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Douglas Ross, MSP

Convener

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Scottish Parliament

Edinburgh

EH99 1SP

28 August 2025

Dear Douglas,

Widening Access to Higher Education Inquiry

I am writing to you following publication of the Education, Children and Young People Committee's report on their short inquiry to look at the progress being made on widening access to higher education. Please accept my apologies for the delay in responding to the Report.

The following addresses the recommendations for Scottish Government made by the Committee in its report.

Recommendation

The Committee believes that, although the widening access targets relate to students from deprived areas, it is important to consider young people from backgrounds including disabled and BME students as part of the widening access agenda. The Committee asks the Scottish Government to consider further measures to improve access for these groups.

Scottish Ministers have committed to introducing Scotland's first National Transitions to Adulthood Strategy to ensure there is a joined-up approach so that all young disabled people can experience a supported and positive transition to adult life.

The focus of widening access rightly remains on addressing socio-economic disadvantage. SFC's most recent Report on Widening Access shows that progress has been made in increasing the number and proportion of BME students and those with a known disability from the most deprived areas.

The number of Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree students entering HEIs with a declared disability has increased by 250 from the previous year (2022/23) and BME students have increased by 170 from the previous year.

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We will continue to monitor progress of these groups.

Recommendation

The Committee notes the evidence it heard in relation to disabled students and is disappointed that the findings from the last review of disabled student support do not appear to have been actioned at the time. The Committee notes the Scottish Government plans to conduct a fresh consultation on this issue in the near future and would welcome timescales for when this consultation will be undertaken, when a report will be published and when disabled students are likely to see improvements as a result of this work. The Committee welcomes the Minister's agreement to consider reconvening the group set up following the 2023 report into disabled students support and asks for confirmation that this group will be reconvened and, if so, when it would next meet.

A consultation on support for part-time study and disabled students was launched on 26 June and will close on 9 October 2025. Responses will be subject to external analysis. Thereafter a report of its findings will be published and Ministers will consider next steps to ensure we continue to meet the needs of students.

The Scottish Government remains committed to improving support for disabled students in further and higher education. Following careful consideration, the Government has decided not to reconvene the group established in response to the 2023 review at this time.

This consultation provides a broader platform for feedback and policy development, including input from Disabled People-Led Organisations (DPOs) and student representatives the Government is exploring alternative mechanisms to ensure that lived experience continues to inform policy.

Recommendation

The Committee requests that the Scottish Government provides an update on the National Transitions to Adulthood Strategy, including specific details of when it will be published.

The strategy and a number of accessible formats was published on 2 July 2025, and an advanced copy of the strategy was sent to the Committee a day before publication.

Recommendation

The Committee notes the evidence it heard in relation to the barriers faced by BME students. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government liaises with relevant stakeholders, including those with direct experience of working with students from BME backgrounds, on how these barriers might be addressed. In addition, the Committee recommends the Scottish Government works with Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners to ensure widening access programmes take into account the issues raised by BME students when accessing higher education.

The Scottish Government acknowledges the concerns raised by the Committee regarding the barriers faced by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students in accessing higher education.

Every HEI must have an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion strategy. The Scottish Funding Council have committed to reviewing the equality outcomes set by institutions by Autumn

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2025. The information gathered from the review will be used to share good practice and encourage institutions who could improve their outcome settings to do so.

The Government remains committed to ensuring fair access for all students, including those from BME backgrounds. This includes working toward the 2030 target for widening access, with specific attention to underrepresented groups.

Officials are actively engaging with Universities Scotland, Colleges Scotland, and the Commissioner for Fair Access to better understand and address the unique challenges faced by BME students. Recognising that BME students may also face multiple disadvantages—such as socio-economic hardship or care experience.

Officials regularly meet with Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP) to ensure that widening access programmes are inclusive and responsive to the lived experiences of students, including BME students.

