

Universities Scotland Brief on Widening Access in support of the 26 March Scottish Government debate: Widening Access: Equality of Access to Higher Education.

Key messages:

1. **Celebrate progress.** Universities have made significant progress and policy changes and met the Commission's interim targets (in 2021) on the journey to the 2030 strategic goal of 20% of Scottish entrants from the 20% most disadvantaged areas¹.
2. **Acknowledge a new level of challenge ahead.** Universities remain committed to the 2030 goal, but progress has slowed, and they are concerned about the ability to get there. The attainment gap in schools persists and new challenges, on a whole new scale, like the pandemic's legacy of lost learning and the cost-of-living crisis have made things harder.
3. **We need a re-doubling of efforts from all stakeholders.** Where cost neutral actions can be taken in support of this agenda, like new data metrics, this should be accelerated. University progress has to be framed within wider holistic progress on attainment and within funding challenges. The Parliament's Education Committee is ideally situated to do a short inquiry into this.

Next month, Universities Scotland will launch a widening access campaign called **40 Faces**. We've spoken to 40 underrepresented students and graduates about their access journeys into university and to hear what action they feel needs to be taken to reach the 2030 target. We look forward to sharing the campaign with you.

1. Let's celebrate the progress achieved:

- **Progress on SIMD20.** There are a record number of entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds in our universities, standing at 5,595. The CoWA Core Target for 2021, which was that the sector reaches 16% of Scottish entrants from SIMD20, was achieved in advance (2019/20) and has continued to be met/exceeded in 2020/21 and 2021/22. There has been a 45% increase in the CoWA core target group since 2013-14 (from 3,850 to 5,595 in 2021/22).
- **Progress for people with care experience.** University action taken in support of those with care experience (the introduction of minimum entry requirements and guaranteed offers) has had a positive impact. The number of care experienced entrants rose to 545 in 2021/22, compared to 485 the year before (2020/21).
- **Articulation from college.** More college students are progressing direct into university, with recognition for prior learning in their HN (on a 1+3 or 2+2 model). In 2021/22 4,705 college leavers progressed via "articulation with advanced standing" compared to 4,430 the year before. Almost a quarter (23.7%) of the 4,705 students were from SIMD20 areas.

¹ SIMD20 from now on, which refers to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, with SIMD20 meaning the 20% most deprived areas of Scotland.

- **Students with disability.** The widening access agenda is focused on socio-economic disadvantage but we want to acknowledge the intersectionality of that with disability. The number of entrants declaring a disability has increased again – 17.4% compared to 16.3% previous year.
- **No displacement effect.** Another achievement is that universities have made this progress, working within a capped places model, so without a displacement effect of other Scottish-domiciled learners. The Commissioner makes this report in his 2024 report, noting that: *“the number of entrants has increased for all SIMD quintile cohorts since 2013-14”*.²
- **Scotland now has the most progressive admissions policies in the UK.** Every institution uses contextual admissions³ to identify underrepresented learners, all set minimum entry requirements in 2019 to help level the playing field for underrepresented applicants (working in conjunction with contextualised admissions) and universities introduced a care experienced guarantee in 2019 too. These changes to admissions policy were led by universities themselves. Any care experienced applicant who meets minimum entry requirements will be guaranteed an offer to undergraduate study.

2. Acknowledge a new level of challenge ahead.

- Despite this progress universities feel no complacency about the scale of the challenge still ahead. They are concerned, but not surprised, that progress has stalled.
- Whilst there is a net increase in the CoWA Core Target of 0.1 percentage points in the last two years, there is a decrease of 0.2 percentage points in the last year (16.4%, 16.7% and 16.5% in the last three years).

The reasons for this are many:

- **A stubborn attainment gap in schools.** The actions universities can take to widen access cannot fully compensate for a significant attainment gap which still exists in schools. This is not only the view of universities. It was made clear from the outset, in the original *Blueprint for Fair Access* and was repeated in the 2024 Commissioner’s report, where he said that: *“...the poverty-related attainment gap persist(s) at unacceptably high levels... Achieving fair access targets is predicated, at least in part, on progress in reducing child poverty and improving the qualifications at SCQF Level 6 of adults and children experiencing poverty.”*⁴
- **The pandemic caused significant disruption to education at all levels.** The lost learning experienced by school pupils has a legacy effect – both academically and socially - as those cohorts move up the years and progress into college and university. A UK report, *Generation Catch-Up*, surveyed 500 school leaders, of which 96% said that learning gaps are still having an impact 3 years on and 70% report learning loss at between 6-12 months.⁵
- **The cost-of-living crisis** has had the biggest impact on those who were already most disadvantaged. This is likely to be particularly acute for mature students with caring responsibilities, estranged students and students with care experience, who may not have wider family networks for financial and practical support. Some potential applicants may be deterred from going to university by the fear of student debt. Students are increasingly finding they need to work part-time, or increase part-time hours, which puts pressure on their study time.
- **Our student cohort has complex needs.** University students have increasingly complex needs, including wide prevalence of mental health challenges. Pre-pandemic, the biggest ever student survey of mental health in Scotland found that nearly three-quarters of respondents said they had experienced low wellbeing (74%) and more than one-third (36%) of respondents reported

² [Renewing the Alliance for Fair Access: Annual Report 2024](#) (2024) page 26, section on “displacement”

³ Where the institution has conventional admissions policies with entry criteria. Not including the Open University.

