

Commissioner for Fair Access

Renewing the Alliance for Fair Access

Annual Report 2024

January 2024

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An Introduction to Fair Access in Scotland

1. What is fair access? Fair access is the name given to work to help people from disadvantaged backgrounds access higher education in Scotland.
2. What is the national target for fair access? By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived areas should represent 20% of entrants to higher education.
3. Are we there yet? No. Currently, 16.5% of entrants to higher education are from the 20% most deprived areas.
4. Are there interim targets to be met before 2030? Yes. A target of 16% was set for 2021 (and met). The next target is that by 2026, 18% of entrants to higher education will be from the 20% most deprived areas.
5. Are we headed in the right direction? Perhaps. Although we met the 2021 target and although there were a record number of entrants to higher education from deprived areas last year, the share of entrants from deprived areas fell from 16.7% to 16.5% (last year, the increase in the number of entrants was greater for those living outside deprived areas).
6. What is the scale of the challenge that lies ahead? Significant. Future entrants have had to manage learning through times of COVID and a cost-of-living crisis. Scotland's fiscal position also makes it more challenging to resource fair access work.
7. Is there promising practice? Yes. There is already a wide range of actions being undertaken to enable fair access to higher education in Scotland. However, there is scope for more of this type of work to be undertaken.
8. Do we know 'what works'? We think so. The increased numbers of people from Scotland's most deprived areas who are now accessing higher education would suggest that something is working. However, we need to strengthen the evidence base to better understand which (or which combination) of these actions is making the difference.
9. Who is responsible for achieving fair access? Obviously, universities in Scotland have the key role to play. However, fair access is an example of an objective that is 'everybody's business' – we won't achieve fair access unless schools, colleges, government, the wider 'public sector', third sector organisations working in this field, and families do what is required to enable entrants to realise their own potential.
10. Is fair access only about getting people into university? No. Fair access is also about enabling entrants to thrive in higher education and helping them achieve positive outcomes after graduation. However, much of the early fair access work has, understandably, been focused on entry to tackle the under-representation among entrants.
11. Does this mean that less disadvantaged students will lose out? Not for Scotland as a whole. In fact, the number of the entrants from the least deprived areas has increased by 8.4% (690 entrants) since 2013/14. The much higher increase in the number from the most deprived areas (45.3% since 2013/14, or an extra 1,745) is narrowing the gap. Entrants from the least deprived areas are still the largest cohort, with 1.6 times more entrants than the most deprived areas. Furthermore, the growth in entry among those from the most deprived areas is not at the expense of those slightly less deprived areas (growth of 32.5% since 2013/14, or an extra 1,395 entrants from the 20-40% most deprived areas).

12. Should we continue to promote fair access? Yes. Fair access is about promoting social justice. It is, and should be, viewed as a key aspect of Scotland's national mission to eradicate poverty.

Foreword

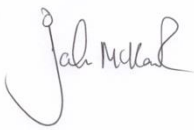
This is my first report as Commissioner for Fair Access, and the sixth Commissioner report since the Scottish Government acted on the recommendation of the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) to appoint a Commissioner to provide impartial policy advice to develop best practice, improve the evidence base, and hold to account all those with a role in advancing fair access to higher education.

I believe that fair access is a goal worth pursuing. I have no doubt that there continues to be untapped potential that is not being realised. My measured opinion is that we can achieve fair access, but that the challenge cannot be under-estimated.

Having completed 111 meetings in 2023, I am grateful to far too many people to mention individually in a short foreword. However, I wish to acknowledge that the time afforded to me over the last twelve months by busy practitioners, office holders, and sector leaders has been greatly appreciated. I own the recommendations and the priorities that are outlined in this report, but these have been shaped by the thinking and practice of many.

Although I refrain from thanking individuals, I make one exception. Those concerned to promote fair access to higher education in Scotland owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Sir Peter Scott for his work over the last five years. Although always keen to credit the work of others, the same would acknowledge that we are much closer to achieving fair access as a direct result of his guidance, encouragement, and recommendations.

I end this foreword with a simple commitment. I will endeavour to match your commitment to fashion a nation in which those with ability, and potential ability, from Scotland's most disadvantaged backgrounds can realise their potential through higher education.



Professor John H. McKendrick
Commissioner for Fair Access

Executive Summary

It did not start here.

This is the sixth annual Commissioner for Access report to be published since the Scottish Government acted on the first of the 34 recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) in its Blueprint for Fairness report (2016): this recommended the appointment of a Commissioner to provide impartial policy advice to develop best practice, improve the evidence base, and hold to account all those with a role in advancing fair access to higher education. Appointed in 2017, Professor Sir Peter Scott made 78 recommendations over five reports starting with Laying the Foundations for Fair Access (2017) and concluding with Maintaining the Momentum Towards Fair Access (2022).

Fair access in Scotland: A qualified celebration.

Much has already been achieved in delivering fair access to higher education in Scotland:

- Interim 2021 Target. The CoWA Core Target for 2021 (16%) was achieved in advance (2019/20) and has continued to be met/exceeded (2020/21 and 2021/22).
- Record number of entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds. The highest ever number of entrants from Scotland's most deprived areas was achieved in 2021/22 (5,595).
- Steady progress in increasing the number of entrants from deprived backgrounds. The number of CoWA Core Target entrants has increased in each of the last five years. There has been a 45% increase in the CoWA core target group since 2013-14 (from 3,850 to 5,595 in 2021-22).

Furthermore, a sense of collective purpose has developed; each of Scotland's HEIs has made some progress in promoting fair access; there are examples of promising practice to be found in each Scottish HEI; and a dense ecosystem of support has developed over time.

However, although much progress has been made, there are ways in which each of these successes could be enhanced. It should also be acknowledged that:

- Progress toward the next Interim Target has stalled. There has been a net increase in the CoWA Core Target of 0.1 percentage points in the last two years, with regression of 0.2 percentage points in the last year (16.4%, 16.7% and 16.5% in the last three years). Furthermore, several HEIs indicated in their latest Outcome Agreements that the proportion of CoWA Core Target entrants seems to have fallen in 2023/24.

Each Scottish HEI could enhance the contribution it makes to the CoWA Core Target; there is a need to examine whether the ecosystem of support is delivering all that it can; and there is a need for more robust evaluation to determine the extent to which promising interventions are impactful interventions.

Back to basics: the nature of fair access.

The presentation of the agenda as 'fair access' since 2014 asserts that the goal is not to widen access per se, but rather to achieve social justice, i.e., to ensure that those with ability from more disadvantaged backgrounds are not excluded from higher education on account of the ways in which access has traditionally been administered. Although there are other imbalances in Scottish higher education, fair access should continue to be pursued for those who may be disadvantaged on account of their socio-economic status. On the other hand, we should be interested in the intersections between socio-economic disadvantage and other planes of difference.

Fair access must continue to focus on entry to higher education. However, there is a need to recalibrate the focus to take account of experience and outcomes. The lack of progress in raising retention rates among the CoWA Core Target group should be addressed.

Concerns have been raised that increasing the share of CoWA Core Target entrants could be at the expense of marginally less disadvantaged entrants (SIMD20-40), and students who do not experience disadvantage (assumed to be in cohorts SIMD40-100). Although it may seem counter-intuitive, at present, increasing the share of students from the most deprived areas has not led to fewer students progressing to higher education from those from less deprived areas. The number of entrants has increased for all Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) quintile cohorts since 2013-14.

SIMD is an indicator of progress toward fair access, rather than a measure of it. It has served, and continues to serve, a useful purpose in providing focus to the fair access agenda and evidencing the progress that has been made in Scotland in recent years. However, there is room to improve how we use SIMD.

2023: a year of review for renewal.

2023 was an exceptional year for thinking through the future of (higher) education in Scotland. Three reports were published, each of which has implications for the fair access agenda, i.e., Purpose and Principles for Post-school Education by the Scottish Government, and two reports commissioned by the same – Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation/ Skills Delivery Landscape Review (the Withers review) and It's Our Future: Report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (the Hayward report).

Each of these reports is aware of the fair access agenda, makes recommendations that have the potential to strengthen it, but equally each raises issues that require actions to be taken to safeguard a commitment to strengthen fair access.

Emergent issues: renewing the alliance for fair access.

I make 20 recommendations over 10 domains. My recommendations extend beyond a narrow focus on the CoWA target, to consider how the framework for promoting fair access can be strengthened.

1. The primary focus for fair access should continue to be improving outcomes for those who experience or have experienced socio-economic disadvantage.
2. Retain SIMD as the central metric to indicate national progress in achieving fair access.
3. To strengthen the utility of SIMD to understand fair access, SFC and institutions are encouraged to report evidence in deciles up to SIMD40, in addition to quintiles.
4. Withdraw the SIMD Institutional target but introduce a commitment from each HEI to take action to increase the proportion of SIMD20 among its entrants or, if this is demonstrably not possible without adverse consequences, to match the highest proportion and number of SIMD20 entrants that it achieved since 2013-14.
5. For universities in Scotland to collectively specify a basket of indicators from which individual HEIs may draw to demonstrate their wider work in promoting fair access.
6. The Scottish Government should consider strengthening the remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access to assume responsibility for advising on fair access to the whole of tertiary education.

7. The Scottish Government should take the necessary preparatory steps to embolden the fair access agenda beyond 2026 by transitioning toward individual-level indicators of socio-economic disadvantage, and thereafter to challenge institutions to achieve fair access for prospective students who have experienced such disadvantage.
8. The fair access agenda should be recalibrated to give equal weight to entry, student experience, and outcomes.
9. The primary focus on fair access should remain on Scottish-domiciled, full-time, first-degree entrants. However, for a rounded perspective on fair access to higher education, it is necessary to also focus on Graduate Apprenticeships, part-time undergraduate study, and postgraduate study.
10. Wherever practicable, data on fair access should be disaggregated to understand the relative contributions of different pathways (direct entry from school; articulation; and adult wider access).
11. SFC, in conjunction with participating universities, should ensure that disaggregated data are available for each of the disciplines that comprise the 'high demand professions' that are part of the AHDP programme (to enable the national impact of this work to be appraised) and the Transitions programme.
12. SFC should act on the advice of the previous Commissioner for Fair Access, specified as a recommendation in each of his last four annual reports, to commit to more secure and longer-term funding for SCAPP.
13. It should be re-affirmed that the central purpose of SCAPP is as a vehicle to support the development and professionalisation of a widening access and participation practitioner community in Scotland.
14. SFC, in conjunction with SCAPP, Universities Scotland and the wider educational research community in Scotland, should examine what steps should be taken to strengthen research and evaluation to underpin the fair access agenda.
15. For universities in Scotland to collectively agree what intelligence is in the national interest to promote fair access (as opposed to that which is commercially sensitive), and thereafter to ensure that this intelligence is made available to all relevant stakeholders in Scotland.
16. Should the decision be taken to withdraw funding for an intervention that had been integral to promoting fair access, or if an element of such work is to be radically altered, providers should undertake (and funders should encourage) an impact assessment to ascertain the impact on pupil cohorts who have previously benefited from this provision.
17. School leaders in Scotland, the SFC and its National Schools Programme, SCAPP and Universities Scotland should examine if, and if so what, steps should be taken to underpin the fair access agenda within the broad general education phase in Scottish education.
18. SFC, Universities Scotland and Skills Development Scotland should examine the prospects of introducing an easily accessible user-centred web-based resource that provides a single point of reference to inform prospective students and other stakeholders of the programmes and resources that are available to support access to higher education.
19. Stakeholders should explore the prospects for introducing a single student identifier to improve tracking and to facilitate more robust evaluation of the impact of fair access activity.
20. Stakeholders and leaders should reaffirm their commitment to promote fair access and commit to take those actions necessary to attain the next interim target for 2026

My priorities for 2024.

I have ten priorities for 2024, the first three of which describe how I will approach my work as Commissioner: it is my intention that each of the remainder will lead to future recommendations on actions to be taken to promote fair access.

1. To follow up on each of my recommendations and to report on progress in my next annual report.
2. To produce a second annual report, to be published as soon as is practicably possible after the release of the SFC's Report on Widening Access 2022-23.
3. To produce my first bi-annual report, ideally to be published at the start of 2025, i.e., halfway between annual reports, to provide a timely update on progress to promote fair access.
4. To engage with school leaders and universities in Scotland to explore whether inefficiencies in SCQF Level 7 can be addressed through system change and/or institutional practice.
5. To engage with Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland to better understand the prospects for increasing the proportion of HN students articulating with so-called 'Advanced Standing' into SCQF Level 8 and 9.
6. To examine retention rates for SIMD20 entrants, focusing on why these have not improved substantially since the introduction of the CoWA agenda.
7. To reflect on insight from the Student Finance and Wellbeing Survey commissioned by the Scottish Government, and the wider evidence base, to better understand how students' financial situation impacts on fair access.
8. To explore possibilities to enhance and promote regional intelligence, and to strengthen cross-institutional collaboration in regions to advance the fair access agenda.
9. To review the deployment of contextual admissions and Minimum Entry Requirements across Scottish HEIs to appraise whether the impact on fair access is optimal.
10. To engage with professional bodies, Programme leads, and Heads of Department (or equivalent) to promote shared responsibility for the fair access agenda in Scotland.

