

Written submission from Universities Scotland: Education and Skills Committee 16 May

We are pleased to have the opportunity to make a written statement to the Education and Skills Committee. We were asked to focus on progress with widening access to higher education and on the goal that 20 per cent of entrants to higher education should be from the poorest 20 per cent of neighbourhoods by 2030.

The brief is structured as follows:

1. Progress on widening access, as shown by the data
2. Progress on implementing the 15 actions in *Working to Widen Access*
3. Remaining challenges facing higher education and its aspirations on access.

Where possible, we have presented evidence collated by ourselves at the end of the document in the Annex.

1. Progress on widening access, as shown by the data

1.1 Progress on increasing the number of students from SIMD20 (quintile 1)¹ data zones in HE

- Currently, 14.8% of Scottish-domiciled entrants to undergraduate degrees, of all ages, are from SIMD20 data zones.² This is the way our progress to the 2030 target of 20% is being measured. The target is challenging but within sight. The proportion of entrants has increased from 11.4% in 2006/07.
- In 2016, the **offer rate** for applicants from the SIMD20 quintile was exactly the same as the offer rate to applicants from SIMD60-80. Applicants from SIMD40 quintile had the same offer rate as applicants from the SIMD80+ quintile.³ In the Commissioner's own words: "This suggests that institutions were actively trying to bring in more students from Q1 [SIMD20] and Q2 [SIMD40]".⁴

1.2 Progress towards 2021 CoWA targets

- The 2021 access target is that all 18 institutions should reach the threshold of 10% entrants from SIMD20 backgrounds. The latest published data on progress towards this goal is for 2015/16, which is two years behind the present. Even working from this data set, on full-time first degree entrants, 11 institutions had already almost exactly met or exceeded that target. A further three institutions were within two per cent of the target.⁵

¹ SIMD20 is used most commonly in Scotland. However the Commissioner's discussion papers and UCAS data often refer to Q1 for SIMD20 through to Q5 for SIMD80+ applicants. We will try to standardly use SIMD20

² This measure tracks entrants to full-time first degrees at university and looks at entrants of all ages.

³ Chart 2, Commissioner for Fair Access (2017) [University and College Admissions, Offers and Acceptances: Discussion Paper](#).

⁴ Ibid. p.2.

⁵ [Laying the Foundations, Commissioner's annual report](#), 2017. Chart 4, page 14.



1.3 Progress widening access to the ‘professions’ including medicine

- Applications to study medicine from SIMD20 and SIMD40 backgrounds are now much more likely to receive an offer than students in other quintiles.
- 49% of applications from students living in SIMD20 data zones received an offer to study medicine in one of Scotland’s university medical schools in 2017/18. This has increased from 16% of SIMD20 applications made an offer in 2014/15 and compares to the 36% of applications from students living in SIMD80+ data zones who received an offer in 2017/18.
- This is significant progress in the proportion of entrants, with more than double the number of SIMD20 entrants (matriculations) to medicine in three years (2014/15 to 2016/17) at 7.6% of all entrants (matriculations) up from 3.7%. However, SIMD20&40 students remain under-represented.

1.4 Progress with student retention:

- Scotland’s universities have improved their rates of retention with ‘non-continuation’ levels now at just 6.2% for full-time students. This non-continuation rate has fairly steadily improved over time (and marks a significant improvement from 10.7% in 2002/03).
- Continuous improvement in Scotland’s retention rate, over a period, means that Scottish higher education has surpassed the retention rate of English higher education for the first time in 19 years.⁶
- There has always been a gap in retention rates between the average and that of SIMD20 students. This reflects the additional challenges access students can face at various points in their studies and is why Universities Scotland has consistently said⁷ that access and retention have to go hand in hand. The real challenge is not to widen access to the first year, it is to ensure a successful outcome for every student. Positively the gap is closing and it is closing as a result of levelling up (rather than levelling down). The retention gap is currently at 6.4 percentage points down from 7.5 percentage points in 2011/12.