Recommendation

The Committee welcomes that the number of care experienced students is at record level and that the number of care experienced students in relation to articulation is above the level for the general population. The Committee welcomes the publication of the National Ambition for Care Experienced Students which considers intake, retention, and successful completions for care experienced students.

Information on articulation care experience students is published in the SFC Report on Widening Access:

[Report on Widening Access 2022-23 - Scottish Funding Council](#)

In background table 14b.

The release also covers numbers of estranged and care experience students.

SG also published additional information on estranged students in November 2022: [Estranged students in Further \(FE\) and Higher Education \(HE\) - experiences: research - gov.scot](#)

Data: [Estranged students: university data 2020-21 - gov.scot](#)

Recommendation

The Committee also notes the evidence in relation to the housing barrier for care experienced students and estranged students and welcomes the commitment from the Scottish Government to consider this further. The Committee recommends the Scottish Government provides an update to the Committee on the steps it plans to take in relation to these areas including indicative timescales for action.

Local authorities and learning institutions should work together as corporate parents to ensure the housing needs of young care experienced students are met.

The Scottish Government's Continuing Care policy means that eligible young people leaving foster, kinship or residential care can stay with their families or carers as they make the transition to college or university, until at least their 21st birthday. In addition, eligible young people, including those who were 'looked after' at home, can access Aftercare until at least

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their 26th birthday, which may include help in securing accommodation to undertake education or employment opportunities, and other financial support.

Students with experience of care may also be eligible for the Care Leaver Council Tax Exemption until their 26th birthday and Care Experienced Accommodation Grant to assist with accommodation costs over the summer months during their course of study. We are aware from recent work undertaken with Widening Access leads to update information held on The Propel into Education website hosted by Become that almost all institutions in Scotland either provide year round accommodation or support to find year round accommodation for care experienced students, including providing rent guarantees for privately rented accommodation.

Recommendation

The Committee notes the evidence that, despite good work, some students are still not receiving the correct advice from their careers advisors and that there was a lack of awareness of widening access programmes and the graduate apprenticeship scheme. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government works with stakeholders/practitioners and SCAPP to address these issues and ensure awareness of widening access information is consistent among practitioners, including careers advisors, across Scotland.

The Scottish Government welcomes the Committee's findings and shares its concern that some students are not receiving consistent or accurate advice regarding widening access programmes and the graduate apprenticeship scheme.

We are committed to working with stakeholders, including SCAPP, to ensure that careers advisors and other practitioners across Scotland are fully informed about the range of widening access opportunities available.

Through collaboration with Education Scotland and Skills Development Scotland, we are reviewing the guidance and training provided to careers professionals to ensure it reflects current access pathways and programmes.

The Government continues to support the expansion and visibility of graduate apprenticeships, recognising their role in widening access and offering alternative routes into higher education.

As reaffirmed in our response to the Commissioner for Fair Access's 2024 report, our goal remains to ensure that higher education is accessible to all, regardless of background, and that advice and support systems reflect this commitment.

Recommendation

The Committee welcomes the monitoring and collection of data collection in relation to former forces personnel entering further and higher education and the work being done by Scottish Credit and Qualifications Partnership to support a mapping tool. The Committee requests that the Scottish Government keeps the Committee updated of developments in this area.

The Scottish Government welcomes the Committee's recognition of the progress being made to support former Armed Forces personnel in accessing further and higher education.

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Information on service leaver status is published in the SFC Report on Widening Access, and included in background table 16:

[Report on Widening Access 2022-23 - Scottish Funding Council](#)

Given the reliance on SIMD data and the fact that a number of institutions are in areas with limited numbers of SIMD20 students, the Committee agrees that the institutional COWA targets for 10% of full-time first-degree entrants to be from SIMD20 areas should be reviewed. The Committee agrees that progress by institutions with limited SIMD20 learners in their area should be measured by maintaining or improving SIMD20 numbers which would allow those institutions to continue to demonstrate positive progress towards widening access, whilst at the same time recognising the broader context in which they are operating.