1. Fair Access and Scotland's National Purpose

“ The proportion of entrants to higher education from our most deprived areas is now at its highest-ever level, but I do not think that we are yet doing well enough. We still have a situation in which the most deprived fifth of our communities supply only one seventh of our university undergraduates ... I want us to be bolder in our aspirations. I am setting the Government and our universities the challenging long-term target of eradicating inequality in access to higher education. I want us to determine now that by the time a child who is born today in one of our most deprived communities leaves school, he or she will have the same chance of going to university as a child who is born in one of our least deprived communities. That means that we would expect at least 20 per cent of university entrants to come from the most deprived 20 per cent of the population.”

Nicola Sturgeon (November 26th, 2014)¹

“ ... overall and overwhelmingly, I am proud of what has been achieved. ... Widening access to higher education, with a record number of young people from backgrounds like mine now going to university.”

Nicola Sturgeon (March 23rd, 2023)²

“ As the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, working with my Cabinet colleagues, I commit that by 2026 I will have ... [M]et our interim target of 18% of full-time first degree entrants to universities coming from the most deprived communities in Scotland.”

Jenny Gilruth, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (April 18th, 2023)³

A decade ago, Nicola Sturgeon, the then First Minister, outlined an ambition to work toward what would come to be known as fair access to higher education in Scotland. In her resignation speech to Parliament nine years later, prominent among the list of achievements of which she was “overwhelmingly proud” was widening access to higher education. Although Humza Yousaf, the new First Minister, made no specific reference to widening access when introducing ‘a fresh start for Scotland’ in April 2023,⁴ the ambitions that underpin the fair access agenda – equality, opportunity, community – are those which were headlined in his reset for government.⁵ Furthermore, in this reset for education, the commitment to continue working to achieve fair access was listed among long list of priority actions by Jenny Gilruth, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

Thus, political commitment to fair access was re-affirmed in 2023, although this might be characterised as a quiet re-affirmation, as opposed to the headlining of a priority.

It should be acknowledged, as my predecessor did in the introduction to *Maintaining Momentum Toward Fair Access*,⁶ that the pursuit of fair access in higher education takes place in a very different societal and economic context from when it was first conceived. To the challenges presented by the legacy effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, must now be added the challenging fiscal climate,⁷ with its implications

1 [TheyWorkForYou - First Minister statement on 2014-15 Programme for Government](#)

2 [SNP - Nicola Sturgeon's farewell speech at the Scottish Parliament](#)

3 [Scottish Government - Equality, Opportunity, Community. New Leadership - A fresh start](#)

4 [Scottish Government - “New Leadership, A Fresh Start for Scotland”: First Minister's speech – 18 April 2023](#)

5 [Scottish Government - Equality, Opportunity, Community. New Leadership - A fresh start](#)

6 p.5 in [Maintaining the Momentum Towards Fair Access, Annual Report 2022](#)

7 [Scottish Government - UK economic and fiscal outlook: summary](#)

for the Scottish Budget.⁸ The commitment of the Scottish Government to a ‘social contract’ with the Scottish people⁹ provides some re-assurance that funding decisions will not undermine the fair access agenda. Indeed, there is explicit commitment in Annex A5 of the Scottish Budget to work toward “driving forward our commitment for Widening Access” and providing “vital financial support to students to support them in completing their studies in the face of significant cost of living pressures”.¹⁰ Although the significant uplift in funds for student support is welcome,¹¹ less so is the real-term reduction in funds for the Scottish Funding Council¹².

We should also recognise that child poverty¹³ (and poverty among adults of working-age¹⁴) and the poverty-related attainment gap¹⁵ persist at unacceptably high levels, despite the good intentions to work toward reduction, if not eradication.¹⁶ 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.

My predecessor was concerned with the prospect of dissenting voices undermining wider public support for the fair access agenda.¹⁷ Although some question the very principle of social mobility,¹⁸ it is more commonplace to question the mechanics of how fair access is to be achieved: sometimes, this is expressed in terms of resourcing,¹⁹ but more commonly it is criticised on the grounds that less disadvantaged groups will be squeezed out of universities. I have received some personal communication on this matter from concerned individuals and groups. It was also the subject of public²⁰ and political debate²¹ early in 2023 in relation to evidence that nine courses at the University of Edinburgh had their places filled solely by pupils from less socio-economically advantaged backgrounds. I conclude this introduction with the re-assurance that I am mindful of these concerns, which I address more fully in the body of this report.

I consider five issues in this report. First, I review what has been achieved so far through fair access work (Fair access in Scotland: A qualified celebration). Next, I reflect on the key ideas that frame fair access work (Back to basics: the nature of fair access). The recent revisioning of education in Scotland is considered in 2023: a year of review for renewal. My thoughts on what must be done are outlined in Emergent issues: renewing the alliance for fair access. Finally, I conclude by outlining my priorities for 2024.

8 [Scottish Government - Scottish Budget 2024-25](#)

9 Foreword. *Ibid.*

10 p.67 in [Scottish Government - Scottish Budget 2024-25](#)

11 Table A5.06 on p.72. *Ibid.*

12 Table A5.07 on p.73. *Ibid.*

13 [Scottish Government National Statistics - Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2019-2022 - Children](#)

14 [Scottish Government National Statistics - Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2019-2022 - Working-age adults](#)

15 [Scottish Government - Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: progress report 2016 to 2021](#)

16 For the Scottish Attainment Challenge and its poverty-related attainment gap: [Scottish Government - Pupil attainment: closing the gap](#); For tackling child poverty: [Scottish Government - Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022 to 2026](#)

17 The twentieth recommendation in 2019; Recommendations 2 and 4 in 2021; and Recommendation 4 in 2022.

18 [Scottish Union for Education – Newsletter No13](#)

19 [Scottish Union for Education - Newsletter No4](#)

20 [The Herald - Middle class pupils missing university place will see reform](#)

21 [Scottish Parliament - Meeting of the Parliament Thursday, January 12, 2023](#)

2. Fair Access in Scotland: A Qualified Celebration

It is important we take stock of what has been achieved in promoting fair access. It is helpful to examine the core evidence base for three dimensions of fair access, all of which pertain to full-time, Scottish-domiciled, first-time degree entrants at 18 of Scotland's HEIs,²² with disadvantaged students defined as those living in one of Scotland's 20% Most Deprived Areas:

- Entrants.²³ The number and proportion of students entering university.
- Retention.²⁴ The number and proportion of students who progress to a second year of study.
- Qualifiers.²⁵ The number and proportion of students who completed their studies.

Although the CoWA core target only focuses on entrants, the wider fair access agenda pertains to all three metrics. We should acknowledge five achievements, although each is a work-in-progress:

- A sense of collective purpose.
- National progress in numbers.
- Institutional progress in numbers.
- Ecosystem of support.
- Promising interventions.

A sense of collective purpose

The challenge to universities in Scotland to achieve fair access within a generation, set by the First Minister in 2014, had foundations on which to build, with much work already being pursued. For example, the Scottish Widening Access Programme was introduced in 1989²⁶ to promote adult access, and the Caledonian Club of Glasgow Caledonian University was introduced in 2008 to strengthen attachment to universities among nursery, primary and secondary school pupils in five under-represented communities in the City of Glasgow.²⁷ Government commitments to widen access to higher education in Scotland (UK and Europe) also predate 2014.²⁸ However, the challenge that the First Minister set in 2014 to universities in Scotland provided collective purpose and focus to these endeavours, and the establishment of the Commission on Widening Access (announced in March 2015, reporting one year later²⁹) to make recommendations for how this should be pursued facilitated a step-change in approach. As noted in the introduction to this report, the Scottish Government re-affirmed its commitment to fair access in 2023.

²² As the Open University in Scotland does not deliver full-time degrees, it is not captured in this metric.

²³ Tables 1, 1A and 1B (Background Tables): [SFC - Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

²⁴ Tables 2 and 2A. *Ibid.*

²⁵ Tables 3 and 3A. *Ibid.*

²⁶ [Scottish Wider Access Programme - About SWAP](#)

²⁷ [GCU - Outreach](#)

²⁸ See Chapter 3: [Widening Access to Higher Education: Does Anyone Know What Works? A Report to Universities Scotland](#)

²⁹ [A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access](#)

National progress in numbers

Shared purpose and national ambition are important, but these are only means to an end. What matters most is that the number and proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing higher education is increasing and increasing at a rate that is necessary to achieve the end goal of proportionate participation by 2030. There is much to celebrate:

- Interim 2021 Target. The CoWA Core Target for 2021 (16%) was achieved in advance (2019/20) and has continued to be met/exceeded (2020/21 and 2021/22).
- Record number of entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds. The highest ever number of entrants from Scotland's most deprived areas was achieved in 2021/22 (5,595).
- Steady progress in increasing the number of entrants from deprived backgrounds. The number of CoWA Core Target group entrants has increased in each of the last five years. There has been a 45% increase in the CoWA core target group since 2013-14 (from 3,850 to 5,595 in 2021-22).

On the other hand, there is no room for complacency. If current trends continue, the next CoWA Target (2026) will not be achieved.

- Progress toward the Target has stalled. There has been a net increase in the CoWA Core Target of 0.1 percentage points in the last two years, with a decrease of 0.2 percentage points in the last year (16.4%, 16.7% and 16.5% in the last three years).

Institutional progress in numbers

There is evidence of each Scottish HEI making a positive contribution to achieve fair access:

- Trend in the number of entrants in each Scottish HEI. The number of CoWA core entrants has increased in each Scottish HEI since 2013-14 (e.g., the number of entrants in the University of Aberdeen has increased by a factor of 3.3 – from 45 to 150 in 2021-22).
- Record number of entrants in Scottish HEIs in 2021-22. The majority of Scottish HEIs recorded their highest ever number of entrants in 2021-22. Only six institutions have recorded a higher number of entrants in the past and for five of these (i.e., University of Dundee, Glasgow Caledonian University, Robert Gordon University, Scotland's Rural College, and the University of Strathclyde), their highest ever number of entrants was in the previous year: the highest number of entrants for the University of Stirling was back in 2017-18.
- Proportion of entrants in each Scottish HEI, medium term. In all but three Scottish HEIs, the proportion of CoWA Core Target group entrants has increased since 2013-14 (the only institutions in which the proportion has not increased were Glasgow Caledonian University, Robert Gordon University and Scotland's Rural College, although the small numbers in the latter, render this point insignificant).

Indeed, we can identify ways in which each Scottish HEI has made a positive contribution to advancing fair access (Table 1).

Table 1: Positive contributions to achieving fair access, Scottish HEIs³⁰

Aberdeen, University of
The number of CoWA Core Target entrants has increased by a factor of 3.3 – from 45 in 2013-14 to 150 in 2021-22 (their highest ever number of CoWA Core Target entrants).
Abertay University, Dundee
Recorded their joint-highest ever number of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22 (215, also achieved in 2017-18).
Dundee, University of
Has the highest intake of CoWA Core Target entrants outside the central belt of Scotland.
Edinburgh Napier University
Recorded their highest ever number of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22 (410).
Edinburgh, University of
Recorded their highest ever number of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22 (245).
Glasgow Caledonian University
Has an entrant intake that has exceeded the CoWA Core Target every year since 2013-14.
Glasgow School of Art
Recorded their highest ever number of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22 (75).
Glasgow, The University of
Recorded their highest ever number (605) and proportion (16.7%) of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22.
Heriot-Watt University
Recorded their highest ever number (170) of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22.
Highlands and Islands, University of the
Recorded their highest ever number (85) and proportion (12.1%) of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22.
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh
Recorded their joint-highest ever number (120) and joint-highest ever proportion (13.8%) of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22. ³¹
Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen
Recorded their highest ever number of CoWA Core Target entrants progressing to Year 2 of study between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (135) ³² .
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
Recorded their joint-highest ever number (25) of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22. ³³

³⁰ ROWA data are rounded to the nearest 5 or 0. All numbers in these tables are estimates, albeit accurate ones based on data that have been verified. Where small numbers are involved, these estimates have more uncertainty, e.g., the estimate of 23 for the number of CoWA Core Target students progressing to year 2 from SRUC. This caveat also applies to Table 2.

³¹ Joint highest number with 2020-21 and joint highest proportion with 2019-20.

³² The number is an estimate calculated from the ROWA Table 2A for 2021/22, which reports that of the 155 SIMD20 entrants, 87.3% progressed to a second year of study.

³³ Joint highest number, alongside the previous two years (2019/20 and 2020/21).