1.5 Direct progression from college into university via articulation

- Between 2009/10 and 2015/16 there has been a 36% increase in the number of students moving from college direct into university (articulation) with full credit for their college course. This reflects the rise of articulation as an alternative entry route into university.
- 47.8% of all HN students who move onto university receive *full credit* from the university for their existing qualifications.
- Where students stay in the same subject as they progress between college and university, 57.6% of HN students receive *full credit* from the university. And in some subjects, where moving between HN and degree level study is easier, such as business and administration, the percentage of students receiving *full credit* increases to 75.7%.⁸

⁶ <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/scottish-universities-better-uk-average-retention-first-time-generation/>

⁷ Since *Action on Access* in 2014.

⁸ Universities Scotland (2017) *Working to Widen Access*, table 1, p.21.



- 21.4% of all students who received *full credit* for their HNs through an articulation route were students living in SIMD20 data zones.⁹
- Of the total number of 1,926 SIMD20 students on articulation routes, 44.5% progressed to university with *full credit* given for their HN qualification.

1.6 Care experienced students

- The percentage of **entrants** to full-time first degrees in university with care experience is now at 0.6%, up very marginally from 0.5%. The overall numbers are low and so prone to fluctuations year to year.
- There were 160 full-time undergraduates at university known to have care experience in 2015/16.
- Universities are working towards reaching 1% of entrants with care experience. New data is due out soon.

1.7 Mature students will be vital to success on access

- Scotland has a positive trend of increase in the number of mature applicants (25+ years of age). The numbers of Scottish-domiciled mature applicants to 18 institutions via UCAS have increased by 10.7% over the last four years (2015–2018) to a new high of 9,280 applicants.¹⁰
- This positive trend is in stark contrast to the pattern for mature students in England, where applicants aged 25+ have fallen by 30.3% over the same time period.
- Mature students will be essential to Scotland’s ability to reach the 2030 *Commission on Widening Access (CoWA)* targets. This is clearly evident in this year’s applicant figures which unfortunately showed a very slight decrease in the number of Scottish-domiciled 18 year old applicants from SIMD20 data zones (a decrease of 10 applicants relative to 2017 cycle) but saw an increase of 170 SIMD20 applicants aged 20+ to at least a nine year high of 4,340 applicants at the 15 January deadline for entry in 2018.¹¹¹²
- It was very helpful for the Commissioner and the Minister to confirm (at their respective sessions with the Education and Skills Committee recently) that the CoWA 2030 targets were inclusive of students of all age groups. This is important because 33% of first degree entrants to university are 21 or over¹³ and many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, who have not reached their full potential at school, will enter higher education as a mature student, after work or further education.

⁹ National Articulation Database as supplied by the Scottish Funding Council. Analysis done by Universities Scotland. Data for 2014/15.

¹⁰ [UCAS January Deadline Analysis: Applicant Sex and Age](#). Table D.2.46. These data are applicants by the 15 January deadline for equal consideration. These are not end of cycle figures but they do present the picture up to and including the current admissions cycle. Not all mature entrants to university apply via UCAS so these figures may underrepresent the total number.

¹¹ UCAS [January Deadline Analysis: SIMD Quintile](#). D.1.3

¹² The UCAS analysis at the 15 January deadline shows the figures in age brackets of under 18, 18, 19, 20+ and all ages. We would liked to have shown data for 25+ years of age to match the definition of ‘mature’ students but it is not publicly available at this point in the cycle.

