx>)



It is also essential that robust governance arrangements are in place to provide oversight and drive continuous improvement – including mechanisms for ongoing review of existing measures and potential additional ones, as well as processes to manage interactions with other relevant policy areas (for example, gender equality). More clarity on governance arrangements would be welcome.

Q4: Will this approach avoid the introduction of perverse incentives?

No. There is a risk that the proposed approach, as is stands, could lead to a perverse incentive not to aspire beyond a single qualification at SCQF level 6. Additional measures of Senior Phase attainment, set at higher levels (as proposed in response to Q3), should help to provide incentives to work towards the most positive outcomes possible for all learners.

Q5: Is 3rd level the right measure to use of attainment at S3?

No comment.

Q6: Does the use of SCQF levels reflect a sound approach to measuring senior phase attainment? Are there other options such as Insight tariff points?

No. The SCQF is a valuable framework. The use of SCQF levels alone is not sufficient for measuring the attainment gap, however. As indicated in response to Q3, to build a meaningful picture of the gap in the Senior Phase, the use of SCQF levels must be accompanied by an indication of the number of qualifications achieved at that level (i.e. both the level and volume of SCQF credit are required), as well as the grades achieved in those qualifications.

The use of SCQF enables (limited) measurements across different qualifications, and this is welcome. The most common Senior Phase qualification (and the primary entry qualification for university) continues to be Higher, however. As indicated in response to Q3, additional measures of Higher attainment are required to reflect this.

Q7: How best we can give more meaning/clarity to the terms “SCQF 5” and “SCQF 6” so they are accessible to all?

Examples could be provided briefly of the most common qualifications at that SCQF level, alongside references to further information about the framework.

Q8: Are these the right sub-measures? Are there others that should be included?

As outlined in response to Q3, Universities Scotland believes that there is a clear need for additional measures of Senior Phase attainment, including at levels enabling access to higher education, to provide a more rounded picture of progress towards closing the gap. If not included as key measures, these should at least be added as sub-measures.

Q9: Is the use of stretch aims, by SIMD quintile, the right way to set milestones?

Yes. The proposed use of stretch aims is sensible. It is important to work towards raising attainment for all learners, to ensure that the gap is not closed in a way that involves improvement amongst disadvantaged learners alongside deterioration amongst others.

If stretch aims are reported by SIMD quintile, it is also important that there continues to be a clear awareness and acknowledgement of the limitations of SIMD as a measure. The Scottish Government has itself recognised that “two of out three people who are income deprived do not live in deprived areas” as measured by SIMD². The Commission on Widening Access also highlighted issues with the use of SIMD as a sole measure to identify disadvantaged learners, including particular problems with its use in rural areas of Scotland.

Q10: Are the stretch aims set at the right level?

No comment.

² *Introducing The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2016* (<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0050/00504809.pdf>)