The Scottish Government has written to the SFC (copy attached) advising that Ministers are proposing to implement the Commissioner's recommendation by removing the current target for each institution and replacing it with a commitment from each HEI to increase the proportion of SIMD 20 entrants or to match the highest proportion they have achieved since 2013-14.

Institutions are expected to continue to work towards achieving the 2026 and 2030 widening access targets and to commit to increasing the proportion of SIMD 20 entrants.

Officials will work with SFC and the sector to implement this change and to ensure sector-wide goals are still met without unintended consequences.

The Government will continue using SIMD as the main measure for tracking fair access, but is open to using additional indicators to give a fuller picture.

Recommendation

The Committee notes the Commissioner's recommendation that its remit should be strengthened by including colleges, and that this suggestion has been rejected by the Scottish Government. Given the evidence heard during this inquiry, the Committee recommends that the Scottish Government extends the remit of the Commissioner to include colleges. Should the Scottish Government choose not to do this, the Committee would welcome an update on the reason for rejecting this proposal.

Given the necessary focus on the Commission on Widening Access 2026 and 2030 targets, we believe that the primary focus of the Commissioner's remit should continue to be higher education. However, the Government acknowledges the need for broader reform and intends to address college inclusion and parity of esteem through separate, system-wide considerations of the post-school education landscape.

Recommendation

The Committee notes part-time students are not currently included in COWA targets and understands the need to recognise and support these learners. The Committee commends the work being done by the Open University in supporting part-time students from SIMD20 areas and its contribution to the widening access agenda. The Committee asks the Scottish Government to set out a timescale for the consultation on part-time study.

A consultation on support for part-time study and disabled students was launched on 26 June and will close on 9 October 2025. Responses will be subject to external analysis.

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Thereafter a report of its findings will be published and Ministers will consider next steps to ensure we continue to meet the needs of students.

Recommendation

The Committee notes that the Part-Time Fee Grant is only available to part-time students earning under £25,000 per year. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government considers how part-time students might be recognised by widening access targets. The Committee also recommends that the eligibility criteria for the Part-Time Fee Grant is reviewed as part of the Scottish Government's forthcoming consultation.

The consultation on support for part-time study and disabled students will seek views on whether part-time students should be included in the CoWA targets.

It will also seek views on the Part-Time Fee Grant eligibility.

Recommendation

Given the importance of ensuring that students not only gain access to university but that they thrive when there, the Committee agrees that retention should be a priority area in the context of widening access. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government should collate and analyse retention data throughout a widening access student's time at university, rather than maintaining the current focus on the end of year one and on course completion. This will help provide a better picture of that student's experience, and potentially highlight any barriers that may arise throughout their time at university.

Scottish Government will engage with SFC and HESA to understand the possibilities of collecting enhanced retention data. Historically, the challenge is around definitions with many students repeating years, changing course, changing provider or taking a year out.

Recommendation

In addition, the Committee notes the evidence it heard, which suggests that if universities wish to improve retention amongst widening access learners, the focus should be on tackling financial barriers and improving mental health support. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government factors this evidence into its own work on widening access and retention.

The Student Mental Health Action Plan, published in September 2024, aims to support student mental health in Scotland, through effective collaborative working across colleges, universities and key partners.

It recognises that "financial stress can be a significant contributor to student mental health concerns" and the measures taken by the Government to alleviate those.

A Student Mental Health Action Plan Delivery Group has been established to inform the delivery of the Action Plan, and met for the first time in April.

Additionally, we fund NUS Scotland's student mental health project, Think Positive, to support students experiencing mental ill health, tackle stigma and discrimination, and promote wellbeing in colleges and universities.

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Recommendation

The Committee also notes evidence from witnesses that the North-East pilot on FSM data is not scalable at national level, and recognises the limitations of what can be learned from the pilot. The Committee therefore requests that the Scottish Government sets out how it will take forward plans to introduce FSM data as an access measure at a national level, including timescales attached to this work and any legislation required.

We recognise that not everyone who faces socioeconomic disadvantage lives in an SIMD20 area, and it is important that we identify and support these learners as well.