¹³ Universities Scotland (2017) Submission to Learner Journey Review



2. Progress implementing the 15 actions in *Working to Widen Access (WtWA)*:

Scotland's universities committed to 15 actions last November across the areas of admissions, articulation and bridging programmes with schools with the aim of delivering a big step forward in access. In less than 6 months we can report the following progress:

2.1 Admissions

- At least 9 of 18 universities have set minimum entry requirements for their undergraduate courses, although some are reviewing these requirements in response to the actions set out in *Working to Widen Access*. Another 6¹⁴ are in the process of setting minimum entry requirements and report being on track to publish these in time for 2020 entry.
- At least 9 institutions now guarantee offers for care-experienced applicants who meet the minimum entry requirements. These offers are generally made at the access threshold. Another 6 have guaranteed offers under consideration.¹⁵
- We have established an Admissions Working Group of expert practitioners and key partners, including NUS Scotland, to drive progress on our admissions actions.
- The Group has responded to feedback from schools, by agreeing to examine how universities take account of personal statements, Foundation Apprenticeships and Advanced Highers in the admissions process.
- It will also explore whether free school meals and Education Maintenance Allowance should be 'core contextual indicators' (i.e. factors that all universities should take into account). If so, this would add to the two core contextual indicators, of SIMD20 and care experience, that were confirmed by all institutions in November 2017. The goal is to create opportunity for those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage but who do not necessarily live in SIMD20 data zones. It will also bring greater consistency in approach across the sector and therefore offer more clarity to applicants, teachers and their parents/advisers.
- As part of work on admissions, another group is focused on developing clear and consistent language for contextualised admissions so that it becomes far more accessible and user-friendly. The membership of the group will give a voice to young people, adult returners, parents and schools as well as UCAS, the Scottish Funding Council, the Plain English Campaign, universities and others.
- As a crucial first step, the group has agreed to hold a discussion with existing and prospective students to understand their views on how the language that universities use could be made simpler and more consistent: we are determined to put learners at the centre of this process and to remove any barriers to people applying to university.

2.2 Articulation

¹⁴ Neither the Open University in Scotland or the Conservatoire are counted within this survey on admissions as the OU does not have standard entry requirements for its courses and the Conservatoire does not apply academic entry requirements.

¹⁵ Admissions survey of institutions was run by US between February and May 2018. This information is based on a total of 16 respondents.



- The National Articulation Forum promised in *Working to Widen Access* has been established. It is co-convened by Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland.
- The Forum will take account of any relevant recommendations on articulation from the long-awaited Scottish Government review of the ‘Learner Journey’, which was published in May 2018.

2.3 Bridging programmes

- We want to make it easier for learners, their parents and advisers to understand what bridging programmes are available and how programmes could help to support students into university. The provision of bridging programmes at a regional and national level must be more coherent, and we need better links between HEIs so that more learners can get credit for the study they’ve undertaken on bridging programmes.
- Our progress has been slightly delayed as we did not receive anticipated funding to support our work nor do we know whether the Learner Journey review will affect our proposed actions. We have, however, appointed a senior professional from within the sector to lead our work, while we will seek to work collaboratively with the Scottish Funding Council as it takes forward relevant work on bridging programmes.

3. Remaining challenges facing higher education and its aspirations on access

3.1 The attainment gap amongst school leavers.

- The attainment gap amongst school leavers remains stark. Only 20% of school leavers from the most deprived 10% of SIMD data zones have 3+ Highers (or equivalent SCQF level 6 qualifications) compared to 70% of school leavers from SIMD80+.¹⁶
- The most pressing shared challenge is to increase the proportion of people from the most deprived backgrounds who choose to apply to university and have the qualifications to do so. In 2016 over 6,000 18 year olds applied to university from the least deprived quintile compared to 2,000 from the most deprived quintile.¹⁷
- Obviously the Scottish Government has made the attainment gap a priority and is working with partners (including universities) to address this but this is the stark reality in Scotland at the moment and the reality against which universities make progress with SIMD20 entrants.

3.2 There are not enough applicants from SIMD20 or SIMD40 data zones applying to university.

- For entry in 2017, applicants from SIMD20 data zones made up only 15.6% of all applicants to study at undergraduate level in Scotland.
- Applying a modest threshold for entry, of four Higher grades at BCCC, applicants from SIMD20 data zones made up an even smaller proportion of applicants, at only

¹⁶ Data is for 2014/15. Data received from Scottish Government in a request from the University of Edinburgh.