Scotland's Rural College
Recorded their highest ever number of CoWA Core Target entrants progressing to Year 2 of study between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (23). ³⁴
St Andrews, University of
Recorded their highest ever number (90) and proportion (14.9%) of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22.
Stirling, University of
Recorded their highest ever number (180) and proportion (14.4%) of CoWA Core Target qualifiers in 2021-22.
Strathclyde, University of
Recorded their highest ever number of CoWA Core Target entrants progressing to Year 2 of study between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (618). ³⁵
West of Scotland, University of the
Recorded their joint-highest ever number (1240) ³⁶ and proportion (30.7%) of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22 (from an institution that has exceeded the CoWA Core Target every year since 2013-14).

On the other hand, there is some evidence of ways in which fair access impact could be strengthened:

- Number of entrants in each Scottish HEIs. Between 2020-21 and 2021-22, the number of CoWA core entrants increased in ten Scottish HEIs, remained constant in three HEIs, and decreased in five Scottish HEIs. The greatest reductions in numbers were reported for the University of Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian University (fall of 95 in each) and the greatest increase was recorded for the University of Glasgow (increase of 100).
- Proportion of entrants in each Scottish HEIs. Between 2020-21 and 2021-22, the proportion of CoWA core entrants increased in nine Scottish HEIs, was unchanged in one Scottish HEI, and decreased in eight Scottish HEIs. The greatest increase in proportion was reported for the University of St. Andrews (an increase of 4.73 percentage points, from 10.2% to 14.9%) and the greatest decrease was recorded for Scotland's Rural College (although the numbers are small, thus rendering this insignificant).
- Not recording a record proportion of entrants in Scottish HEIs in 2021-22. The majority of Scottish HEIs have recorded a higher proportion of entrants at some point in the recent past. Only five institutions recorded their highest ever proportion of entrants in 2021-22, i.e., University of Glasgow, University of the Highlands and Islands, Queen Margaret University, University of St Andrews, and the University of the West of Scotland.

Furthermore, just as we can identify ways in which each Scottish HEI can be lauded for its contribution to fair access, there are ways in which these contributions could be strengthened (Table 2).

³⁴ The number is an estimate calculated from the ROWA Table 2A for 2021/22. which reports that of the 30 SIMD20 entrants, 77.4% progressed to a second year of study.

³⁵ The number is an estimate calculated from the ROWA Table 2A for 2021/22. which reports that of the 685 SIMD20 entrants, 90.2% progressed to a second year of study.

³⁶ Joint highest number, alongside the previous year (2020/21).

Table 2: Ways in which fair access could be strengthened, Scottish HEIs

Aberdeen, University of
Was one of only three institutions to record a reduction in the both the number and proportion of CoWA Core entrants progressing to year 2 between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (119 and 95.2% to 109 and 94.8%).
Abertay University, Dundee
Had the lowest retention rate in Scotland of CoWA Target entrants between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (77.6%) among those institutions with at least 50 entrants from SIMD20 areas.
Dundee, University of
The number and proportion of CoWA Core Target entrants fell between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (16.4% and 355 entrants to 16% and 335 entrants).
Edinburgh Napier University
Frequently among the institutions with the lowest retention rate of CoWA Core Target students (among the lowest five retention rates in four years from 2015-16 to 2021-22).
Edinburgh, University of
Was one of only three institutions to record a reduction in both the number and proportion of CoWA Core entrants progressing to year 2 between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (179 and 94.2% to 167 and 92.9%).
Glasgow Caledonian University
The proportion of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22 is no higher than it was in 2013-14.
Glasgow School of Art
The proportion of CoWA Core Target entrants was lower in 2021-22 than in 2020-21.
Glasgow, The University of
In the last five years, the number of CoWA Core Target qualifiers has not reached the highest level it set back in 2016-17 (265).
Heriot-Watt University
Consistently among the institutions with the lowest retention rate of CoWA Core Target students (among the lowest five retention rates in the seven years from 2014-15 to 2020-21).
Highlands and Islands, University of the
Consistently among the institutions with the lowest retention rate of CoWA Core Target students (83.3% in 2021-22), and lowest rate in Scotland in 2014-15 and 2020-21.
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh
Frequently among the institutions with the lowest retention rate of CoWA Core Target students (among the lowest five retention rates in five years from 2013-14 to 2021-22).
Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen
The proportion of CoWA Core Target entrants in 2021-22 is no higher than it was in 2013-14.
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
Returned the smallest number of CoWA Core Target students progressing to Year 2 of their studies between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (25).
Scotland's Rural College
Notwithstanding a small intake, SRUC was the only institution to have stopped achieving the 10% institutional benchmark in 2021-22 (the CoWA Core Target share falling from 13.5% to 5.1% of students).

St Andrews, University of
Was one of only three institutions to record a reduction in both the number and proportion of CoWA Core entrants progressing to year 2 between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (75 and 95.9% to 65 and 95.3%)
Stirling, University of
It has been four years since it recorded its highest ever number (270) and proportion (15.9%) of CoWA Core Target students (in 2017-18).
Strathclyde, University of
The number of CoWA Core Target students fell by 95 (a fall of 3.9 percentage points) between 2020-21 and 2021-22.
West of Scotland, University of the
Recorded the highest number of CoWA Core Target students not progressing to Year 2 of their studies between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (200).

On balance, positive progress prevails, although if the next CoWA Target (2026) is to be achieved, it is clear that each Scottish HEI could contribute to the uplift that is required.

Ecosystem of support

A complex ecosystem has developed through time to support and shape the fair access agenda in Scotland, some components of which pre-date the national commitment made in 2014. The core elements of this ecosystem will be familiar to most stakeholders.

Within Scottish Government, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills³⁷ has ultimate responsibility for determining policy priorities, supported by the Minister for Higher and Further Education³⁸. Civil service support is provided by the Lifelong Learning and Skills Directorate,³⁹ (one of thirty within the Scottish Government), work within which is led by the Student Equalities and Wellbeing team.

Oversight and strategic direction within the Scottish Funding Council is provided by the Skills, Enhancement, Access, and Learning (SEAL) committee⁴⁰ with the Access, Learning and Outcomes directorate⁴¹ managing SFC work. The Scottish Funding Council funds much of the core work, supporting many of the organisations and initiatives that promote fair access. The National Schools Programme is a now well-established framework comprising four programmes, two of which are multi-component:

- Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) comprising four regional school, college, and university collaborations to work with “targeted pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to share impartial information, advice, guidance, and support regarding higher education”, i.e., ASPIRE North,⁴² LEAPS,⁴³ LIFT OFF,⁴⁴ and FOCUS West⁴⁵.

³⁷ [Scottish Government - Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills](#)

³⁸ [Scottish Government - Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans](#)

³⁹ [Scottish Government - Lifelong Learning and Skills Directorate](#)

⁴⁰ [SFC - Skills, Enhancement, Access and Learning Committee](#)

⁴¹ [SFC - Access, Learning and Outcomes](#)

⁴² [ASPIRENorth - Schools for Higher Education Programme](#)

⁴³ [LEAPS](#)

⁴⁴ [LIFT OFF](#)

⁴⁵ [Focus West](#)

- Access to High Demand Professions (AHDP), comprises two programmes, i.e., Reach⁴⁶ (which is delivered in five universities to students who wish to pursue law, medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry, or economics) and Access to Creative Education Scotland (ACES)⁴⁷ which is delivered in four HEIs and focuses on degrees related to art, design, and architecture.
- Transitions programme⁴⁸ at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, which “aims to provide funded training for students from disadvantaged communities who wish to pursue the performing or production arts”.
- Advanced Higher Hub⁴⁹ at Glasgow Caledonian University, which “offers Senior Phase pupils the opportunity to study Advanced Higher Subjects that are not available at their own schools. The Hub also provides students in an immersive transition experience to introduce prospective students to the opportunities and challenges of student life”.

SFC supports the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), which operates as SWAP West and SWAP East, each of which “works in partnership with colleges and Higher Education Institutions across Scotland to provide routes into Higher Education for adults with few or no qualifications, or whose qualifications are out of date”. SWAP Access Programmes are “one-year full-time courses at colleges across Scotland. Successful completion of a SWAP Access Programme can lead to a guaranteed place on a Higher National or degree course at a college or university”.

SFC also supports the Scottish Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP),⁵⁰ which was formed as part of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access in response to a CoWA recommendation. This aims to “support the development and professionalisation of a strong widening access and participation community in Scotland and by doing this embed, enhance and support effective practice in Scotland”.

Working as a collective, Universities Scotland has been a strong supporter of the agenda (and vocal critic of aspects which it considers must be strengthened). Notable contributions to the agenda – in addition to regular comment and communication⁵¹ – include Working to Widen Access (2019)⁵² (setting out 15 actions by Scottish universities in response to the CoWA report) and Access All Areas⁵³ (2013) (a celebration of university-led initiatives to promote fair access). Likewise, Colleges Scotland has been invested in this agenda and makes regular comment on emerging issues.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Reach at the University of Aberdeen ([University of Aberdeen - Reach](#)); University of Dundee ([University of Dundee - Reach](#)); University of Edinburgh ([University of Edinburgh - Reach](#)), University of Glasgow ([University of Glasgow - Reach](#)) and University of St Andrews ([University of St Andrews - Reach](#)).

⁴⁷ ACES at Glasgow School of Art (); Gray’s School of Art at Robert Gordon University ([Robert Gordon University - ACES Programme](#)); Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at the University of Dundee ([University of Dundee - ACES \(Access to Creative Education in Scotland\)](#)); and Edinburgh College of Art at the University of Edinburgh ([University of Edinburgh - Access to Creative Education in Scotland \(ACES\)](#)).

⁴⁸ [Royal Conservatoire of Scotland - What is Transitions?](#)

⁴⁹ [GCU - Advanced Higher Hub](#)

⁵⁰ [Scottish Framework for Fair Access - About SCAPP](#)

⁵¹ [Universities Scotland - Fair access](#)

⁵² [Universities Scotland - Working to Widen Access](#)

⁵³ [Universities Scotland - Access All Areas](#)

⁵⁴ [Colleges Scotland - Access](#)

Three collectives have been convened to address key aspects of the fair access agenda:

- Access Delivery Group⁵⁵ Now meeting on an ad-hoc basis, the Access Delivery Group brought together representatives of the key organisations involved in promoting fair access to “help the Scottish Government meet its goal of tackling socioeconomic inequality in higher education by leading on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the CoWA report.”
- Access Data Short Life Working Group. First convened by the Scottish Government in 2018, this group investigated further measures to identify access students. It was reconvened in 2023, to further examine the prospects for using individual-level indicators, reporting early in 2024.
- Joint Articulation Group.⁵⁶ Co-convened by Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland to examine issues pertaining to articulation.

Beyond this, the key institutions involved in higher education in Scotland have been proactive in engaging with the Commissioner for Fair Access to convey the importance of their work to the fair access agenda, i.e., Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAA),⁵⁷ primarily through the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC),⁵⁸ the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)⁵⁹ and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).⁶⁰ Similarly, proactive engagement with the Commissioner has been sought by those representing school leaders (i.e., School Leaders Scotland⁶¹ and AHDS⁶²), and staff and students (NUS Scotland⁶³ and UCU Scotland⁶⁴).

In addition to this congested institutional landscape there are a wide range of interest groups that exist to raise awareness and improve conditions for a wide range of student groups, including carers (e.g., Carers Scotland⁶⁵), disabled students (e.g., Disabling Barriers Scotland⁶⁶), estranged students (e.g., Stand Alone⁶⁷), refugees and asylum seekers (e.g., University of Sanctuary⁶⁸) and minority ethnic groups (e.g., Diversity in the Teaching Profession and Education Workforce sub-group⁶⁹ of the Anti-racism in Education Programme).

Then there are a range of national and local charitable bodies that offer financial support to disadvantaged students, most notably The Robertson Trust (e.g., through their Journey to Success⁷⁰ programme) and the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland (e.g., through their Undergraduate Tuition Fee grants⁷¹). There are also a wide range of smaller

55 [Scottish Government - Access Delivery Group](#)

56 [Universities Scotland - Scotland's colleges and universities launch plans for more flexible pathways for learners in the post-COVID economy](#)

57 [QAA - About us](#)

58 [Enhancement Themes - How the Enhancement Themes Are Managed](#)

59 [UCAS - Who we are](#)

60 [SCQF - The SCQF partnership](#)

61 <https://www.sls-scotland.org.uk/>

62 [AHDS](#)

63 [National Union of Students Scotland](#)

64 [UCU - Scotland](#)

65 [Carers UK - Scotland](#)

66 [MMWS - Disabling Barriers Scotland](#)

67 [StandAlone](#)

68 [Universities of Sanctuary](#)

69 [Scottish Government - Diversity in the Teaching Profession and Education Workforce sub group](#)

70 [The Robertson Trust - Journey to Success](#)

71 [The Carnegie Trust - Undergraduate Tuition Fee Grants](#)

Trusts, often localised, that provide financial support, e.g., the Dundee Educational Trust,⁷² the Glasgow Educational and Marshall Trust⁷³, and Wheatley Foundation bursaries (for tenants of this social housing provider).⁷⁴ Of this ilk is My Academic Family,⁷⁵ a private company which is described as supporting, “first-generation students in completing their university degrees by providing mentorship and creating supportive environments for first-generation students within universities, thereby unlocking near limitless possibilities to improve their lives and the lives of those around them”.

