



Universities Scotland update on action to deliver the Commission for Widening Access recommendations

May 2019

The last year (2018/19) was a record year for progress on widening access, with figures showing Scotland's universities on track to meet the 2021 interim target for 16% of all full time first degree university entrants to come from the country's most deprived backgrounds. Universities have also delivered several of their policy commitments to support widening access over the last year. This brief links our actions back to the recommendations in the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) to make it easy to track progress (see annex A for a full read across).

1. We're really pleased to be able to say that over 2018-2019 the university sector has delivered all five* of its actions related to admissions that we set out in *Working to Widen Access*.
2. Scotland's universities have now set minimum entry requirements which apply to applicants from SIMD20 areas and care experienced learners. Students starting courses in autumn 2020 will be the first to have benefitted from this move (CoWA recommendation 11).
3. Now that minimum entry requirements are in place, all universities will very soon move to guarantee an offer to every care experienced applicant who meets them. We expect to be able to share more details imminently (CoWA recommendation 21).
4. Every university is focusing on SIMD20 and "care experienced" as "core indicators" in their access work (CoWA recommendation 31).
5. All universities agreed on a shared way of talking about admissions in their prospectuses to make it easier for applicants to understand the process (links to CoWA recommendation #12).

Data published over the last year has also shown good progress:

- 15.6% of entrants to university are now from SIMD20 neighbourhoods based on data from 2017/18.¹ This is within touching distance of the 2021 interim target of 16% set by the Commission on Widening Access.

*6 actions were set out in the admissions strand of *Working to Widen Access* but the 6th was a recommendation for SFC and Scottish Government about access to data. We're pleased to say that the Scottish Government did share the data we asked for.



- There was a 3% increase in the number of SIMD20 students accepted onto a degree course starting September 2019 compared to 2018, taking the number of SIMD20 students getting a place at a Scottish university to a ten year high. The gap *between the entry rates of the wealthiest and most deprived neighbourhoods is also the smallest it's been in ten years.*
- More than a quarter (26%) of university entrants now join with Higher Nationals, coming through an articulation route. In just one year there was an 8% increase in the number of HN qualifiers (an extra 299 learners) getting full credit for their college qualification when starting university. This takes the proportion of people now getting full credit for their HN to 64% and the proportion getting full or partial credit to 82%.²
- Scotland's retention rate now exceeds that of English universities, sitting at a rate of only 5.8% non-continuation after the first year of study, relative to the UK average of 6.3%. Scotland's retention rate has improved steadily over a number of years. Retention is a key part of the access agenda.

Further details on the actions delivered by Scotland's universities

Minimum entry requirements

- We're not aware of any other higher education sector that's taken an equivalent sector-wide step of setting minimum entry requirements for certain groups of underrepresented students as a key element of contextualised admissions.
- The grade adjustment universities have made between "standard" and "minimum" requirements is typically at least two Higher grades achieved by S6. In some cases the adjustment goes as far as four Higher grades or asks for one less Higher qualification.
- To take an example: standard entry requirements to start a degree in mechanical engineering at Heriot-Watt University in 2020 are AAAB. This has been adjusted by four Higher grades to a minimum entry requirement of BBBC for students applying from SIMD20 areas and/or with care experience.
- As a sector, we strongly support the educational rationale for adjusted grades and believe it is entirely compatible with the preservation of standards and retention rates in Scottish higher education.
- We're confident about this because universities themselves have taken the decisions about how to adjust the grades for each subject area based on their knowledge of the educational experience they deliver, what it takes to succeed on that course, and the transitional and additional support they can provide to students once on the degree. There is no one size fits all and all institutions were starting from different entry requirements to begin with. What works in one institution may not work for students in the next. The goal is not only that setting minimum entry requirements succeeds in

¹ Scottish Government (2019) release based on Scottish-domiciled entrants to first degrees on a full-time basis. <https://www.gov.scot/news/record-number-of-students-from-deprived-areas-at-university/>

² SFC National Articulation Data Dashboard, data for 2017/18. The figures on full or partial credit are significant when you consider that there is not a subject match between all HN and degree courses and a third of HN students decide to change course between college and university (*Working to Widen Access, 2017*)



encouraging more applications or entrants from underrepresented groups, it's about ensuring that these students go on to achieve successful outcomes from university. The CoWA was clear that access thresholds should be set at the "minimum required to succeed at degree level". Our interest lies in ensuring that such learners graduate with the same outcomes as their peers.