¹⁷ Commissioner for Fair Access (2017) Discussion Paper: UCAS Applications, Offers & Acceptances.



14.3%. It is worth stating that BCCC is below the entry rate, even with adjusted grades, for several institutions.

It is essential that universities' actions to widen access, through the measures described, happen in parallel with significant growth in the overall number of SIMD20 applicants with the attainment level needed to succeed at university (school-leavers or otherwise), if Scotland is to meet the access ambitions for 2030. Otherwise, Scotland risks a situation whereby SIMD20 students simply make different choices about which institutions in which to study without actually, or significantly, increasing the number of SIMD20 students studying in the university sector as a whole.

3.3 The need to support mature and part time students in order to reach the aspirations on access

- The data in section 1.7 made it clear that mature students will be vital to the achievement of the 2030 widening access targets. Given this, it should be one of the early priorities of the newly created Access Data Working Group to consider how to best identify socio-economic disadvantage among mature learners. There are additional challenges that mature learners also face such as additional responsibilities such as work and family.
- Part-time students continue to face challenges around student support. This was not dealt with in substance by the student support review.
- The sector is at the forefront of delivering Graduate Apprenticeships to meet the needs of people wanting to up-skill whilst already contributing to the economy within the labour force.

3.4 Availability of places

- Demand from well qualified applicants far exceeds the supply of places available at undergraduate level in Scottish higher education. Audit Scotland's 2016 analysis found that the cap on places for Scottish and EU-domiciled students has made it more difficult in recent years for Scottish students to gain a place at a Scottish university.¹⁸
- Brexit provides Scottish higher education with an opportunity, which is to maintain a proportion of the funded places currently available to EU-domiciled students for exclusive use by Scots, and to use some of the remaining resource to increase the overall level of per student investment by making above real terms increases in the university Teaching Grant. These two actions would support widening access without additional cost to Government.
- In recent months the Minister has signalled that the Scottish Government may not be inclined towards this option. In evidence to the Education and Skills Committee the Minister stated: "*you can extend a system to infinity, but that does not necessarily make it fair. We have an unfair system at the moment...*"¹⁹
- We acknowledge that Scotland faces significant societal and educational inequalities. We support the view, as expressed in *Blueprint for Fairness*, that

¹⁸ Audit Scotland (2016) *Audit of Higher Education in Scottish Universities* p.41.

¹⁹ Scottish Parliament [Education and Skills Committee Official Report](#), 7 March 2018



“everyone should be expected to meet the same academic standards... if all applicants had the same opportunities to realise their potential. But this is plainly not the case...” The higher education sector is taking action to level the playing field for applicants who have experienced that inequality. Contextualised admissions, adjusted grades and guaranteed places for those with care experience²⁰ represent new ways of recognising an applicant’s *achievement* with the goal of redressing the inequality they have experienced at other stages in their lives.

- However, it is very important to note that university admissions is a fair system. Fairness for every student is a guiding principle of the admissions process.²¹ We believe contextualising admissions and adjusting grades is consistent with being fair, as it is consistent with one of the five principles²²; the desire to minimise barriers for applicants. But it is important to signal to all applicants – regardless of age or background – that the admissions system, even without these changes, is one that adheres to principles of fairness. To say otherwise discredits the hard work and achievement of other successful applicants. The ultimate goal has to be to eradicate the inequality that applicants have faced.
- We believe that retaining a proportion of existing funded places in higher education so that they are available to Scottish-domiciled students and reinvesting in the unit of teaching resource available to support the education and welfare of every student in university would be a good way to support the Government’s aspiration to widen access to university.