The breadth of activity is testament to the importance of the fair access agenda to a wide range of organisations in Scotland. Understandably, some of these stakeholders may find themselves agitating others for change to advance their cause. More generally, there is a need to reflect on whether this ecosystem is using its resources to best effect to advance progress toward fair access.

Promising interventions

As noted above, Scottish HEIs work closely with the National Schools Programme to facilitate fair access. However, many go beyond these collaborative endeavours to manage their own widening access work in ways that might be relevant to recruitment, but which are not determined by it. Universities Scotland celebrated this work in Access All Areas⁷⁶, a showcase publication in 2013: Table 3 demonstrates that every institution is engaged in this work.

Table 3: Institutional-led activity to widen access, Scottish HEIs

Aberdeen, University of
Offer free accommodation ⁷⁷ for the first year of university study to new undergraduate students from a SIMD20 postcode area.
Abertay University, Dundee
AHEAD ⁷⁸ is described as “a free university access course which provides you, on successful completion, with a guaranteed place on a range of Abertay University undergraduate degrees”, which is for people who have ... been out of education for three years or more and don't have the qualifications”.
Dundee, University of
The CityCampus project ⁷⁹ is described as allowing “ ... Advanced Highers that cannot be viably delivered within individual schools (in Dundee) to be taught by school staff with school pupils and school materials ... at the University. Pupils commute to the University and have access to ... many of (the University's) resources”.

⁷² [The City of Dundee Educational Trust](#)

⁷³ [Glasgow Educational & Marshall Trust](#)

⁷⁴ [Wheatley Homes Glasgow - Bursaries](#)

⁷⁵ [My Academic Family - About](#)

⁷⁶ [Universities Scotland - Access All Areas](#)

⁷⁷ [University of Aberdeen - SIMD 20 - One Year Free Accommodation Offer](#)

⁷⁸ [Abertay University - AHEAD](#)

⁷⁹ [University of Dundee - External partners for widening access](#)

Edinburgh Napier University
Edinburgh Napier University promotes Students Helping Students ⁸⁰ in which widening participation student ambassadors play an important role in supporting potential students by sharing their experiences.
Edinburgh, University of
INTO University ⁸¹ in Craigmillar is described as a new initiative, which provides “after-school academic tuition, mentoring and programmes to enable young people to achieve their ambitions”, targeting “children growing up experiencing poverty”.
Glasgow Caledonian University
The Caledonian Club ⁸² is a long-standing widening participation and community engagement initiative with five school clusters in Glasgow, working to support young people from 3-18 from disadvantaged communities.
Glasgow School of Art
The S4 Creative Club ⁸³ is described as “a series of online workshops for eligible S4 pupils which takes place on the last Saturday of the month. Participants learn how to make work with a different art material each month, posted to them free of charge before each session. A friendly GSA tutor and student mentor guide the lesson and provide helpful feedback throughout each class.”
Glasgow, The University of
INTO University ⁸⁴ in Govan and Maryhill is described (as for its partner institution, the University of Edinburgh) as a new initiative, which provides “after-school academic tuition, mentoring and programmes to enable young people to achieve their ambitions”, targeting “children growing up experiencing poverty”.
Heriot-Watt University
The Heriot-Watt Widening Access Bursary ⁸⁵ is a payment of £1000 that is awarded to around 50 students each year and is described as providing “students from widening participation backgrounds who are joining (the University) in September 2024, with extra financial support to help towards living costs.”
Highlands and Islands, University of the
UHI reports that ⁸⁶ “The range of available mainstream student support is highlighted to widening participation students through targeted emails. These are sent at regular intervals throughout the academic year, highlighting services to targeted students”.
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh
The Enhanced Learning Tutoring Initiative (ELTI) ⁸⁷ is described as “a high school tutoring programme ... which responds to the “educational challenges faced by disadvantaged and care-experienced young people” providing tutoring sessions to eligible S4-S6 pupils in East Lothian and Midlothian, with over 300 pupils taking part each year”.

⁸⁰ [Edinburgh Napier University - Students helping students](#)

⁸¹ [University of Edinburgh - IntoUniversity Partnership](#)

⁸² [GCU - Caledonian Club](#)

⁸³ P.13 in: [The Glasgow School of Art - CURRENT](#)

⁸⁴ [University of Glasgow - NEW EDUCATION CENTRES TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE IN GLASGOW AND EDINBURGH](#)

⁸⁵ [Heriot-Watt University - Heriot-Watt Widening Access Bursary \(Scotland\)](#)

⁸⁶ [University of the Highlands and Islands - Widening access framework](#)

⁸⁷ [Queen Margaret University - Enhanced Learning Tutoring Initiative](#)

Robert Gordon University
Access To ⁸⁸ is described as a programme which “offers subject-focused sessions and support sessions, delivered by RGU’s academic teaching staff and the Widening Access Team”
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
Widening Access in the Creative Industries ⁸⁹ is described as providing “entry-level short courses, workshops, masterclasses and information and guidance for school pupils in the West of Scotland”
Scotland's Rural College
Offers a comprehensive programme of National Progression Awards ⁹⁰ that can be studied as Distance Learning options by pupils in S4, S5 and S6.
St Andrews, University of
First Chances Fife ⁹¹ is described as a “programme which aims to raise the aspirations and achievements of Fife pupils as they progress through their education. The programme works with pupils from P7 to S6 and continues to support them into further and higher education”.
Stirling, University of
Offers a wide range of Access courses ⁹² to facilitate direct entry to university for those with “few or no formal qualifications and has been out of full-time education for more than three years”.
Strathclyde, University of
Young Strathclyder ⁹³ is described as “a programme of long-term sustained contact and support for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds throughout their compulsory schooling and is designed to raise awareness of higher education, support attainment, and offer learning opportunities”.
West of Scotland, University of the
Foundation Academy ⁹⁴ for senior school pupils is described as giving “the opportunity to experience studying at university level, develop academic skills in a specific subject area, and improve the quality of their university application.”

Although all Scottish HEIs are currently engaged in independent widening participation work, many of the projects that were showcased in Access All Areas in 2013 have been discontinued, among them, Robokids (Heriot-Watt University), Build a Business in a Day (Edinburgh Napier University), Tayside Space School (Abertay University) and the Children’s University (University of Strathclyde). The learning from this work is not readily available, and it is not clear whether these were unsuccessful, partly successful, or successful at the time but no longer necessary.

There is also opportunity for similar projects across Scotland – such as the City Campus project (University of Dundee) and Advanced Higher Hub⁹⁵ (Glasgow Caledonian University) or the Caledonian Club (Glasgow Caledonian University), Young Strathclyder

⁸⁸ [Robert Gordon University - Schools Engagement Programmes](#)

⁸⁹ [Royal Conservatoire of Scotland - Widening Access to the Creative Industries](#)

⁹⁰ [Issuu - SRUC Senior Phase Schools Prospectus 2024](#)

⁹¹ [University of St Andrews - First Chances Fife](#)

⁹² [University of Stirling - Access courses](#)

⁹³ [University of Strathclyde - Young Strathclyder](#)

⁹⁴ [University of the West of Scotland - Foundation Academy](#)

⁹⁵ [GCU - Advanced Higher Hub](#)

(University of Strathclyde) and First Chances Fife (University of St Andrews) – to promote shared learning and evaluation as these are projects that deliver similar programmes, and which aim to achieve similar outcomes.

Thus, although there are examples of evaluation of university-led interventions,⁹⁶ there is a need for more evaluation, more cross-sector collaboration in evaluation, and more effective ways to share the learning from this evaluation among stakeholders, especially potential adopters.

3. Back to Basics: The Nature of Fair Access

Although the fair access agenda is now well-established, some of the ideas and foundations of this work have been contested of late. In this section, I clarify my thinking on five key issues: what is fair regarding fair access; whether fair access concerns more than entry to higher education; the substantive focus of fair access; whether promoting fair access for the most disadvantaged is at the expense of others; and clarification that Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is an indicator, rather than a measure of progress.

Fairness

The goal of widening access to universities has been pursued in Scotland for many years, although some Scottish HEIs have aligned themselves more centrally to this agenda than others. The presentation of the agenda as 'fair access' since 2014 asserts that the goal is not to widen access per se, but rather to achieve social justice, i.e., to ensure that those with ability from more disadvantaged backgrounds are not excluded from higher education on account of the ways in which access has traditionally been administered. This fair access agenda is not an exercise in social engineering (not that it ever was) in which the aim is simply to change the composition of those who pursue higher education. Rather, changing the composition of the student body is a consequence of achieving fair access.

Fair access is achieved through three broad strategies (two of which are multifaceted):

- Bespoke pathways to entry, such as through Access courses, or articulation from college.
- Contextualised admissions, through which it is acknowledged what may appear to be lesser achievement by candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers is equivalent to what otherwise might appear to be higher achievement from candidates who do not experience these disadvantages.
- Work to better prepare disadvantaged candidates, either to achieve in pre-university examinations; to better understand higher education; to strengthen applications to higher education; and to prepare for life at university.

As currently conceived, fair access is pursued for those who may be disadvantaged on account of their socio-economic status. In my opinion, this should continue to be the focus of the work of the Commissioner for Fair Access (see also 'Focus' below).

I acknowledge that there are other imbalances in the student population that may also be considered unfair, for example, the under-representation of: boys in higher education as a whole;⁹⁷ those from minority ethnic backgrounds in 'media, journalism and communication';⁹⁸ or disabled students in 'medicine and dentistry',⁹⁹ among many others. Furthermore, I acknowledge the sense of injustice that may be held by students (and their parents) from backgrounds that are not disadvantaged on account of having to achieve 'higher' grades in Highers and Advanced Highers, compared to their peers who have experienced disadvantage. I consider this in the section on 'Displacement' below.

⁹⁷ Background Table 1 in: [SFC - Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

⁹⁸ Background Table 8b in *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Background Table 8c in *Ibid.*

Entry, experience, and outcomes

Fair access might be regarded as a misnomer. The fair access agenda is one that concerns who enters higher education (access), who thrives during higher education (experience) and what follows from higher education as a direct result of it (outcomes). Of course, experience and outcomes can only be considered if there is access, and it is understandable that the early focus on fair access has been on entry. It might be argued that the fair access agenda has been skewed as there is a national and institutional target for entry, but none for experience or outcomes.

Fair access must continue to focus on entry to higher education. However, there is a need to recalibrate the focus to take account of experience and outcomes. The issues that should be examined include:

- Progression. The SFC's annual Report on Widening Access shares data on which students progress to a second year of study in higher education.¹⁰⁰ More detailed progression data, such as those progressing to each year of a degree is not published.¹⁰¹ Thus, although data on progression is reported, insight is partial.
- Performance. Progression is an indicator of performance. However, it is a crude indicator when it is the level of performance that is used as a tool by employers and HEIs to determine who gets to access post-degree outcomes (which class of degree, rather than pass/fail). More detailed data on performance – beyond progression to next level – would be useful.
- Financial circumstance, work, and impact on study. There is emerging evidence that students' financial situation may be impacting adversely on their studies,¹⁰² and their inclination to pursue studies,¹⁰³ while outside of Scotland innovative approaches to supporting students financially are being pursued.¹⁰⁴ The evidence base on how financial well-being impacts on fair access needs to be strengthened.
- Engagement in the wider opportunities that being an HEI student affords. HEIs market a university experience as being one that extends beyond the seminar room, lecture theatre, work place, or laboratory. It is not clear which students avail themselves, or are able to avail themselves, of these wider opportunities.
- Access to student support services. HEIs have developed an array of student-centred services to meet students' needs. As for wider opportunities, it is not clear which students avail themselves, or are able to avail themselves, of these support services.
- Postgraduate study. For some professions, postgraduate study is the gateway to a career. More generally, there is an assumption that postgraduate qualification enhances career prospects. More consideration must be given to access to

¹⁰⁰ CoWA Table 2 and 2A in: [SFC - Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

¹⁰¹ Data on qualifiers (CoWA Table 3 and 3A) in effect, captures 'progression' in the final year of study (the fourth year of study for those entering HE in year 1; third year of study for those entering HE in year 2; and second year of study for those entering HE in year 3). No data on progression is reported for progression at the end of a second year of study (for those who entered in year 1 and year 2) and at the end of a third year of study (for those who entered in year 1).

¹⁰² For example: [NUS Scotland - Cost of Survival report](#); and [Times Higher Education - Rise in working students 'should prompt radical teaching rethink'](#); and [Times Higher Education - Poorer UK students 'get £1,300 less' towards living costs](#).

