Attainment and Achievement of School Age Children Experiencing Poverty. Submission from Universities Scotland. March 2018.

We welcome the Committee's focus on this area. Progressing to university is only one of many positive destinations pupils might take on leaving school. Moving straight into employment and into college are important and equitable markers of attainment. However, Scotland is also focused on widening access to university to those from all socio-economic backgrounds. Given that goal, we want to see every action taken to reinforce the commitment to a holistic approach to this issue. Joining-up the issues of attainment and achievement of school-age children experiencing poverty with widening access to university is one way to do this and something we very much support.

For this inquiry, we recognise that the Committee is particularly interested in hearing from young people themselves, their parents and carers and from teachers and schools. With that in mind, we limit our contribution to a few points:

The Committee's inquiry specifically asked: How has your work supported the educational attainment of children and young people? What has worked well and what barriers have there been to success?

Universities[1] are very active in engaging with schools and school-age children to support attainment. A recent audit of university-run bridging programmes found there to be over 100 in place that matched a specific definition[2] and delivered for pupils as young as four years of age through to adult learners.

We recognise that the sheer scale of these initiatives is likely to be overwhelming and create a difficult landscape for schools, parents and others to navigate. We see the benefits in trying to achieve better coordination of bridging programmes and have committed to actions in _Working to Widen Access_ which would improve the national coherence of bridging programmes. Actions 12-14 are very relevant here. We would be happy to keep the Committee informed of progress.

Many university initiatives in schools or with school-age children are long running and very successful. As we are not the custodians of individual initiatives we have not provided details here but we hope that universities will take the opportunity to submit evidence of the positive impact of their support services and initiatives.

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[1] By which we mean universities and higher education institutions. There are 19 in Scotland.

[2] The definition of 'bridging programme' that we used can be found in Universities Scotland (2017) _Working to Widen Access._ p28. It was defined as: "_The essential purpose of a bridging programme is to help a learner overcome a gap in knowledge, skill, experience or aspiration or to help overcome a barrier between one place and other. That could be the transition between school, college or employment into higher education. Bridging programmes are systematic and are not just a one-off engagement._"

The Framework for Fair Access is highly relevant to this inquiry

We welcome the Committee's emphasis on evaluating the success of initiatives to support pupil attainment and achievement. We see the development, throughout 2018, of a Framework for Fair Access for Scotland as highly relevant in this context. The Framework was recommendation number 2 in the *Blueprint for Fairness* report from Commission on Widening Access. Whilst this means it is probably most associated with universities and widening access, the Commission intended this to be useful from the early-years, onwards to university. The Framework is meant to focus on evaluation and share best practice. The *Blueprint* states that the Framework is due for publication in 2018.

The language in the recommendation in clear about its relevance to education at all levels:

"This *authoritative, evidence based Framework should identify the most impactful forms of access activity at each stage of the learner journey, from early learning through to higher education and provide best practice guidelines on its delivery and evaluation.*"

A tender for the development of the Framework went out in December 2017, and has subsequently been re-tendered by SFC in the absence of a satisfactory bid. If the Committee's inquiry has scope, it might be valuable to look into the development of the Framework and ensure that it will deliver holistically. The Committee's responsibility for early-year education, schools, colleges and universities makes it ideally placed to do so.

Scotland needs data that tracks progress into higher education

The Scottish Government's recent consultation on the National Improvement Framework: *Measuring the Attainment Gap and Milestones Towards Closing it* proposed eight measures of the attainment gap. Our concern is that the only measure proposed for the senior phase (1 or more SCQF level 6 or above on leaving school)[3] does not get close enough to the attainment level needed to progress to university. Adding an additional measure in the senior phase would complement the objectives and support the Scottish Government's other commitment on access, which is that by 2030 20 per cent of entrants to university should be from the 20 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods.

We recognise that there are many successful destinations after school. Therefore, the measures need to work for many stakeholders and serve many purposes. But we feel there is an important opportunity, currently missed, to also make the attainment gap measures work for the Government's own access goals in university. We would like to see an additional measure of learners in SIMD20 and SIMD80+ who achieve four SCQF level 6 qualifications. We would like a grade profile to be specified in the measure but we would be happy to discuss the appropriate level with the Scottish Government. We feel that the level chosen should be consistent with the university sector's work to adjust grades as part of contextualised admissions to support the goal of widening access. Including this would establish a baseline and then allow all stakeholders to track the proportion of SIMD20 school-leavers who qualify, or come very close to qualifying, for entry to university.

We have made this point more fully in our response to the Scottish Government's consultation on the National Performance Framework.

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[3] Scottish Government (2017) National Improvement Framework Consultation, table 1, pg 5.

Universities are taking short-term actions to recognise achievement in other ways

Long-term, we absolutely agree that the goal that Scotland needs to achieve is to close the attainment gap at all levels and to have removed inequality of achievement, by socio-economic factors and protected characteristic. This is both a societal and generational goal and will have positive outcomes for those pursuing all post-school destinations be it employment or further study, including university. Yet, there are shorter-term measures, linked to recognising achievement that universities have committed to take which don't wait for that.

Scotland's 19 universities have agreed to make automatic offers to care experienced applicants who meet the minimum entry requirements for undergraduate study. This recognises the correlation between care experience and educational attainment. Data on the educational attainment of those with care experience is limited, but figures show only 15% of 'looked after' school leavers[4] achieve one or more SCQF level 6 qualification, equivalent to a Higher, compared to an average of 62% of all school leavers.[5] In the face of this substantial inequality, we feel it is only right to recognise the achievement of people with experience of care who succeed in reaching minimum entry requirements. It will begin from academic year 2019/20 once universities have set minimum entry requirements for their courses. This is action number 4 in our set of 15 actions as part of *Working to Widen Access.*

ENDS

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[4] Universities Scotland prefers to consistently use the definition of care experience but the data set uses the definition 'looked after children'.
[5] Scottish Government (2015/16) Educational Outcomes for Looked After Children p6, table 1.1.