Guaranteed offers for care experienced students

- We've worked with institutions, WhoCares?Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council to develop an inclusive definition of care experience to use to inform this commitment. Our definition sets no upper age limit on individuals, nor time frame on an individual's experience of care. It recognises all forms and settings of care experience.
- Linked to this, we'd like to see the age limit on Scotland's care experience student bursary removed. Currently the eligibility criteria sets an upper age limit of 26. It would be helpful if there was consistency across all forms of support for care experienced students.
- We hope to launch this initiative once all the details are finalised and all partners have been notified. We will, of course, ensure that the Committee is made aware of all the details.

A consistent approach to talking about admissions

- Universities agreed to describe their admissions processes consistently to make it easier for applicants and their advisers applying to several institutions. This links to CoWA recommendation #12.
- We realised that many of the initiatives used to widen access come with jargon-heavy terms like "contextualised admissions" and "articulation" which aren't user-friendly. It's also possible that universities were been using different terms for the same things (e.g. "contextualised admissions" can mean a grade adjustment but not necessarily).
- We drafted some text to explain Scotland's approach to university applications and passed it over to a group of pupils in the senior phase and mature students to road test it. The final text went into prospectuses that were printed this spring for use by people looking to apply for entry in 2020.

Other policy work to support widening access

Other policy work continues at a national level across our universities to support access through other routes. Including:

Articulation. The new National Articulation Forum is now up and running, co-chaired by a university and college Principal. Its purpose is to join up efforts on articulation at a national level and its work will focus on two work streams: i) a research project looking at improving articulation by expanding full-credit recognition; ii) work to improve the



understanding of articulation, engaging with students and institutions across the country to build understanding of the student experience of articulation.

Bridging programmes from schools. Universities Scotland had set out four actions in *Working to Widen Access* that we intended to take to better coordinate bridging programmes from schools into university. However, the SFC has now taken on this work and is building on the mapping of existing provision that we initiated in 2017, which found over 100 programmes that met our definition. The aim is to be able to classify programmes as ‘access’ or ‘bridging’ for the first time. The SFC now has a Bridging Programmes Advisory Group (BPAG) and it will consider how CoWA recommendation #7 on bridging programmes³ can be implemented.

We welcome other constructive developments from partners over the last year:

We’re not the only ones working in this space. There have been other developments in the policy landscape over the last year which should help support universities and others.

- **SFC articulation dashboard.** We’d like to welcome the publication in May of articulation data in a new, interactive dashboard tool. Universities Scotland called for this in *Working to Widen Access* to make the data more accessible to colleges and universities. There was a pause on the publication of articulation data whilst the SFC created this resource so it’s very positive the SFC will be able to return to annual analysis of progress as well as the new element of the dashboard which will allow universities greater interrogation of the data to inform evolution of the articulation agenda. (CoWA recommendation #30).
- **Framework for Fair Access.** The Framework for Fair Access was published in 2019 along with the foundations of a community of practice to share evidence on what works in widening access. This was recommendation #2 in CoWA. We’re very supportive of the emphasis on evaluation. We understand the intention is that the resource will grow over time and we are hopeful that the resource will prove useful to practitioners although we think it may need continued support from the Commissioner’s office to build momentum and keep it sustainable.