¹⁰³ For example: [Times Higher Education - 'Unprecedented' fall in entry rate for disadvantaged students](#); and [Times Higher Education - PhDs and master's 'overwhelmingly slanted' to wealthy students](#)

¹⁰⁴ For example: [Times Higher Education - Redrawing of French student support would be 'huge change'](#); and [Japan Times - Japan plans to make university tuition free for large families](#).

postgraduate study, not least as we know that representation of full time entrants from Scotland's most deprived areas is lower at postgraduate than first degree level.¹⁰⁵

- Destinations. Data on graduate outcomes could be given more prominence in the fair access agenda.

Where these data are readily available, consideration might be given – by institutions and collectives within, and the Scottish Funding Council – to making these publicly available to strengthen the fair access agenda.

Focus

In the sub-section on 'fair' access, I asserted that the focus of the Commissioner for Fair Access should remain on addressing socio-economic disadvantage. I retain an interest in wider patterns of unequal participation, although this is not the focus of my work. On the other hand, I am interested in the intersections between socio-economic disadvantage and other planes of difference. The Report on Widening Access provides insight into this intersectionality.

Gender.¹⁰⁶ Progress has been made in increasing the number and proportion of both men and women from the CoWA Core Target group. However, progress has been more marked and more consistent for women:

- Increase in the relative share of SIMD20 for both men and women. The proportion of male entrants from SIMD20 has increased from 12.5% of all men in 2013-14 to 14.2% in 2021-22; the proportion of women entrants from SIMD20 has increased from 14.5% in 2013-14 to 18% in 2021-22.
- Increase in SIMD20 entrants for both men and women. The number of male entrants from SIMD20 has increased from 1,520 in 2013-14 to 1,910 in 2021-22; the number of women entrants from SIMD20 has increased from 2,325 in 2013-14 to 3,665 in 2021-22.

However,

- Stalling of progress for men. The relative share of SIMD20 men in 2021-22 is lower than that in 2017-18 (14.2% and 14.3%, respectively), with the number of SIMD20 men entrants falling between 2020-21 and 2021-22.
- Gender gap. The gender gap in entrants is most marked in the most deprived areas: there are almost twice as many women entrants among SIMD20 (3,665 women, compared to 1,910 men in 2021-22), with a much narrower order of difference in the least deprived areas (4,870 women, compared to 4,030 men for SIMD80-100 in 2021-22).

Ethnicity.¹⁰⁷ The number and relative share of entrants from a BME background is higher in both the most deprived and least deprived areas, e.g., 26.7% of BME entrants were from SIMD20 areas (925) and 22.4% of BME entrants were from SIMD80-100 areas (780) in 2021-22. Notwithstanding this bi-polar distribution, progress has been made in increasing the number and proportion of BME students from the most deprived areas.

¹⁰⁵ [Scottish Government - Access to postgraduate study - representation and destinations: discussion paper](#)

¹⁰⁶ SFC (2023) 'Number and Proportion of Scottish-domiciled entrants to Scottish Universities across deprivation quintiles, 2013-14 to 2021-22, FTFP (Background Table 2)'. *ROWA 2021-22 Background Tables*. [SFC - Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

¹⁰⁷ SFC (2023) 'Number and Proportion of Scottish-domiciled entrants to Scottish Universities across deprivation quintiles, 2013-14 to 2021-22, FTFP (Background Table 2)'. *ROWA 2021-22 Background Tables*. [SFC - Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

- Increase in number of BME entrants from SIMD20 areas. The number of BME entrants from SIMD20 areas has increased from 490 in 2013-14 to 925 in 2021-22.
- Increase in the relative share of BME entrants from SIMD20 areas. The proportion of BME entrants from SIMD20 areas has increased from 23.2% in 2013-14 to 26.7% in 2021-22.

However,

- Stalling of progress. The relative share of BME entrants from SIMD20 areas fell between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (from 29.2% to 26.7%), as the number of BME entrants from SIMD20 areas fell from 1030 to 925.

Disability.^{108,109} Progress has been made in increasing the number and proportion of entrants with a known disability from the CoWA Core Target group.

- Increase in number of entrants with a known disability who are from SIMD20 areas. The number of entrants with a known disability who are from SIMD20 areas has increased from 380 in 2013-14 to 985 in 2021-22.
- Increase in the relative share of entrants with a known disability who are from SIMD20 areas. The proportion of entrants with a known disability who are from SIMD20 areas has increased from 13.3% in 2013-14 to 16.7% in 2021-22.

However,

- Mixed evidence for the most recent year. Although the number of entrants with a known disability who are from SIMD20 areas has increased in each of the last six years (from 450 in 2015-16 to 985 in 2021-22), the relative share of students from a SIMD20 area with a known disability is lower in 2021-22 than it was in 2019-20 (16.7%, compared to 17.1%).

Care experience.¹¹⁰ Progress has been made in increasing the number and proportion of entrants with care experience from the CoWA Core Target group.

- Increase in number of care-experienced entrants who are from SIMD20 areas. The number of care-experienced entrants who are from SIMD20 areas has increased from 25 in 2013-14 to 145 in 2021-22.
- Increase in the relative share of care-experienced entrants who are from SIMD20 areas. The proportion of care-experienced entrants who are from SIMD20 areas has increased from 16.2% in 2013-14 to 26.5% in 2021-22.

However,

- Stalling of progress. The relative share of care-experienced entrants from SIMD20 areas fell between 2020-21 and 2021-22 (from 32% to 26.5%), as the number of care-experienced entrants from SIMD20 areas fell from 155 to 145.

Age.¹¹¹ Progress has been made in increasing the number and proportion of both younger (under 21) and older (21 and over) entrants from the CoWA Core Target group.

¹⁰⁸ SFC (2023) 'Number and Proportion of Scottish-domiciled entrants to Scottish Universities across deprivation quintiles, 2013-14 to 2021-22, FTFP (Background Table 2)'. *ROWA 2021-22 Background Tables*. [SFC - Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

¹⁰⁹ Some caution is required with these data. We do not know with certainty how much of the increase in numbers of those that are disabled is a real increase in widening access, rather than students having more confidence to self-report it (e.g., more comfortable highlighting mental health issues), or institutions being more pro-active in facilitating this.

¹¹⁰ SFC (2023) 'Number and Proportion of Scottish-domiciled entrants to Scottish Universities across deprivation quintiles, 2013-14 to 2021-22, FTFP (Background Table 2)'. *ROWA 2021-22 Background Tables*. [SFC - Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

¹¹¹ SFC (2023) 'Number and Proportion of Scottish-domiciled entrants to Scottish Universities across deprivation quintiles, 2013-14 to 2021-22, FTFP (Background Table 2)'. *ROWA 2021-22 Background Tables*. [SFC - Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

- Increase in the relative share of SIMD20 for both younger and older entrants. The proportion of younger entrants from SIMD20 has increased from 10% in 2013-14 to 12.8% in 2021-22; the proportion of older entrants from SIMD20 has increased from 23.9% in 2013-14 to 25.1% in 2021-22.
- Increase in SIMD20 entrants for both younger and older age groups. The number of younger entrants from SIMD20 has increased from 2,085 in 2013-14 to 3,005 in 2021-22; the number of older entrants from SIMD20 has increased from 1,765 in 2013-14 to 3,950 in 2021-22.

However,

- Stalling of progress in relative share for older age groups. The relative share of older students from SIMD20 areas is lower in 2021-22 than it was 2017-18 (25.1% and 26.4%, respectively), although the number of older entrants from SIMD20 areas has increased.
- Most under-represented sub-population. At only 12.8% of all entrants in 2021-22, the relative share of younger students from SIMD20 areas is lower than the equivalent relative share for BME students, care-experienced students, those with a known disability, and both men and women.

Displacement

It is a fact that increasing the relative share of CoWA Core Target entrants (SIMD20) determines that the share of other cohorts will be reduced.¹¹² Concerns have been raised that increasing the share of CoWA Core Target entrants could be at the expense of marginally less disadvantaged entrants (SIMD20-40), and students who do not experience disadvantage (assumed to be in cohorts SIMD40-100).

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, at present, increasing the share of students from the most deprived areas has not led to fewer students progressing to higher education from less deprived areas. The number of entrants has increased for all SIMD quintile cohorts since 2013-14. As Table 4 reports (comparing 2021-22 to 2013-14):

- There has been an increase of 1,745 entrants from Scotland's 20% Most Deprived Areas
- Increase of 1,395 entrants from marginally less deprived areas (SIMD20-40)
- Increase of 830 entrants from SIMD40-60 areas
- Increase of 1,010 entrants from SIMD60-80 areas
- Increase of 690 entrants from the least deprived areas in Scotland (SIMD80-100)

Notwithstanding these progressive trends, there are 1.6 times more entrants from the least deprived areas, compared to the most deprived areas. There is room for improvement.

Furthermore, concerns that the marginally less deprived may be 'displaced' are also, at present, unfounded. The relative share of both SIMD20 and SIMD20-40 has increased since 2013-14 (from 13.7% to 16.5% for the most deprived areas, and from 15.2% to 16.8% for SIMD20-40 areas).

Table 4: The number of entrants to Scottish HEIs, by SIMD quintile, 2013-14 to 2021-22.

¹¹² SFC (2023) 'Number and Proportion of Scottish-domiciled entrants to Scottish Universities, 2013-14 to 2021-22, by various characteristic groups, FTFP (Background Table 1)'. *ROWA 2021-22 Background Tables*. [SFC - Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Deprivation Quintile									
SIMD0-20	3,850	3,965	4,015	3,965	4,650	4,900	4,970	5,515	5,595
SIMD20-40	4,295	4,525	4,515	4,550	4,800	4,970	4,635	5,270	5,690
SIMD40-60	5,285	5,375	5,385	5,410	5,365	5,600	5,505	6,165	6,115
SIMD60-80	6,525	6,495	6,500	6,550	6,520	6,825	6,690	7,150	7,535
SIMD80-100	8,225	8,145	8,145	8,270	8,380	8,585	8,435	8,915	8,915
Total	28,285	28,640	28,770	28,885	29,880	31,065	30,620	33,290	33,885

Notes: Shaded cells denote an annual increase in the number of entrants.

On the other hand, there is mixed evidence for the most recent year. The number (Table 4) and relative share of SIMD20-40 increased between 2020-21 and 2021-22; although the number of SIMD20 increased (Table 4), the relative share of SIMD20 entrants reduced.

Understanding SIMD – an indicator, not a measure

As signposted in the introduction to this Report, most of the objections to the fair access agenda focus on the way in which disadvantage is estimated – more specifically, the use of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) to identify the disadvantaged. SIMD is flawed as a measure of the disadvantage experienced by individuals. SIMD does not aim to measure individual disadvantage, and it is well-known among those concerned to tackle poverty in Scotland that more people living in poverty in Scotland live outside Scotland's 20% Most Deprived Areas and most people who live in one of Scotland's 20% Most Deprived Areas do not live in poverty. The risk of false positives and false negatives when using SIMD to identify the disadvantaged is readily apparent. These risks have already been discussed at length in relation to the fair access agenda.

However, I recommend that we should continue to use SIMD to indicate progress with fair access. There are five points in favour of continuing to use SIMD, the first three of which are listed below:

- Tracking progress. SIMD is the metric that we have used to track progress since the start of the CoWA agenda. It has provided focus to the work of HEIs and other stakeholders working to promote fair access. Continuing to use SIMD provides continuity when tracking progress.
- Promoting social justice. Promoting fair access with a focus on Scotland's most deprived areas, adds to the body of social policy interventions that seek to promote social justice in Scotland, countering the multiple inter-related disadvantages that are characteristic of Scotland's most deprived localities.
- National target to which we have committed. We have set a target to be achieved by 2030 (with the next interim target in 2026) and we should not renege on this goal, which might otherwise signal a weakening of commitment to promote fair access.

I accept that critics may find these three arguments to be wanting, criticising, respectively: persisting with an indicator that is flawed; charging Scottish HEIs with a responsibility to address social imbalances that extend beyond education; and persisting with the target premised on these points. However, there are two more arguments in favour of continuing to use SIMD:

- SIMD status is not the only metric that Scottish HEIs use to promote fair access. The University of Aberdeen, for example, uses the following as widening access criteria in addition to SIMD:¹¹³
 - Care-experienced students.
 - In receipt of free school meals.
 - In schools defined as University of Aberdeen priority schools.
 - Estranged From Parents.
 - Have Caring Responsibilities.
 - In receipt of Educational Maintenance Allowance.
 - Experienced a physical and/or mental health issue that has impacted on secondary education.
 - Ordinarily resident in a POLAR 4 Quintile 1 (Rest of UK) postcode area.
 - Gypsy, Roma, or Travelling Community.
 - Refugee/Asylum Seeker Status.
 - Home address is in an area considered to remote and rural (5-8 on the Scottish Government 8-fold Urban Rural Classification).
 - Parent Or Carer in the Armed Forces.
 - Served In Armed Forces.
 - Have been through the Children’s Panel process.
 - Parents(s) have had a custodial sentence.
- All Scottish HEIs use a range of widening access criteria, although not all use as extensive a list as the University of Aberdeen.