3.4 Lack of granularity of data available

- The school leaver attainment data referred to in section 3.1 (which shows the proportion of SIMD20 students achieving 3 or more Highers) is all that is publicly available to universities, and others, to work with in terms of school leaver attainment by quintile of deprivation.
- The published data lacks grade specification and therefore doesn’t give universities enough detailed information with which to track the number of suitably qualified school-leavers now, or to project and track the progress on attainment to university entry level, forward to the 2030 targets.
- Similarly, we were concerned that the Scottish Government’s 2017 consultation on measuring the attainment gap and milestones towards closing it did not include measurements that would show increase in attainment at levels that would qualify learners for university entry, even with reduced offers through contextual admissions. Whilst we’d support the 8 measurements proposed as valuable, there is an opportunity to connect this work, aimed at the early years and those of school age, to the Government’s ambitions in post-16 education as part of the original holistic approach to widening access taken by the Commission and that was commended by all stakeholders.

²⁰ As per action 3 in *Working to Widen Access*

²¹ Supporting Professionalism in Admissions’ five principles are: 1. being transparent; 2. enabling institutions to select students who are able to complete the course, as judged by their achievements and their potential; 3. striving to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid; 4. seeking to minimise barriers for applicants; and 5. being professional in every aspect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes

²² See ‘Our Guiding Principles’ (2017) [Working to Widen Access](#), p. 6.



- We have been in discussions with the Government since June 2017 about how the university sector can access the more granular level data which shows grade attainment by SIMD quintile. We have recently been advised that the data will be made available via the newly created Access Data Working Group to support the implementation of the Commission for Widening Access' recommendations. This group next meets on 24 May and we very much hope to be able to draw on the data as a useful resource from that point onwards.

3.4 The limitations of SIMD as a measure

- Universities Scotland members have long expressed concerns about the use of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as the sole way of determining the sector's progress on widening access.
- The Scottish Government's own publication, *Introducing The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2016* argues that SIMD is not to be used for "identifying all people who are deprived in Scotland – not everyone who is deprived lives in a deprived area."²³ The document goes on to say: "not all deprived people live in deprived areas: Two out of three people who are income deprived do not live in deprived areas"²⁴ and points out that there are no deprived data zones in three different local authorities in Scotland (Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles) despite the presence of people experiencing deprivation in these areas.

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²³ Scottish Government (2016), [Introducing The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2016](#)

²⁴ Ibid



Annex A

Table 1: Number of Scotland-domiciled full-time first degree entrants to Scottish HEIs from the most deprived SIMD quintile, and these as a percentage of all Scotland-domiciled full-time first degree entrants (2006/07 and 2009/10-2015/16) ²⁵

	2006/07	...	2009/10	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Number	2,915	...	3,400	3,695	4,060	4,200	4,250
Percentage	11.4	...	11.6	13.6	14.4	14.7	14.8

Table 2: Scotland-domiciled applications from SIMD20 through UCAS, and the difference between cycles (2011-2017) ²⁶

For entry in:	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
	5,260	5,240	5,390	5,860	6,430	6,600	6,780	6,890
Difference to 2017 cycle	-22%	-23%	-20%	-14%	-5%	-3%	0%	2%
Increase year-to-year	220	-20	150	470	570	170	180	110

Table 3: Number of acceptances through UCAS by SIMD (Scotland-domiciled 18 year olds, 2011-2017) ²⁷

For entry in:	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
SIMD Q1	1,070	1,100	1,170	1,250	1,215	1,280	1,425
SIMD Q2	1,660	1,710	1,775	1,830	1,865	1,935	2,000
SIMD Q3	2,530	2,675	2,645	2,540	2,765	2,660	2,630
SIMD Q4	3,630	3,670	3,605	3,530	3,660	3,720	3,665
SIMD Q5	5,310	5,250	5,275	5,120	5,195	5,260	5,125
Total	14,455	14,455	14,505	14,280	14,735	14,875	14,875
%SIMD20	7.4	7.6	8.1	8.8	8.2	8.6	9.6

²⁵ Table 5, pg 10, 2017 SFC Report on Widening Access 2015-16. Full time, first degree at university.

²⁶ Tables D.13.3 and D.13.4. UCAS 15 January Deadline analysis for entry in 2018.

