

## RESPONSE FORM

**Name:** Shona Struthers

**Organisation:** Colleges Scotland

**Role:** Chief Executive

**Are you responding on behalf of this organisation?** Yes

**Email:** [shona.struthers@collegesscotland.ac.uk](mailto:shona.struthers@collegesscotland.ac.uk)

**Tel:** 01786 892008

Please provide evidence and views in relation to the questions and strategic themes on the next page.

Evidence should relate to widening access specifically for those from **socio-economically** deprived backgrounds.

Responses **should not exceed 1500 words.**

## 1. The identification and removal of barriers to access and retention

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What are the main barriers to accessing university and higher education in colleges for people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and those with care experience, and how can these be overcome?
- What more can be done specifically by colleges and universities, including institutions with the highest entry requirements, to generate a greater volume of successful applications from people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?
- What actions can be taken to support people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds who enter higher education to successfully complete their course?

### Access – barriers and ways to overcome

The barriers to accessing higher education have been well documented and scoped by many researchers. For example, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2013 commissioned a [Literature review of research into widening participation to higher education](#) and [International research on the effectiveness of widening participation](#) and in 2012 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) published a [Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success](#). In addition, Colleges Scotland's presentation to the Widening Access Commission on Wednesday 29 April 2015 summarised the key barriers and described some initiatives in the college sector that were indicative of ways to successfully overcome these barriers.

Considerations of access is usually concerned with the social composition of the higher education population relative to the population as a whole. Colleges are well aware of the need to make available opportunities and treatment that are independent of socio-economic background or other factors that may lead to educational disadvantage. The commitment of the college sector to addressing issues of disability, gender, and care-leavers in relation to access is amply evidenced in the 2015/16 [College Outcome Agreements](#).

Success factors in overcoming barriers to access in colleges include:

- the provision of high quality advice and careers guidance at all points in the student lifecycle [this delivers success by ensuring that prospective entrants have the right information at the right time for decision making]
- clear pathways for progression through education to employment [this delivers success by giving entrants a 'line of sight' from their current status to a more positive one]
- support for vulnerable young people at the points of transition [this delivers success by building confidence in the ability for self-determination]
- easily accessed web-based provision of information about the college sector including its portfolio of provision and success stories [this delivers success by highlighting that there are many routes to higher education].

### Applications – raising chances of success

Through engagement with the [Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme](#) and the [Equality Challenge Unit](#), colleges are fully aware of the requirement to operate a fair admissions process and to avoid unconscious bias. College admissions staff are skilled in what would constitute as an acceptable route to entry for all college courses and take steps to ensure that they do not inadvertently create barriers which narrow the chances of success.

Colleges have moved increasingly to a professional approach to the processing of applications that involves centralised teams operating standardised procedures rather than faculty-based approaches that could be relatively ad hoc. This has improved communication and feedback to prospective students, which has proved to be of particular value to vulnerable applicants or those from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not have a family history of engagement with higher education.

### **Course completion – actions to support**

Colleges have achieved success in helping students to successfully complete higher education courses by providing planned and targeted additional help and support. This begins with the provision of well-planned induction experiences to help students negotiate the crucial early stages of their course and continues with individual course tutor support and easy access to learning services.

Colleges also provide appropriate professional development for staff in relation to aspects of support that may be required for students with a disability or from disadvantaged backgrounds. All colleges have now published equality outcomes to meet the duties of the Equality Act 2010. These are available to view on individual college websites. See [City of Glasgow College](#) as an example.

### **Examples of successful arrangements to support successful completion**

**Ayrshire College** has an Associate Student agreement with the University of the West of Scotland which allows college students to visit the university, use its facilities, and provides 'top up' units as appropriate to support progressing students before they transition to university.

**Fife College** has developed a range of formal higher education articulation agreements and franchised provision for learners in Fife. These opportunities are particularly important to those from poorer backgrounds and those who do not wish to travel to access higher education. The franchised programmes allow them to access this level of study whilst maintain part-time employment and studying from home.

**West Lothian College** is working with Equate Scotland, which is supported by the Scottish Government, the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), the National Lottery and Edinburgh Napier University, to make a positive difference to recruiting and retaining young women into science, engineering, technology and built environment courses.

## 2. The identification and scaling up of best practice

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What can be learned from Scottish access programmes, across the education system and early years, about best practice in relation to improving access, retention and successful completion?
- What new programmes might be introduced in Scotland, drawing on experiences in the rest of the UK and other countries, that have had proven success in improving access, retention and successful completion for people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?
- Which widening access programmes, initiatives and curriculum components, with a proven record of success, have the potential to be scaled up nationally?

### **Best practice in access, retention, completion**

The best practice ensures coverage of the whole of the student lifecycle (getting in, staying on, completing) to ensure that each student is supported at every stage of the learner journey. This is what college support systems are set up to do. Each of the various national programmes (Scottish Wider Access Programme, Schools for Higher Education Programme) report on their own outcomes.