The North-East of Scotland has a unique data sharing agreement in place between local authorities and further and higher education institutions. This means that it is an ideal location to test out the use of Free School Meals data in widening access, as, unlike elsewhere in Scotland, the framework for sharing data amongst these partners is already in place.

While initial feedback from universities is that this approach is not scalable, evaluation of the pilot later this year will still allow us to understand the impact of using FSM data for widening access, whatever the approach taken. We will use the findings to inform our approach to individual-level metrics.

When implementing an approach in Scotland we need to ensure we comply with UK data protection legislation in how we use individual measures of deprivation. In particular, we need to ensure proportionality when sharing personal data. This is a priority and my officials are working on what is required to overcome these barriers in Scotland – whether that is legislative change or more practical considerations.

The Government will keep the Committee informed of progress, including developments in data sharing and any legislative steps.

Recommendation

The Committee welcomes the offer from the Information Commissioner's Office to work with the Scottish Government and institutions on these issues and recommends that the Scottish Government accepts this offer as a matter of urgency.

Officials have had an introductory meeting with the ICO to discuss further potential work on a Unique Learner Number (ULN) and with DfE colleagues to discuss the current UK ULN scheme and will continue to engage with them as scoping work progresses.

Recommendation

The Committee strongly agrees with the value of introducing a Unique Learner Number (ULN) to track students' educational journey and allow a better understanding of what works regarding transitions in the longer term. The Committee was extremely disappointed in the apparent lack of progress in relation to the introduction of a ULN, and that the Scottish Government has said this will not be introduced in the short or even medium term, despite this being raised by COWA almost 10 years ago. The Committee was also disappointed that the Scottish Government was unable to provide indicative costs for this or to confirm whether legislation would be required for this to be introduced. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government now commits to the introduction of a ULN, and outlines how this will be achieved.

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The Scottish Government already makes use of a number of data sources that link data to understand learner journeys. This includes SDS's data hub, the SG's LEO linked data and SFC's articulation database.

Whilst we recognise the potential long-term benefits of a Unique Learner Number (ULN), it is a wide-ranging issue requiring careful consideration and we continue to explore how this could be delivered for Scotland. Our focus continues to be on increasing access for those from our most deprived communities.

Officials continue to explore the various options associated with a ULN. This includes meeting further with stakeholders such as Universities Scotland, the SFC and the Commissioner for Fair Access to understand the specifics of how they see a ULN functioning in theory.

This is complex work which is inherently cross-cutting in nature, and potentially involves sharing the personal, sensitive data of millions of individuals. It is therefore right that this work is done properly and thoroughly.

Be assured that work on progressing the widening access agenda within our institutions is very much ongoing, the committee will be kept updated on progress.

Yours Sincerely,

GRAEME DEY MSP

Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans

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T: 0300 244 4000
Francesca Osowska
Chief Executive, SFC

Cc: Cara Aitchinson

30 July 2025

Dear Francesca,

I am writing to set out a change in policy direction regarding the initial Commission on Widening Access recommendation (recommendation 32 – A Blueprint for Fairness) that students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10% of full-time first degree entrants in each of the individual universities.

In his annual report, published January 2024, Professor John McKendrick, Commissioner for Fair Access, makes 20 recommendations for a range of parties, including Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council, and colleges and universities. With regards to the 10% target, his recommendation was to:

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.

I am implementing the Commissioner's recommendation by removing the current target for each institution and replacing it with a commitment from each HEI to increase the proportion of SIMD 20 entrants or to match the highest proportion they have achieved since 2013-14. I would like SFC to work with my officials in SG and the sector to introduce this change for academic year 26/27.

I also expect institutions to continue to work towards achieving the 2026 and 2030 widening access targets and to commit to increasing the proportion of SIMD 20 entrants.

Thank you for progressing this matter.

Your sincerely, _____

Graeme Dey
Minister for Higher and Further Education and Minister for Veterans.

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