⁴ [Renewing the Alliance for Fair Access: Annual Report 2024](#) (2024) p9

⁵ SIMS (2023) [Generation Catch-Up](#)

moderately severe or severe symptoms of depression. In 2021/22, 16,654 students requested counselling support at Scottish universities. Which is a threefold increase on the number of students who requested counselling in 2010. Universities are worried about retention, which is at risk of falling. This would be deeply regrettable after years of strong progress and success in narrowing the gap between the average retention rate and that for students from SIMD20 areas.

3. Where next: We need a re-doubling of efforts from all stakeholders.

There are six years remaining until the 2030 access target. Universities would like to see the following in order to renew efforts to achieve this societal goal.

Cross-party support and a joined-up, Scotland-wide approach to reach 2030 goals.

- The goal of widening access connects to the values of every political party. A united and renewed energy from all parties in support of this goal would be helpful at this point in the journey.
- The Education Committee has a unique position in its ability to take a holistic perspective of the progress with this agenda, linking schools, colleges and universities, all of which sit within the Committee's remit. There might be value in a short inquiry.

Better data.

- Universities want to see progress on a person-centred data set (in addition to the use of SIMD20, which is an area-based metric). We have been asking for this since 2016. With six years remaining to the 2030 targets, we want to see solutions that overcome barriers to data. The benefits a person-specific metric would bring are to i) better identify the people who should benefit, ii) to target support more effectively on the right people (as resources get tighter and tighter) and iii) to be certain that we're measuring what counts, and not counting only what we can measure.
- Universities Scotland and the Scottish Government have been working together on this (in a short-life working group). Data on recipients of free school meals (FSM) and the Scottish Child Payment have both been explored as options. In principle, there is support for using FSM but there has been a data sharing barrier, which would require a separate agreement with each of the 32 local authorities as SG cannot share the data with universities for this purpose. Meanwhile, free school meals data in England and Wales is now shared with UCAS, the university admissions body, as part of admissions decisions elsewhere in the UK. We think this barrier could be overcome by either (a) expediting of the data sharing process with local authorities or, b) including a data-sharing provision in the Education Bill (which we suggested this in our consultation response).

Funding: for students and for universities.

- We welcome the [Scottish Government's move to increase the maximum student loan by £2,400](#) from 2024/25, which we'd expect will help students to better manage spiralling costs due to the cost-of-living crisis.
- However, we'd like to see more invested in (non-repayable) discretionary funds to support students who find themselves in short-term financial difficulty. We also want to see a better student support package for part-time students, which would recognise the diversity of our student demographics. The Withers Review (June 2023) noted that the income cap to access part-time undergraduate fee support had not increased in many years. One of Withers'

recommendations called for part-time learning to receive the same pro-rata level of funding support for living costs as those in full time education.⁶

- **Cuts to university teaching grants will jeopardise access.** Universities' work to widen access and support students to successful outcomes takes considerable investment. When it comes to widening access and supporting access students, the amount of public funding spent on each student place (the "unit of teaching resource") is absolutely key. Yet, that has eroded in real terms since 2014/15: the IFS estimate that it has fallen by 19% in real terms. For next year, universities are facing a further £28.5 million cut in their teaching budgets, the details of which are yet to be confirmed.
- As the Scottish Government and Scottish Funding Council finalise funding allocations for FY/AY 2024/25, we call on them to protect (at least in flat cash) the unit of teaching resource per Scottish-domiciled student in all students' interests but also in specific support of widening access.
- More recently, the major headwinds in international student recruitment (facing all UK universities) will jeopardise the cross-subsidy element for the access agenda (as well as wider financial risk it poses to institutions).
- **Support for colleges.** Entry to university, direct from college, is an important entry route in support of widening access. There is more work that needs to be done to broaden opportunities for learners (to achieve a subject match across a wider range of HN into degree programmes and to broaden options geographically). Universities and Colleges are committed to this work via the Joint Articulation Group (JAG) led by Lydia Rohmer and Duncan Cockburn. [Read more](#). Colleges also face budget cuts and an under-resourced college sector (as with universities) will be an obstacle to opportunities for students.

ENDS

Further information: Susannah Lane, Head of Public Affairs, Universities Scotland

susannah@universities-scotland.ac.uk M: 07715 992908

⁶ [Fit for the Future \(2023\) Withers Review](#), Pg 40.