### **Examples of good practice that could be introduced**

Drawing on the success of colleges in the Highlands & Islands in deploying open and distance learning to enhance access and provide on-course support, more extensive use could be made of this technology for students in all areas of Scotland. This could be facilitated by providing specialised training for staff to develop these approaches, and funding for enhancements to college IT infrastructures.

In addition, research shows that providing high quality transition support, including welcoming and support networks, can be successful in improving retention and completion. Again, this could be facilitated by the provision of guidance and specialised training for staff to deliver such services.

### **Scaling up of initiatives**

Individual colleges will respond with exemplars drawn from their own initiatives, however here are a few of examples:

**North East Scotland College (NESCOL)** offers students in particular subject areas a 2+2 Degree-Link Programme, where they can gain two awards from four years of higher education – an HND and an Honours degree. NESCOL students successfully completing a relevant college HND qualification can obtain entry to the third year of a four year degree at the Robert Gordon University. In some subjects a 1+3 Degree Link is available where students who complete an HNC can enter into second year of the appropriate degree course.

**Forth Valley College**, in partnership with the University of Stirling, delivers integrated degree programmes in Applied Biological Sciences; Heritage and Conservation Management; Digital Media and Computing Science. Unlike traditional articulation arrangements, these are wholly integrated tertiary programmes, jointly designed, developed and delivered by the university, college and industrial partners. Students are Associate Students of the university from the beginning and, while they undertake their HND in college, they benefit from a wide range of enhancement activities including workplace visits, guest lectures, visits to the university for joint lectures, seminars and practical activities.

**Dundee & Angus College** has collaborated with Abertay University to provide a seamless pathway in sports education. The desire to create a fully integrated provision across the two institutions has resulted in the Dundee Academy of Sport and a programme of support that will ensure college students develop a sense of being part of the Academy right from the start of their HN level study. Students develop a motivation and understanding that progression to Abertay after HN studies is part of an established pathway with the opportunity once (or more) a month to work with Dundee Academy of Sport staff.

### 3. The data and measures needed to support access and retention

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What evidence or data is required to effectively measure Scotland's progress on widening access to higher education at both a national and institutional level?
- What evidence or data should be considered as part of the admissions process for students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?
- Do we have enough evidence on the effectiveness of existing widening access programmes and initiatives and, if not, what else do we need to do to build a robust evidence base in this area?

#### **Evidence or data measuring whether access is being widened**

At present the range of indicators includes data on gender, age, protected characteristics, Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) quantile, and disclosed characteristics such as disability or care leavers. In the past few years these indicators have mostly shown a trend towards greater participation from minority groupings. In the absence of a unified system of applications for college courses, it is not possible to estimate the true ratio of admissions to applications.

#### **Evidence that student is from socio-economic deprived background**

The current reporting on widening access in colleges makes use of the SIMD quantiles to indicate the trends in participation rates from within these sections of the population. The deficiencies of this single measure have been well-documented by the Scottish Government statisticians and other education commentators. Colleges Scotland would prefer to see an appropriate range of measures that allowed more effective targeting of interventions and funding to those most likely to benefit from them.

#### **Building a more robust evidence base**

One way forward might be to have greater cohesion and data transfer from the various management information systems (MIS) in which an individual's data might live. It should be possible for a young person leaving school, entering college and progressing to university to have their progress record follow them in a seamless manner.

### 4. Any other comments

Colleges Scotland is supportive of the aims and objectives of the Commission for Widening Access and will endeavour to facilitate the Commission's work with Scotland's colleges. The college sector has established itself as a strong partner in initiatives that involve collaboration with schools and with the university sector.

Colleges Scotland would draw the attention of the Commission to the following:

The college sector is known for its 'can do' attitude in enabling access and supporting students to persist in their studies and progress to positive destinations. It should be recognised that colleges will adopt their own particular initiatives and approaches, tailored to the identified needs of their region and agreed with their strategic partners. However, a key element to the

success of the initiatives outlined in this response (and further exemplified in individual college responses to the Commission) is the availability of professional and dedicated staffing and support resources. Due to the reduction in core funding over the past years, maintaining this resource has been challenging for individual colleges. If greater success in widening access is to be achieved, then a concurrent and sustained investment in measures – such as those previously mentioned in our response and the success of which has been evidenced – will be required.

The college sector is subject to a whole range of ‘asks’ from the Scottish Government, Scottish Funding Council and their strategic partners. Colleges Scotland would advise that there should be a coherent approach to securing the many different strands of government education policy.

The needs of all learners are important, including adult learners – whether it be the desire to return to employment after an absence or upskilling of the workforce. Colleges Scotland would ask that the Commission looks at the requirements of all individuals including adult learners in the development of a widening access policy.

**The closing date for responses to this call for evidence is 20 July 2015**

Please provide your response in Microsoft Word format. **Responses should not exceed 1500 words.**

**Is there any part of your response which you would prefer not to be made public?** NO

**If yes please indicate in the box below:**

Please email or post the completed response form to:

**Email:** Wideningaccess@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

**Postal Address:**

Secretariat to the Widening Access Commission  
Higher Education and Learner Support Division  
5 Atlantic Quay  
150 Broomielaw  
Glasgow  
G2 8LU

The Commission thanks you for your response.