- At the present time, we do not have a workable alternative to SIMD. The Access Data Short Life Working Group has explored two alternatives to SIMD (Scottish Child Payment, and Free School Meals) and is likely to conclude that we are not yet able to use either of these individual-level indicators to track progress toward fair access.

In effect, SIMD is an indicator of progress toward fair access, rather than a measure of it. It has, and continues to serve, a useful purpose in providing focus to the fair access agenda and has served to evidence the progress that has been made in Scotland in recent years. However, there is room for improvement and the need to be vigilant to ensure it is used to best effect. I make three further points regarding SIMD.

- Continue work to operationalise a robust indicator of individual disadvantage. Although we are not able to replace SIMD at the current time, or to define a second indicator to complement SIMD, working toward one of these goals should be a priority action.
- Examine deployment of SIMD. It is within the gift of Scottish HEIs to scrutinise the extent to which SIMD adequately represents disadvantage among their student body, by examining the intersection of SIMD with other indicators of disadvantage. Similarly, it is within the gift of Scottish HEIs to use the marker of SIMD20 to understand whether student experience, performance and outcomes are equivalent to non-SIMD students.
- Displacement. Notwithstanding the evidence that the focus on SIMD20 as a marker of disadvantage is not adversely impacting access to Scottish higher education at present, there is a need to continually monitor this issue, particularly if there are no further increases in the total number of entrants, and with a view to understanding impact on courses within institutions.

4. 2023: A Year of Review for Renewal

2023 was an exceptional year for thinking through the future of (higher) education in Scotland. Three reports were published, each of which has implications for the fair access agenda, i.e., Purpose and Principles for Post-school Education by the Scottish Government, and two reports commissioned by the same – Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation/ Skills Delivery Landscape Review (the Withers review) and It's Our Future: Report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (the Hayward report). We also reflect on an economic review completed in 2023 that has implications for the fair access agenda.

Purpose and Principles for Post-school Education

In June 2023, the Scottish Government published a suite of outputs from its Purpose and Principles work,¹¹⁴ which had the aim of providing an overarching framework that sets the policy direction and shapes delivery”.¹¹⁵

There is much in Purpose and Principles that gives confidence that fair access will remain central to what the Scottish Government hopes to achieve through higher education. This is most clear in the opening objectives outlined by the Minister for Higher and Further Education on the issue of equality:¹¹⁶

That opportunities are available to all based on their ability to learn and that learning presents a pathway out of poverty. That learners who need it most are financially supported to complete their chosen pathway. That we work hard so that those who face the greatest barriers to accessing opportunities are supported and encouraged to do so, based on a genuine understanding of what they need to succeed and, that we use the strength of our social research on poverty and society to further support this work.

Thereafter, many of the system outcomes that are specified are relevant to the fair access agenda:¹¹⁷

- Collaboration across the post-school system is pursued proactively with shared values and a common purpose. (in Transparent, Resilient and Trusted)
- The introduction to Supportive and Equitable is described as “People are supported throughout their learning journey, particularly those who need it most”.
- The public funding system for student support is perceived as fair, transparent, and accessible by learners, providers, and employers. (Supportive and Equitable)
- Learners have access to holistic, person-centred support, empowering them to access, sustain and complete their learning. (Supportive and Equitable)
- The system supports a culture of lifelong learning with a ‘no wrong door’ approach, where learners have equity of access and opportunity to fulfil their interests and potential. (in High quality)
- Learners, no matter their background or prior attainment, can develop skills to enter and progress in good quality employment and/or realise their potential. (in Agile and responsive)

¹¹⁴ [Scottish Government - Post-school education, research and skills - purpose and principles](#)

¹¹⁵ p.4 in: [Scottish Government - Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills](#)

¹¹⁶ p.2 in *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ pp.4-5 in *Ibid.*

Furthermore, many of the 37 short-term outcomes (1-3 years),¹¹⁸ 32 medium-term outcomes (4-7 years)¹¹⁹ and 14 long-term outcomes (8+ years)¹²⁰ pertain to fair access. For example:

- Providers, policymakers, and delivery partners can access data to allow efficient, timely and equitable reporting on outcomes across the post-school system. (medium-term outcome in Transparent, resilient and trusted).
- Provider approaches and national targets to widen access and encourage retention are aligned with each other and fit for purpose (short-term outcome in Supportive and equitable).
- The system supports a culture of lifelong learning with a 'no wrong door' approach, where learners have equity of access and opportunity to fulfil their interests and potential (long-term outcome in High quality)
- Learners understand the skills they need to access post-graduation opportunities, including further study, work, and entrepreneurship (short-term outcome in Globally respected).
- Learners, no matter their background or prior attainment, can develop skills to enter and progress in good quality employment and/or realise their potential (long-term outcome in Agile and responsive).

However, there will be a need to monitor how these principles are realised in practice:¹²¹ For colleges, universities and providers this means greater flexibility in how institutions use the investment that is available and autonomy to set ambitious, stretch targets for delivery, rooted in individual purpose, mission, and context, but with greater accountability for their contribution to Scotland's economy and society at home and abroad".

There is a need to ensure that this admirable aspiration to strengthen institutional autonomy does not undermine current commitments to enhance fair access in each Scottish HEI.

Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation/ Skills Delivery Landscape Review - The Withers Review

In May 2023, the Scottish Government published Fit for the Future,¹²² Alan Withers' independent review of the skills delivery landscape in Scotland. As in the Purpose and Principles review, there is explicit commitment to the fair access agenda, evident both in terms of how success is defined and within one of the recommendations for action:

- Success: "my interpretation of success is that: Every individual in Scotland has equitable access to the learning opportunities required to reach a positive destination in their working life, collectively ensuring Scotland's economy and society can flourish".¹²³

¹¹⁸ In particular, short-term outcomes 8,9,10,11,13,14,23,31 and 32 in [Scottish Government - Introduction: logic models for the Purpose and Principles](#)

¹¹⁹ In particular, medium-term outcomes 5,7,8,9,10,11,12,15,16,18 and 26 in *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ In particular, long-term outcomes 3,4,5,8 and 13 in *Ibid.*

¹²¹ p.6 in [Scottish Government - Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills - Initial Priorities](#)

¹²² [Scottish Government - Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation](#)

¹²³ Paragraph 1.20 in *Ibid.*

- Recommendation 5: embedding commitments to equalities, widening access and fair work within the delivery system.¹²⁴

Beyond this explicit support, sentiments are expressed that re-affirm points made within this report and previous reports of the Commissioner for Fair Access: imploring simplification¹²⁵ and universal access¹²⁶ to information to all options that are available in post-school education; ensuring that funding – lack of, and lack of access to, is not a disincentive to anyone pursuing post-school education;¹²⁷ establishing multi-year funding assumptions and commitments to assist with planning and to encourage partnership working;¹²⁸ and seeking equity for those who wish to pursue studies on a part-time basis.¹²⁹

Although there is much alignment and shared sense of purpose between the work and recommendations of Fit for Purpose and the Commissioner for Fair Access (past and present), there may be some divergence of opinion with regards to the role of national targets. It is asserted that:¹³⁰

There is a lack of coherent measurement of quality and impact across the landscape as a whole, national targets that constrain flexibility and resources that are diverted to managing conflicts or satisfying bureaucratic processes.

I would concur that adverse unintended consequences of pursuing national targets are to be avoided. However, I am strongly in favour of maintaining the national target for fair access, as this has been a key asset in driving forward progress in fair access since CoWA and continues to serve a useful purpose in this regard.

It's Our Future: Report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment - The Hayward Report

In June 2023, the Scottish Government published It's Our Future,¹³¹ the Independent Review Group's (led by Professor Louise Hayward) appraisal of, and blueprint for, the future of qualifications and assessment in Scotland. If implemented as recommended, the Scottish Diploma of Achievement would commence within the timeframe for achieving the CoWA 2030 target.¹³²

Universities Scotland's Learning and Teaching Group welcomed the report,¹³³ which proposed the introduction of a Scottish Diploma of Achievement, comprising programmes of learning (qualifications), project learning and a personal pathway.

Many aspects of what is proposed are consistent with some of the practice that is integral to fair access and the work of the National Schools Programme, and the independent work of universities in widening access and recruitment, e.g., encouraging career reflection in

¹²⁴ p.38 in *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Paragraph 2.21 in *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Paragraph 1.23 in *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Paragraph 3.02, pillar 6 in *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Paragraph 4.37 in *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Recommendation 7 in *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Paragraph 4.29 in *Ibid.*

¹³¹ [Scottish Government - Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation](#)

¹³² p.93 in *Ibid.* Embedding the Scottish Diploma of Achievement is recommended between 2028 and 2032.

¹³³ p.12 in *Ibid.*

the Personal Pathway,¹³⁴ mentoring to inform post-school choices,¹³⁵ and the acknowledgement that design must ensure that disadvantage is not compounded by the introduction of a new system.¹³⁶ Indeed, a strong position was adopted that opportunities must be regarded as entitlements and, in response to consultation responses, the proposal for the Personal Pathway was amended to shift the emphasis away from the number of experiences the learner has undertaken toward reflection on what an individual has learned through an experience.¹³⁷

As for Fit for Purpose, there was also much alignment and shared sense of purpose between the work and recommendations of It's Our Future and the Commissioner for Fair Access (past and present). For example, the suggestion that the learner would own their profile, which should be available digitally¹³⁸ is consistent with, and would be facilitated by, long-standing call by the Commissioner for a single student identifier; as is the call for greater consistency in the application of the SCQF.¹³⁹

On the other hand, there is need to reflect at greater length on some issues. For example, although there is good reason to explain the recommendation that Programmes for Learning is the only component to be assessed,¹⁴⁰ there is a risk that this defaults to the component that matters most (perhaps reinforced by the recommendation that time devoted to this is not to be reduced¹⁴¹) and that the high-stakes culture¹⁴² of the current system is not fully displaced. Similarly, there is an implicit assumption that six years of schooling should be the norm, with the inherent risk of duplicating learning at SCQF7¹⁴³ without wider system change. Although the concept of Project Learning was warmly welcomed, it was acknowledged that the idea of such learning has been valued and envisaged since the outset of the Curriculum for Excellence.¹⁴⁴ Finally, notwithstanding the sensitivity to disadvantage that is shown throughout, there is a need for stronger recognition that provision of opportunity does not determine that everyone is in a position to avail themselves of these.

The critical issue for fair access is the need to consider the implications for contextualised admissions, which has been a key vehicle for promoting fair access to higher education in Scotland. Although there is no reason why contextualised admissions could not continue to be applied to Programmes of Learning, it is less clear how this could be achieved for Project Learning and Personal Pathways. It is vital that the same principle is applied if all three components are to attain the status of equal partners in determining access to post-school opportunities.

¹³⁴ p.75 in *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ p.74 in *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ For example, p.73 in *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ pp.66-67 in *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ p.105 in *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ p.80 in *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ p.66 in *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ p.66 in *Ibid.*

¹⁴² p.12 in *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ p.71 in *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ p.77 in *Ibid.*

Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation

The wider purpose of education is central to the thinking of those who were tasked with revising the future of education in Scotland. However, it is not always apparent that this wider purpose of the education, let alone the fair access agenda in higher education, is fully acknowledged by those outside education.

The first annual report on Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation¹⁴⁵ acknowledged the value of some of the work being undertaken within higher education to support Scotland's economic development. For example, reference was made to: the pilot project in South West Scotland through which the University of the West of Scotland was working with Dumfries and Galloway College and Dumfries and Galloway Council to develop integrated degree pathways in Cyber Security and Business for senior phase learners in the region (p.14); the research undertaken by the University of Strathclyde in defining green jobs (p.14); and the leadership by University of Strathclyde staff in establishing a New Deal for Business group (p.19). Of course, more of the work undertaken within Scottish HEIs to support Scotland's economy could have been acknowledged,¹⁴⁶ although that is not the issue for this report.

One of the six objectives of the NSET is to promote 'a fairer and more equal society'. In reflecting on progress, reference is made to how economic development aligns to Best Start, Bright Futures, the Scottish Government's work to tackle child poverty, and of many other developments to redress imbalances in the labour market. In future, opportunities should be grasped to align fair access in higher education with this wider agenda to support Scotland's economic transformation, focusing on ways to promote fairness for those who accessed higher education from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the contribution that fair access can make to achieve the objective of fashioning a 'fairer and more equal society'.

¹⁴⁵ [Scottish Government - National Strategy for Economic Transformation: annual progress report June 2023](#)

¹⁴⁶ [Universities Scotland - Economic Transformation](#)

5. Pressing Issues: Renewing the Alliance for Fair Access

The decisions and actions that are taken over the next two years will determine whether the next CoWA target for 2026 will be achieved. In this section, I make 20 recommendations over 10 domains. My recommendations extend beyond a narrow focus on the CoWA target, to consider how the framework for promoting fair access can be strengthened.