Areas where further action is needed

³ COWA Recommendation 7: The Scottish Funding Council, working with professionals, should develop a model of how bridging programmes can be expanded nationally to match need. Given the clear benefit to the learner, the model should ensure that academic credit awarded through the completion of such programmes is transferrable between universities. Successful completion of such programmes may form one of the conditions of the access thresholds to be developed in line with recommendation 11.



We'd like to see action on the following issues, which would support higher education institutions:

- **Improve school attainment and drive up SIMD20 application rates.** The biggest challenge universities face in widening access further is the low rate of applications made by SIMD20 students – even with minimum entry requirements now in place. There is very welcome progress in SIMD20 school leaver attainment but a big gap remains: only 29 pupils from SIMD20 areas achieved AAAAA in 2015/16 compared to 333 pupils from the least deprived quintile.⁴ Worryingly, last year the number of 18 year old SIMD20 applicants to university dropped by 4 per cent (by June deadline)⁵.
- **Free School Meals as an additional indicator.** It's been really positive that stakeholders in the Access Delivery Group agreed that Free School Meals should become an additional indicator of disadvantage, as well as SIMD. As a metric, Free School Meals has its limitations but it does have the advantage of being an individual rather than neighbourhood measure. We now want to see as little delay as possible in translating this decision into policy. Universities Scotland first called for other measures to supplement SIMD back in 2013. It also links to recommendation #31 of CoWA.
- **The holistic approach to tackling widening access.** We don't feel there has been enough effort invested in moving towards more of a holistic approach to widening access in Scotland, joining up the efforts of schools, colleges, universities and other partners. We strongly supported the original Commission's intent that Scotland should be holistic⁶ and hoped the Commissioner's role would be well placed to do this. The Commissioner did indicate an intention in spring 2018 to look at issues within school level education and implications for higher education. It would be really positive if that could be picked up and taken forward in 2019. (CoWA recommendation 4).
- **Support for mature students.** Mature students will be a key element of reaching the 2030 access targets. The UCAS data on applicants and entrants makes this clear. The independent review of student financial support deferred the issue of student support for mature learners. Last June the Scottish Government made a welcome announcement to the Chamber that it would take this forward this important element of student support via a consultation exercise in 2018. This has not yet happened and we'd welcome clarity on what the intended timescales are for this consultation.
- **An opportunity to ease the pressure on undergraduate places created by Brexit.** It's still impossible to predict what will happen with Brexit and Scotland's future in the EU but if we leave the EU, an opportunity arises for more Scottish-domiciled students to take up the places that are already there in the system but which are

⁴ [Fair Access: Analysis of School Leaver Attainment by SIMD](#). Scottish Government (2018) Table 10

⁵ [UCAS applicant data for 2018 cycle](#), end of June data. Table I.13.4.

⁶ See Executive Summary and chapter 1: A Whole System Approach. [A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access](#).



currently open to both Scottish and EU domiciled students. Demand from well qualified applicants far exceeds supply. This would come at no additional cost to the Scottish Government and the phased withdrawal of EU numbers would perfectly suit a phased increase in Scottish-domiciled applications, consistent with work to close the attainment gap in schools. This would help avoid displacement of students whilst working towards the 2030 access goals (which currently need to be met within existing student numbers) and avoid a catastrophic withdrawal of funds from the university sector (in the region of £60-90 million by the time it reaches steady-state). The Commissioner's first annual report was in agreement and made the following recommendation to Government: *"It should guarantee that any savings produced by demographic change, Brexit or smarter articulation between HNs and degrees (and schools and universities) will be retained within the higher education budget. This would also help to address fears that some students are being 'displaced' by more deprived applicants."*

- **An inclusive approach to access.** We believe there are other important conversations we need to be having in Scotland about participation and attainment including specifically attainment for black, Asian and minority ethnic students. We support the Universities UK report on this, published in May 2019. Scotland has put an emphasis on socio-economic deprivation and access to university for good reason; there is clear causality between deprivation and educational attainment but it is not the only areas of underrepresentation and we need to be having other conversations too.

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