

## Universities Scotland response to the SFC consultation on the Report on Widening Access

### General feedback

#### 1. What do you value in the RoWA currently?

- We greatly value the RoWA and regularly use its data to look at data trends and analysis beyond the benchmark CoWA targets.
- It is helpful to see trends over a long time period.
- It is a common data set that is trusted and reliable.
- It is helpful to quickly see Scottish domiciled data at a sector level that has been disaggregated for the Scottish context.
- The data is clear and easily accessible across the sector and within organisations.

#### 2. Are there any parts you would like to see improved or enhanced?

- We greatly value the background data tables, and these provide a richness of data however they can be difficult to navigate when comparing data. There are a huge number of tabs and often the links in the contents page do not work.
- We would want to ensure that any enhancement to the visualisation of data still allows for local download so that data can be shared easily internally within teams. This needs to be simple since not everyone who uses this data will have advanced data or technical skills.
- We support the Commissioner for Fair Access's recommendation for improved disaggregation of data for SIMD data as well as other groups of students with protected characteristics as we are interested in intersectionality.
- We think there should be consideration on how data on retention is reported. We are interested in data beyond progression into year 2 and think reporting on progression into each subsequent year will be highly valuable. However, we think the report should highlight the importance of flexible learning journeys and reflect on how these are often not linear, with learners sometimes taking time out or changing study mode and continuing in a different form or different way. We should be careful to acknowledge that these are valid learning journeys too.

Some learners leave their studies before graduation for positive reasons such as an attractive job opportunity. Currently the data shows this as a negative, but for the student (and indeed the university and employer) this is a successful outcome.

We would be interested if data can be provided to evidence these different experiences.

- The time lag on data can mean that some data is not current enough for some data requirements which means that sometimes data sets do not match. We understand however the reasons for the delay in publishing data.
- It would be helpful to be clearer on what has and hasn't changed in any updates to the RoWA. For example, when articulation data is added later in the year, many colleagues are unaware that that is the only change and there are no further amendments.
- We think there could be improvements to how the data is described together with fuller explanations of the different metrics and fields. We also think any caveats should be more visible. This will be especially important if other metrics are included in the future as the report is widely used by others who are not familiar or do not have an understanding of different approaches to contextual admissions.

### **3. Is there anything you would like to see added?**

- We think it could be useful to also include PGT data where it is available along the same lines as UG data. However, there is no standardised approach to how PGT widening access learners are currently identified and as many students tend to apply from their UG student accommodation addresses, it is hard to look at things like SIMD 20. We would recommend caution in including this data until we can be certain that it is an accurate view of the sector.
- We think it could be helpful to consider publication dates of other SFC publications and reports and whether these could be aligned or referenced within the RoWA to help build coherency on related data and analysis, for example the National Equality and Outcomes analysis report.
- We think it would be helpful to include graduate apprenticeship data in the same way as for FTFD students.
- We note the Scottish Government is looking to enable the introduction of a person-centred metric (for example, free school meals) and it would be important for RoWA to include this if/when it happens.
- We have also recently carried out some work on identifying metrics for part time and mature students that can identify individual socio economic disadvantage as the current metrics that are used to measure success in widening access are often not suitable for older learners or for those who do not study full time. It will be important that the RoWA can be flexible to report on this if/when it happens.

### **4. Are there any parts of the RoWA you find less useful or could be removed?**

- (We are not proposing to add anything to this question).

## Changes we are proposing to make for the upcoming 2024-25 publication

### 5. Do you support proposal A?

Removing articulation reporting from the RoWA and publish this separately as part of a new 'student journeys' publication (we plan to launch a separate consultation on this later in 2026)?

Yes  No  Not sure

### Further comments on proposal A (optional):

Articulation is viewed by the Commissioner for Fair Access as one of the three main fair access pathways. We would be concerned that moving this data to a different publication at a different time would lose visibility of this route, especially when the RoWA is seen as the de facto report measuring progress on widening access. It could be seen to have less importance. Institutions will have different perspectives on this given their different strategic engagement on articulation but it is important that importance of articulation within the system is clearly signalled.

It is not helpful that this data is currently published at a different time, and we would suggest that these dates become more aligned. If that is not currently possible then we suggest that this is more clearly noted on the report. The two publications last year were confusing for some parties (within universities and externally) so when the articulation report is published it should be clear that it is just this data and not aggregated with the WA data but made clear the relationship with it.

We support enhanced data on articulation and would like to see more disaggregation on entrants, retention and also on outcomes. We know that there can be disparities in progression depending on the entrance qualification (currently HNC and HND but could be wider when the new definition is applied) and enhanced data will be helpful to improve transition planning. We also think it will be especially helpful to track progression of learners with the new Next Gen: HN qualifications now that these are no longer being piloted and require wider curriculum mapping to enable full credit progression. We know that accessing this data can be challenging but think that articulation data should remain in the report at an equivalent level to the other data that is published.

We can see the value in having an additional publication to provide a richer narrative on articulation as this could help promote articulation as an alternative pathway into higher education. We think more consideration should be given to the purpose of the new publication so the benefits can be better understood and the importance of articulation is not lost. We are pleased that there will be an opportunity to provide further additional feedback on this in a future consultation.

We will also be pleased to provide further comment and feedback on this at the upcoming US/CS Joint Articulation Group meeting between the co-chair and SFC data colleagues on 22 April.

#### **6. Do you support proposal B?**

Over time, moving the information from the background tables into an interactive Power BI dashboard.

Yes  No  Not sure

#### **Further comments on proposal B (optional):**

We would support moving data into a dashboard where users could select filters and model data as required. Members have highlighted the usefulness of OfS dashboards and how they are easy and simple to use.