Retaining the focus

Earlier in the report (Fairness), I described the goal of fair access since 2014 as being one that seeks to achieve social justice, i.e., to ensure that those with ability from more disadvantaged backgrounds are not excluded from higher education on account of the ways in which access has traditionally been administered. I also explained that SIMD has been used as the means to monitor progress (Understanding SIMD – an indicator not a measure). Although there are other imbalances in access to higher education and although there are other ways in which progress can be gauged, this approach has served us well, providing focus and impetus to action. I would hope that there comes a time when we can strengthen a fair access focus beyond this, but for now and for Scotland as a whole, I recommend that we retain our focus.

Recommendation 1. The primary focus for fair access should continue to be improving outcomes for those who experience or have experienced socio-economic disadvantage.

Recommendation 2. Retain SIMD as the central metric to indicate national progress in achieving fair access.

Strengthening the use of SIMD

We need to improve the way in which SIMD is used to support our understanding of fair access. We have the means to better understand whether fair access to higher education is reaching those from the most deprived areas (SIMD10) and those who fall just outside what are currently judged to be the most deprived areas (SIMD20-30 and SIMD30-40). Our best estimate is that almost one-in-four children and young people are living in poverty at the current time, and although area deprivation is not synonymous with poverty, this understanding adds to the strong grounds for extending our focus beyond the 20% Most Deprived Areas. There is also an inconsistency in how SIMD is deployed in tertiary education, with the focus in further education on the 10% Most Deprived Areas,¹⁴⁷ in contrast to 20% Most Deprived Areas in higher education. Although 20% Most Deprived Areas should be retained as the central metric (Recommendation 2) more use should be made of deciles to better understand patterns of fair access.

Recommendation 3. To strengthen the utility of SIMD to understand fair access, SFC and institutions are encouraged to report evidence in deciles up to SIMD40, in addition to quintiles.

¹⁴⁷

[SFC - Guidance for the development of College Outcome Agreements: 2020-21. Annex B: Technical Guidance on SFC's measures of progress](#)

CoWA recommended that in addition to the national target, each institution should work toward achieving at least 10% of entrants from Scotland's 20% Most Deprived Areas, with this target to be reviewed in 2022 (with a view to the target level for institutions being increased). My predecessor argued in his final report that this institutional target was no longer fit-for-purpose and should be replaced with a basket of indicators defined by the institution.¹⁴⁸ I believe institutions should retain a focus on SIMD, but agree that this particular target is not useful, as – given the geography of area deprivation - it does not encourage most institutions to make progress as they have always exceeded it, and it is highly unlikely that others will ever be able to achieve it. One alternative is to define institutional targets. For now, I prefer an approach that gives autonomy to institutions but implores each to make progress.

Recommendation 4. Withdraw the SIMD Institutional target but introduce a commitment from each HEI to take action to increase the proportion of SIMD20 among its entrants or, if this is demonstrably not possible without adverse consequences, to match the highest proportion and number of SIMD20 entrants that it achieved since 2013-14.

An inclusive approach to fair access

Scottish HEIs do not limit their widening access work to facilitating the participation of those from Scotland's 20% Most Deprived Areas. As illustrated earlier using the example of the University of Aberdeen (Understanding SIMD – an indicator not a measure), SIMD20 is only one of many markers that are used by Scottish HEIs for the purpose of contextualised admissions (and other forms of widening access work). Although it is recommended that SIMD is maintained as the primary focus for fair access work, Scottish HEIs are not conveying the totality of their impact in widening access by limiting reporting to the single SIMD20 metric.

Recommendation 5. For universities in Scotland to collectively specify a basket of indicators from which individual HEIs may draw to demonstrate their wider work in promoting fair access.

The fair access agenda is focused on higher education. This is understandable given that those from deprived areas are under-represented in higher education, and over-represented in further education: 24.2% of all Scottish-domiciled entrants to higher education in Scottish FEIs were from Scotland's 20% Most Deprived Areas in 2021-22).¹⁴⁹ Further education has an important role to play in facilitating fair access to higher education through articulation. More generally, Scotland is strengthening its 'tertiary' focus to align and strengthen post-school outcomes.¹⁵⁰ If we only focus on fair access to higher education, we do not fully understand fair access and, inadvertently, suggest that fair access to further education is not of concern. We should maintain a focus on increasing the participation of those from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education but situate this within the context of understanding the totality of participation in post-school education.

Recommendation 6. The Scottish Government should consider strengthening the remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access to assume responsibility for advising on fair access to the whole of tertiary education.

¹⁴⁸ Recommendation 2 in [Maintaining the Momentum Towards Fair Access: annual report 2022](#)

¹⁴⁹ Table 1A in (Background Tables) in [Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

¹⁵⁰ [Scottish Government - Introduction: logic models for the Purpose and Principles](#)

A more ambitious approach to fair access

Although SIMD has served us well, and although I recommend that we continue to use SIMD to appraise progress, I concur with my predecessor and many others¹⁵¹ that individual-level indicators would better serve the fair access agenda. As noted earlier in the report, the Access Data Short-Life Working Group explored the possibility of introducing individual-level indicators and is likely to conclude that we are not yet ready to operationalise these (Ecosystem of support). Although this would be disappointing for those who advocate for individual-level indicators, if we are not yet ready, then this work must be viewed as the foundation and catalyst for further work to achieve individual-level indicators of fair access in the near future. It is my opinion that this will present an opportunity to embolden work to achieve fair access and is one that Scotland should be ready to embrace.

Recommendation 7. The Scottish Government should take the necessary preparatory steps to embolden the fair access agenda beyond 2026 by transitioning toward individual-level indicators of socio-economic disadvantage, and thereafter to challenge institutions to achieve fair access for prospective students who have experienced such disadvantage.

A more granular analysis of fair access

I have recommended that we strengthen the use of SIMD to better understand fair access (Recommendations 3 and 4). There are many other ways in which we need to make better use of existing data to enrich our understanding of fair access.

We need to give equal weight to student experience, post-degree outcomes and entry to higher education. The primacy of the CoWA metric tends to distort the discussion (if not the focus). Consideration must be given to whether existing CoWA metrics for experience (i.e., retention¹⁵²) and outcomes (i.e., qualifiers¹⁵³) are sufficient. Metrics must be robust and useful, although we must remember that metrics are means to an end. The goal is to focus more attention on the experience of disadvantaged students in higher education and the outcomes that directly follow from this.

Recommendation 8. The fair access agenda should be recalibrated to give equal weight to entry, student experience, and outcomes.

The CoWA metric focuses on aggregate patterns of entry to higher education for one cohort of students – full-time, Scottish domiciled, first entrants. This is understandable given that this is the largest cohort of entrants and, arguably, the cohort with which greatest impact can be made. However, there are other pathways to higher education and these are equally important in promoting fair access to undergraduate education, e.g., part-time students, Graduate Apprenticeships, those pursuing sub-degree qualifications/studies, and those who are not Scottish domiciled. Access to postgraduate education is also worthy of attention.

¹⁵¹ [Universities Scotland - Increasing number of Scottish university students from deprived backgrounds requires a change in how deprivation is defined](#)

¹⁵² Table 2 and 2a (Background Tables) in [SFC - Report on Widening Access 2021-22](#)

¹⁵³ Table 3, 3a and 3b (Background Tables) in *Ibid.*

Recommendation 9. The primary focus on fair access should remain on Scottish-domiciled, full-time, first-degree entrants. However, for a rounded perspective on fair access to higher education, it is necessary to also focus on Graduate Apprenticeships, part-time undergraduate study, and postgraduate study.

Similarly, full-time, Scottish domiciled, first degree entrants access higher education through three pathways, i.e., direct entry from school (including agreed deferred entry), articulation from college, and adult wider access. ROWA background tables provide intelligence on the articulating entrants at a national level¹⁵⁴. However, there are ways in which these data could be usefully enhanced. For example, data could be presented on the proportion who progress with 'advanced standing' within each subject area (using the Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECOS)) for each of the three pathways, rather than only presenting the aggregate total to progress with 'advanced standing' for each HECOS subject area).¹⁵⁵ No data are presented on progression through adult access. It would also be helpful to understand the relative contribution of the three pathways to higher education within subject areas and individual Scottish HEIs.

Recommendation 10. Wherever practicable, data on fair access should be disaggregated to understand the relative contributions of different pathways (direct entry from school; articulation; and adult wider access).

Finally, it would be helpful for a more granular analysis of participation in, and progression to higher education that follows from, the interventions designed to facilitate fair access to the 'high demand professions' within National Schools Programme, i.e., law, medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry, or economics (for Reach), art, design, and architecture (for Access to Creative Education) and performing or production arts (for Transitions).

Recommendation 11. SFC, in conjunction with participating universities, should ensure that disaggregated data are available for each of the disciplines that comprise the 'high demand professions' that are part of the AHDP programme (to enable the national impact of this work to be appraised) and the Transitions programme.

Securing the role of practitioners

One of the early successes following CoWA was the establishment of the Scottish Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP). I firmly believe in the importance of listening to, learning from, and enabling, those involved in facilitating participation to higher education who are working directly with the next generation (or future generation) of entrants. My predecessor made recommendations for SCAPP in each of his last four annual reports, imploring in different ways for adequate and sustainable funding.¹⁵⁶ I have also encountered some precarity within institutions, with fixed-term contracts creating instability and uncertainty for some access practitioners. If the sector is committed to a fair access agenda (to 2030 at least), then the means must be found to provide security to those who are at the heart of delivering this work.

¹⁵⁴ Tables 14a, 14b, 14c and 14d (Background Tables) in *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Table 14c (Background Tables) in *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ The fifth recommendation in 2019, Recommendation 2 in 2020, Recommendation 7 in 2021 and Recommendation 5 in 2022.

Recommendation 12. SFC should act on the advice of the previous Commissioner for Fair Access, specified as a recommendation in each of his last four annual reports, to commit to more secure and longer-term funding for SCAPP.

It is important that we know ‘what works’ in delivering fair access. Access and participation practitioners have a role to play in answering this question, but it should not be their responsibility, particularly if this is a distraction from practice. The greatest contribution that SCAPP makes to promoting fair access in Scotland is to support the development and further professionalisation of access and participation practitioners.

Recommendation 13. It should be re-affirmed that the central purpose of SCAPP is as a vehicle to support the development and professionalisation of a widening access and participation practitioner community in Scotland.

Engendering collective purpose among universities

There is a body of work that appraises access and participation work in Scotland. Some individuals specialise in researching access and participation (e.g., Laurence Lasselle at the University of St. Andrews¹⁵⁷); some institutions highlight the internal research that appraises their own widening participation work (e.g., University of Glasgow¹⁵⁸); there have been attempts to showcase ‘what works’ (e.g., the report commissioned by Universities Scotland and authored by Sheila Riddell in 2014¹⁵⁹); and there is SCAPP’s Fair Access Toolkit¹⁶⁰, which aims to provide an overview of the effectiveness, cost and strength of evidence that underpins interventions designed to promote participation in higher education. However, research and evaluation in the field of access and participation appears disparate, disconnected, without priority and under-developed.

Recommendation 14. SFC, in conjunction with SCAPP, Universities Scotland and the wider educational research community in Scotland, should examine what steps should be taken to strengthen research and evaluation to underpin the fair access agenda.

There are many examples of collaboration and shared purpose as universities in Scotland work toward achieving fair access to higher education, to which some have been referred in this report. On the other hand, Scottish HEIs have their own objectives to fulfil and targets to meet. There has always been competition for students, which can be healthy for the sector as a whole and beneficial for individual students. Informally, some concerns have been expressed to me that achieving the CoWA target leads institutions to ‘compete’ for the same students in ways which may not necessarily be efficient for the sector. Against this context, it would be helpful to clarify what intelligence in understanding ‘what works’ in promoting fair access is commercially sensitive and what is in the national interest.

Recommendation 15. For universities in Scotland to collectively agree what intelligence is in the national interest to promote fair access (as opposed to that which is commercially sensitive), and thereafter to ensure that this intelligence is made available to all relevant stakeholders in Scotland.

¹⁵⁷ [Dr Laurence Lasselle](#)

¹⁵⁸ [University of Glasgow - WIDENING PARTICIPATION RESEARCH](#)

¹⁵⁹ [Universities Scotland - Action on Access](#)

¹⁶⁰ [Scottish Framework for Fair Access - Toolkit](#)

As was noted earlier (Promising interventions) several widening access interventions that were previously celebrated are no longer being delivered. The learning from this work is not readily available, and it is not clear whether these were unsuccessful, partly successful, or successful at the time but no longer necessary. It is particularly important that students/entrants are not disadvantaged by decisions to significantly alter provision, or at least, that the impact of these decisions are understood and mitigated.

Recommendation 16. Should the decision be taken to withdraw funding for an intervention that had been integral to promoting fair access, or if an element of such work is to be radically altered, providers should undertake (and funders should encourage) an impact assessment to ascertain the impact on pupil cohorts who have previously benefited from this provision.