²⁷ UCAS Acceptances by SIMD (File: DR2_057_01)

<https://www.ucas.com/file/140256/download?token=RmdwhRsl>



Table 4: Non-continuation of full-time first degree entrants following year of entry (Scottish HEIs, 2005/06 and 2010/11–2015/16) ²⁸

	2005/06	...	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Scotland	8.7		7.6	6.6	6.2	6.7	6.5	6.2
UK	7.1		6.3	5.7	5.7	6	6.2	6.4
England	6.7		6.2	5.7	5.7	5.9	6.3	6.4

Table 5: Full-time retention rates for Scotland-domiciled undergraduate entrants by SIMD (2011/12–2015/16) ²⁹

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Retention rate SIMD20 (%)	84.6	87.2	87.7	87.5	86.7
Retention rate overall (%)			91.7	91.4	91.3
Difference between SIMD20 – overall			4	3.9	4.6

Table 6. Resumption of study after a year out: Percentage who resume the following year at the same HEI (2009/10–2014/15) ³⁰

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Scotland (%)	15	13.6	15.9	11.4	16.9	18.8
England (%)	12.7	11.5	11.6	9.8	10.2	10.4
Difference (%)	2.3	2.1	4.3	1.6	6.7	8.4

Table 7: Number and percentage of Scotland-domiciled entrants to Scottish HEIs with care experience³¹

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
% full-time first degree at university	0.5	0.6	0.6
# full-time first degree at university	145	170	160

²⁸ HESA Performance Indicators Non-continuation. Full-time ‘young’ first degree entrants for 2015/16.

²⁹ Table 9 2017 SFC Report on Widening Access. Full-time Scot-dom UG entrants to university.

³⁰ HESA Performance Indicators. Resumption of study after a year out. Percentage who resume at the same HEI. Full-time, first degree.

³¹ Tables 23 & 24 2017 SFC Report on Widening Access. Full time, first degree.



# full-time HE in college	20	40	140
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Table 8: Number of students who articulate directly from colleges to HEIs with full and partial credit (2009/10-2014/15) ³²

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	% change over period
Advanced Standing (full credit)	2,931	3,056	3,096	3,592	3,757	4,007	36.7
As a % of all those on articulation routes (excl. unknowns)	46.4	47.7	47.0	49.2	47.8	47.8	
Advanced Progression (partial credit)	762	698	647	727	726	862	13.2
As a % of all those on articulation routes (excl. unknowns)	12.1	10.9	9.8	10.0	9.2	10.3	

Table 9: Number of students who articulate into degree programmes with HN qualifications in the same subject area or a different subject area (2014-15) ³³

		Advanced Standing (full credit)	Advanced Progression (partial credit)	Progression (no credit)	Total	Total as a % of all those on articulation routes (excl. unknowns)
Same subject area	Number	3,131	625	1,676	5,432	64.8
	Percentage	57.6	11.5	30.9		
Different subject area	Number	875	235	1,837	2,947	35.2
	Percentage	29.7	8.0	62.3		

³² Data from National Articulation database supplied by the SFC.

³³ Data from National Articulation database supplied by the SFC, analysed by Universities Scotland. Excludes those with HN in unknown subject area or unknown credit recognition. "Subject area" as defined by JACS.



Table 10: Percentage of applications by all quintiles of Scottish domiciled applications to Scottish Medical Schools ³⁴

% applications made an offer	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
SIMD Q1	16	20	35	49
SIMD Q2	33	33	47	58
SIMD Q3	18	25	28	34
SIMD Q4	24	30	33	31
SIMD Q5	26	32	35	33
TOTAL	24	30	34	36

Table 11: Proportion of entrants to medical school from each quintile³⁵

% of entrants	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
SIMD Q1	3.7	3.6	7.6
SIMD Q2	9.8	10.7	11.2
SIMD Q3	12.7	13.1	14.2
SIMD Q4	23.9	22.9	22.5
SIMD Q5	50	49.8	44.5

³⁴ Data from Scottish Medical Schools Admissions Group, analysed by Universities Scotland

³⁵ Ibid