We would however like to ensure that data can be exported easily for internal sharing. We would support user testing across a range of different job roles to ensure that the dashboards and in built filters would meet requirements.

It is important that accessing is data is simple, including for those with more limited technical and data skills.

It will also be important to be proportionate, especially for institutions with smaller numbers, including clarity of definitions and methodological stability, which are important for responsible interpretation and use (especially by the public).

#### **7. Do you support proposal C?**

To include data showing Scottish-domiciled students at all undergraduate levels of study at university, in addition to the Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree (FTFD) or Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants (SDUE) populations. The latter only includes HNC, HND, DipHE and CertHE at the 'other undergraduate' level. Annex A contains a breakdown of this data.

Yes  No  Not sure

#### **Further comments on proposal C (optional):**

We would support this if the parameters are clear and consistent across all data sets and there are opportunities to filter as required.

#### **8. Do you support proposal D?**

Including more reporting on part-time students at university and adding a new part-time first degree (PTFD) measure.

Yes  No  Not sure

**Further comments on proposal D (optional):**

We are keen to see more PT data available, including the new measure. This recognises the importance of PT study and the volume of PT students.

**9. Do you support proposal E?**

Allowing more disaggregation by SIMD decile. At present, almost all reporting is at the SIMD quintile level.

Yes  No  Not sure

**Further comments on proposal E (optional):**

We can see the benefits of this and support reporting on it, but we should keep the focus on SIMD20 targets until/unless there is a change.

**10. Do you support proposal F?**

Adding filters to include college students on courses less than 160 hours in duration.

Yes  No  Not sure

**Further comments on proposal F (optional):**

We think colleges are best placed to answer this question.

**11. Do you support proposal G?**

Adding reporting on other widening access groups, such as estranged students and veteran status (service leavers).

Yes  No  Not sure

**Further comments on proposal G (optional):**

We are interested in including other widening access groups however we note that the data is less established for many groups. There is currently no standardised way to verify this information and there are often small numbers which mean that changes year to year can be more variable. We think this data should be reported on in separate tables and clearly caveated where there may be issues.

We would note that universities vary in their use of widening access indicators (except SIMD and care experience) and not all universities will use all these groups in their contextual admissions policies. Though we recognise what is included in RoWA could lead to changes in that respect.

In a similar vein, it might be helpful to think about what the protocol would be to add a new group. This may happen overtime but could happen more quickly if RoWA includes some groups and not others.

**12. Do you support proposal H?**

Removing HESA PI Table 2023-24 from the background tables.

Yes  No  Not sure

**Further comments on proposal H (optional):**

**13. Do you support proposal I?**

Removing Background Table 12 (HESA Staff data)

Yes  No  Not sure

**Further comments on proposal I (optional):**

**Section 4 Gauging interest in other potential changes**

**14. Do you agree/disagree with the keeping all charts and tables limited to a 10-year time series, with the exception of CoWA tables?**

Yes  No  Not sure

Please add your reasoning below (optional):

We think this would make the data more accessible.

**15. To what extent would you be interested in seeing additional disaggregation by undergraduate qualification types, such as integrated masters, first degree with honours, Graduate Apprenticeship, HNC, etc.**

Very interested  Interested  Neither interested nor disinterested  Not interested   
Not sure

**16. To what extent would you like to see statistics added for degree classification outcome (first class, upper-second class, etc.)**

Very interested  Interested  Neither interested nor disinterested  Not interested   
Not sure

**17. To what extent would you be interested in seeing statistics added on rurality and remoteness?**

Very interested  Interested  Neither interested nor disinterested  Not interested   
Not sure

**18. Please let us know if you have any further comments or concerns about these proposed changes**

We would be very interested to see data on Graduate Apprenticeships and potentially on other degree types too.

Data on degree classification outcomes can be readily accessed via HESA open data, so we don't think it is required in the RoWA. Moreover, not all degrees have degree classification outcomes, for example medicine or non honours degrees so we think this information within the report could become quite messy quite quickly and does not capture the nuance of different learner journeys (or qualifications).

However, one member noted that the RoWA could be a one stop shop for sourcing widening access data and therefore it could be useful to include degree outcomes to make sure widening access students have the same chances as all students and to ensure we don't have an attainment gap. If this is included then it will be extremely important to provide full explanations and caveats as to the reasons why there could be attainment gaps given more complex lives such as work and caring impacting on study time. One way to resolve this is to highlight the HESA data clearly in the report.

We know members are interested in remote and rural data however it will be important to be clear how this is defined and how it should be used in analysis. Not all learners who are remote and/or rural are widening access learners, but the intersectionality of other criteria could be useful to understand.

We are also interested in the overlap of remoteness with SIMD. Distance to local services is a component in SIMD and we wondered if the rurality measure could double weight this factor. So we would encourage SFC to be mindful if they are looking at the intersection of these measures.

We would note that the January 2025 roundtable on widening access discussed remote and rural issues and one of the issues coming out was that there is currently no agreed position on what access means in remote and rural areas. i.e. is it about poverty (not well represented by SIMD), drive time to certain amenities/settlements, something else. Therefore, there may be benefit in discussing what aspect we are most interested in/what data is actually available before deciding on what to publish.

There is potential value in seeing complementary contextual measures such as rurality if these are used to support interpretation rather than as alternative access metrics or measures of success.

We do all agree there are issues and wish to support this student group. This is doubly important in subjects that support these areas such as medicine.

## **Final question**

### **19. Are there any other comments you would like to make?**

- It would be helpful if the publication date could be consistent each year. The RoWA is important to institutions who make strategic use of the data and it is an enabler for effective governance. We think consistency and transparency of publication dates is essential.
- In time, it would be useful to look at the definition of articulation to see if it is possible to revise it to match the US/CS agreed definition.