Bolstering the ecosystem

The National Schools Programme is focused on conversion, working with pupils in the senior phase of Scottish education, enabling them to access higher education. Complementing this, is much of the widening participation work of individual Scottish HEIs, which takes place in the later stages of broad general education, with some taking place at earlier stages of the same. There is growing acknowledgement that for fair access to be transformative engagement is required before the senior phase, although there is a need to consider what this should involve, how early this should commence, and the practicalities of (potentially) extending work to an estate that includes over 2,000 primary schools, and over 2,500 early learning centres.

Recommendation 17. School leaders in Scotland, the SFC and its National Schools Programme, SCAPP and Universities Scotland should examine if, and if so what, steps should be taken to underpin the fair access agenda within the broad general education phase in Scottish education.

Fit for the Future (the Withers review) reported bewilderment when trying to navigate the array of post-school options that are available, reporting that, “Despite the proliferation of web pages and initiatives, I didn’t find a single place where I could access all the information I might need to show me the pathways towards a potential occupation, across different providers and the support that might be available, depending on my individual needs”.¹⁶¹ Such a resource could be used to enhance equity and promote access to the resources that are currently available to support access to higher education.

Recommendation 18. SFC, Universities Scotland and Skills Development Scotland should examine the prospects of introducing an easily accessible user-centred web-based resource that provides a single point of reference to inform prospective students and other stakeholders of the programmes and resources that are available to support access to higher education.

¹⁶¹ Paragraph 2.21 in [Scottish Government - Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation](#)

Optimise use of what we already (can) have

Individual HEIs are encouraged to optimise the use of data that could encourage more of those within their institution to make a more active contribution to the fair access agenda. It is helpful to make disaggregated data on progression and performance readily available to Module Leaders and Programme Leaders, which would enable them to reflect on whether there are fair access issues for them to address. However, without incentive and encouragement to use these data, their potential impact may not be realised. It would be helpful to share promising practice among Scottish HEIs with regards to how fair access data is used within institutions.

Back in 2016 CoWA Recommendation 29 implored the Scottish Government to improve mechanisms that would enable data to be shared and learners to be tracked.¹⁶² More recently, It's Our Future envisaged that a Scottish Diploma of Achievement would move with the learner and could be built upon as the school leaver progressed to college, employment, university, or the voluntary sector.¹⁶³ It is time to revisit this ask of government to examine the prospects for introducing a single student identifier in Scotland that would serve the diverse needs of Scottish education, not least the ability to better understand movement and progression across different levels of education to achieve fair access.

Recommendation 19. Stakeholders should explore the prospects for introducing a single student identifier to improve tracking and to facilitate more robust evaluation of the impact of fair access activity.

Affirmation

We are at a pivotal moment in the fair access agenda. Progress has slowed and the context within which it is to be achieved is more challenging than when the agenda was introduced. Asking key stakeholders to re-affirm their commitment to the fair access agenda was a regular ask of my predecessor.¹⁶⁴ Although action is the best form of affirmation, there is much to be gained by restating commitment to achieve fair access and to take the steps necessary to achieve this.

Recommendation 20. Stakeholders and leaders should reaffirm their commitment to promote fair access and commit to take those actions necessary to attain the next interim target for 2026.

¹⁶² [A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access](#)

¹⁶³ p.105 in [Scottish Government - Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation](#)

¹⁶⁴ Recommendation 22 in 2017, the 22nd recommendation in 2019, Recommendation 5 in 2020 and Recommendation 1 in 2021.

6. My priorities in 2024

In conclusion, I outline my ten priorities for 2024, the first three of which describe how I will approach my work as Commissioner: it is my intention that each of the remainder will lead to future recommendations on actions to be taken to promote fair access.

1. To follow up on each of my recommendations and to report on progress in my next annual report. My predecessor made frequent reference to the status of the 34 recommendations presented by the Commission on Widening Access in his annual reports and occasional briefing papers,¹⁶⁵ most notably in *Re-committing to Fair Access: A Plan for Recovery*¹⁶⁶ in 2021. Sir Peter also made 78 recommendations across five reports. Those embedded in the fair access agenda will be able to identify those recommendations that were acted upon ... and those which were not (some of which featured as recommendations in several annual reports). As with my predecessor, I propose to follow-up on progress between reports. However, I also intend to present a review of progress (or otherwise) with each recommendation in subsequent Commissioner reports.

2. To produce a second annual report, to be published, as soon as is practicably possible, after the release of the SFC's Report on Widening Access 2022-23. Having been appointed in January 2023, it was prudent to spend the full year immersing myself in the fair access agenda, before preparing my first annual report. My predecessor published his first report in December (2017), before reverting to a month of publication that followed soon after the release of the Scottish Funding Council's annual release of the Report on Widening Access, i.e., June (2019, 2020 and 2021) and May (2022). I will revert to this schedule and publish my second annual report in the middle of 2024.

3. To produce my first bi-annual report, ideally to be published at the start of 2025, i.e., halfway between annual reports, to provide a timely update on progress to promote fair access. We are now laying the foundations to meet the next interim CoWA target in 2026, which will require timely interventions, an intensification of activity, and a sustained focus. I am mindful of the multiple demands on the time of leaders who are responsible for shaping how their institutions and organisations respond to the challenge of promoting fair access. However, my engagements with these leaders and with practitioners in 2023 re-assures me that there is strong commitment to achieve fair access, and that a more regular report from the Commissioner for Fair Access would be welcomed as an asset, rather than viewed as a burden.

4. To engage with school leaders and universities in Scotland to explore whether inefficiencies at SCQF Level 7 can be addressed through system change and/or institutional practice. If we were designing an education system from scratch: we would not devise one in which unconditional offers of a place at university enabled school pupils to dis-engage from studies in 6th year, as the offer determined that they were pursuing qualifications that were no longer a condition of entry; we would encourage and enable students to enter university immediately after 5th year if they had achieved sufficient qualifications at SCQF Level 6; we would permit entry to all courses after S5 to 'access students' who had achieved the Minimum Entry Requirements; and we would enable entry to the second year of university for students who had attained sufficient credit at SCQF Level 7 in their 6th year of schooling. However, there may be compelling reasons for the

¹⁶⁵ For example, in response to CoWA Recommendation 13, the Commissioner prepared a briefing paper on university 'league tables': [Commissioner for Fair Access discussion paper: league tables](#)

¹⁶⁶ [Higher education - re-committing to Fair Access - a plan for recovery: annual report 2021](#)

existence and persistence of what appear to be inefficiencies or inequities. I intend to explore these issues in 2024.

5. To engage with Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland to better understand the prospects for increasing the proportion of HN students articulating with so-called 'Advanced Standing' into SCQF Level 8 and 9. There has been little progress in the proportion of HN students entering university at the SCQF Level above the one that they attained at college. Recommendations in the CoWA report¹⁶⁷ and in each of my predecessor's annual reports¹⁶⁸ have not led to a step-change in the proportion of students articulating from college with Advanced Standing. I intend to understand why so little progress has been made, with a view to reviewing the 75% benchmark specified by SFC.

6. To examine retention rates for SIMD20 entrants, focusing on why these have not improved substantially since the introduction of the CoWA agenda. There has been little progress in the proportion of SIMD20 entrants progressing to a second year of study. As for entrants articulating with so-called 'Advanced Standing', I intend to understand why so little progress has been made, in improving retention rates of SIMD20 entrants.

7. To reflect on insight from the Student Finance and Wellbeing Survey commissioned by the Scottish Government, and the wider evidence base, to better understand how students' financial situation impacts on fair access. There is emerging evidence that students' financial situation may be impacting adversely on their studies,¹⁶⁹ and their inclination to pursue studies,¹⁷⁰ while outside of Scotland innovative approaches to supporting students financially are being pursued.¹⁷¹ I intend to review this emerging evidence base, paying particular attention to the insight that the Student Finance and Wellbeing Survey will provide for students in Scotland.

8. To explore possibilities to enhance and promote regional intelligence, and to strengthen cross-institutional collaboration in regions to advance the fair access agenda. There are many examples of regional co-operation to promote fair access in Scotland, not least in the work of the four regional collaborations of the National Schools Programme,¹⁷² and the two regional collaborations of the Scottish Widening Access Programme.¹⁷³ However, in other respects direction of travel is not always consistent within regions. For example, between 2020/21 and 2021/22, in the city of Dundee, the number of SIMD20 entrants to Abertay University increased when the numbers fell in the University of Dundee; in Glasgow, the number of SIMD20 entrants to the University of Glasgow increased, when the numbers fell in both the University of Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian University; and in Aberdeen, the number of SIMD20 students increased in the University of Aberdeen, but fell in Robert Gordon University. The Access Delivery Group has also described how the distribution of datazones within the SIMD20 target group are unevenly distributed

¹⁶⁷ Recommendation 8.

¹⁶⁸ Recommendation 15 in 2017, the third recommendation (not numbered) in 2019, Recommendation 3 in 2020, Recommendation 10 in 2021 and Recommendation 6 in 2022.

¹⁶⁹ For example: [NUS Scotland - Cost of Survival report](#); and [Times Higher Education - Rise in working students 'should prompt radical teaching rethink'](#); and [Times Higher Education - Poorer UK students 'get £1,300 less' towards living costs](#).

¹⁷⁰ For example: [Times Higher Education - 'Unprecedented' fall in entry rate for disadvantaged students](#); and [Times Higher Education - PhDs and master's 'overwhelmingly slanted' to wealthy students](#)

¹⁷¹ For example: [Times Higher Education - Redrawing of French student support would be 'huge change'](#); and [Japan Times - Japan plans to make university tuition free for large families](#).

¹⁷² [SFC - SFC Access initiatives](#)

¹⁷³ [Scottish Wider Access Programme](#)

across Scotland.¹⁷⁴ I intend to review the prospects for strengthening regional intelligence¹⁷⁵ and collaboration to support the fair access agenda.

9. To review the deployment of contextual admissions and Minimum Entry Requirements across Scottish HEIs to appraise whether the impact on fair access is optimal. The introduction of Minimum Entry Requirements (in 2019)¹⁷⁶ for all courses and a commitment to work toward consistency and clarity in the application of contextualised admissions were among the most significant of the responses of universities in Scotland to the CoWA report.¹⁷⁷ Now that these have bedded in to the admissions system, it would be useful to review their deployment to understand if they are being used to optimal impact in promoting fair access.

10. To engage with professional bodies, Programme leads, and Heads of Department (or equivalent) to promote shared responsibility for the fair access agenda in Scotland. For good reason, the leaders in promoting fair access within universities have been university executives and those working specifically to admit and facilitate access to higher education. Although academics provide support in these endeavours, and although some professional groupings have expressed an interest in examining the socio-demographic complexion of its student population,¹⁷⁸ there is scope to strengthen the fair access ecosystem by encouraging more reflection on disciplines and university departments.

¹⁷⁴ Refer also to: [Scottish Government - Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2020v2 local and national share calculator](#)

¹⁷⁵ An exemplar of which is: [A Blueprint for Fairness in the Glasgow Region](#)

¹⁷⁶ [Universities Scotland - Scotland's universities introduce minimum entry requirements](#)

¹⁷⁷ [Universities Scotland - Working to Widen Access](#)

¹⁷⁸ [Royal Scottish Geographical Society - The RSGS Education Conference](#)

Annex 1. List of Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The primary focus for fair access should continue to be improving outcomes for those who experience or have experienced socio-economic disadvantage.

Recommendation 2. Retain SIMD as the central metric to indicate national progress in achieving fair access.

Recommendation 3. To strengthen the utility of SIMD to understand fair access, SFC and institutions are encouraged to report evidence in deciles up to SIMD40, in addition to quintiles.

Recommendation 4. Withdraw the SIMD institutional target but introduce a commitment from each HEI to take action to increase the proportion of SIMD20 among its entrants or, if this is demonstrably not possible without adverse consequences, to match the highest proportion and number of SIMD20 entrants that it achieved since 2013-14.

Recommendation 5. For universities in Scotland to collectively specify a basket of indicators from which individual HEIs may draw to demonstrate their wider work in promoting fair access.

Recommendation 6. The Scottish Government should consider strengthening the remit of the Commissioner for Fair Access to assume responsibility for advising on fair access to the whole of tertiary education.

Recommendation 7. The Scottish Government should take the necessary preparatory steps to embolden the fair access agenda beyond 2026 by transitioning toward individual-level indicators of socio-economic disadvantage, and thereafter to challenge institutions to achieve fair access for prospective students who have experienced such disadvantage.

Recommendation 8. The fair access agenda should be recalibrated to give equal weight to entry, student experience, and outcomes.

Recommendation 9. The primary focus on fair access should remain on Scottish-domiciled, full-time, first-degree entrants. However, for a rounded perspective on fair access to higher education, it is necessary to also focus on Graduate Apprenticeships, part-time undergraduate study, and postgraduate study.

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