

## National Union of Students Poverty Commission Consultation

### Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the collective voice for the college sector in Scotland, representing its interests with the aim that colleges are at the heart of a world class education sector that is recognised, valued and available to all. Colleges Scotland, as the membership body, represents all 26 colleges spread across 13 regions, which deliver both further education and around 28% of all higher education in Scotland.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the National Union of Students (NUS) Poverty Commission consultation. We are happy for our response to be published as part of the commission and would welcome contact when the commission's final report is published.

### Consultation Response

Our response is set out below.

### What do you perceive to be the barriers for working class people, particularly focusing on the constituents you work with, accessing and succeeding in post-16 education?

The barriers in accessing and succeeding in post-16 education are multiple, complex and intersect between different life experiences and identities. The Poverty Commission should review the work of the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA), convened by the First Minister of Scotland in 2015, which produced an [interim](#) and [final report](#) with a series of recommendations on systemic changes to allow for fair access across the post-16 education landscape in Scotland.

There persists a wide range of barriers to post-16 education. Some may be relatively common, others may be unique to an individual's circumstances. Common barriers include (but are not limited to):

- **Financial support and money management**  
Entering post-16 education may require an individual or indeed their family unit, to transition between different financial support frameworks. This can mean a lengthy gap without income, or the source of income moving from non-repayable to loan-based support. Colleges report that financial pressures are often the reason for early withdrawal, further withdrawal, and withdrawing with partial success (achieving some modules but not the full qualification).
- **Opportunity cost**  
Both prospective students and students often have difficult decisions to make in choosing to come to college and sustaining their place. In choosing to study and improve their life chances, students may face increased financial hardship through the loss of benefit entitlement or employment income. Some students elect to study part-time specifically to counter this situation.
- **Support networks**  
Scotland's colleges report an increasing number of students needing support with essential skills such as communication, literacy, numeracy and IT. A growing number of students do not have a strong external support network. For many, they are the only person in their household in a positive destination. Combined with external pressures, this lack of a support network is often a barrier to success.

- **Personal health and wellbeing**

In recent years there has been a significant increase in students who face barriers with mental health and wellbeing needing access to enabling services, student services and their students' association.

- **Caring responsibilities**

Many students, especially those at college, have responsibilities either as a parent or as a carer. This understandably impacts on their capacity to complete enter education and to complete their course successfully.

## **Are there data, research or statistics your organisation would like to highlight in relation to the work of the Poverty Commission?**

It is worth noting at this juncture that the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) has different indicators and measures than the indicators used by the UK Government. The SIMD technical [document](#) may be useful to review fully how SIMD measures work, but essentially there are 38 indicators of deprivation grouped into seven domains, which are then ranked from 1 (most deprived) to 6976 (least deprived), with each datazone constituting 760 people.

The seven domains are:

1. Income
2. Employment
3. Education
4. Health
5. Access to Services
6. Crime
7. Housing

Importantly, in the context of SIMD measurements 'deprived' does not necessarily mean poor or low income, but also poverty of access or opportunity. It should also be noted that due to the way datazones are calculated, SIMD is less reliable in a rural context and as far as possible should be cross referenced with another measure. In the context of widening access (or, widening participation) it would be appropriate to cross reference SIMD with entitlement to free school meals (FSM) (although it should be noted that all children in Primary 1-3 are entitled to free school meals).

The Poverty Commission should review the research undertaken for the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) by Professor Vikki Boliver ([Mapping and evaluating the use of contextual data in undergraduate admissions in Scotland](#)). While the entirety of the research is important, for the reader who is already familiar with the barriers to accessing and succeeding in post-16 education, recommendation 9 is of particular importance. This recommendation identifies the specific demographics of applicants who should **automatically** be considered as genuinely socio-economically disadvantaged for the purpose of contextualised admissions.

**Recommendation 9.** Institutions should, where possible, make use of all indicators of contextual disadvantage which carry a low risk of incorrectly identifying an applicant as contextually disadvantaged when they are not. Such indicators include the following administratively verifiable individual-level markers of socioeconomic disadvantage: has spent time in care, is a carer for a family member, is a refugee or asylum seeker, was in receipt of free school meals, or received an Education Maintenance Allowance. These indicators are suitable for use singly on an EITHER/OR basis (i.e. applicants are highly likely to be genuinely contextually disadvantaged if they meet any one of these criteria)

Boliver, V; Gorard, S; Powell, M; and Moreira, T (2017) "*Mapping and evaluating the use of contextual data in undergraduate admissions in Scotland – An Impact for Access project funded by the Scottish Funding Council*"

This research was commissioned after the Commission on Widening Access published its report [A Blueprint for Fairness](#) in March 2016 and was a response to the challenge to ensure that university admissions systems do not perpetuate the disadvantages learners have faced earlier in life.

Some of the researchers involved in this work have published other work which may be of interest to The Poverty Commission (Stephen Gorard, Nadia Siddiqui, Vikki Boliver: [An Analysis of School-Based Contextual Indicators for Possible Use in Widening Participation](#)). Of particular note is the comment on p87-88:

*“It is shocking that the only group with positive value-added scores on average at KS4 are those never eligible for FSM, otherwise the value-added score declines in a clear progression with every year of eligibility. Poorer children start school with lower attainment than their peers, and then continue to lose ground over time, and the poorer they are the more they fall behind.”*

In other words, whilst receipt of free school meals at the point of transition from compulsory education is a useful indicator for material deprivation, policymakers must be mindful that in fact, clear evidence exists demonstrating that lower attainment for pupils from deprived backgrounds is not static and progressively declines the longer that the individual is entitled to FSM. It is also important to be mindful of those individuals entitled to FSM whose family circumstances may improve and who are not entitled to FSM in later school years, as current policy and action to improve access to post-16 education will not capture the impact that poverty may have had on their early development and attainment prospects.

Of interest to the Poverty Commission may be that in Scotland, where Scottish domiciled students do not pay tuition fees, access rates to university are worse than in other areas of the UK. However, although these statistics are accurate, they do not take into consideration the 28% of all higher education provision which is delivered in Scotland’s 26 colleges, spread across 13 regions. In other words, Scotland’s colleges are routinely delivering access to higher education for those students unable or unwilling to pursue and secure a university place.

Of further interest may be research conducted by academics from the University of Glasgow on behalf of the SFC ([The University of Glasgow and West of Scotland Local Authority partners: how to engage with MD40 pupils in higher progression schools – SFC Impact for Access Project Report](#)). The report found that pupils from SIMD40 backgrounds who attend schools with high progression to HE were achieving qualifications and progressing to HE at a **lower rate** than SIMD40 pupils attending low progression schools. This research was considered ground-breaking as it challenged a number of orthodoxies about programmes which work to widen access in schools.

**If you work directly with people, is there a project, scheme, partnership or activity you deliver that supports working class people accessing and succeeding in post-16 education?**

In Scotland, the 3-18 curriculum – [Curriculum for Excellence \(CfE\)](#) – supports a broad general education to the start of what’s called the ‘Senior Phase’ of school (S4-S6), and a narrowing of subject choices at S4. This coincides with the first National Qualification assessments and exams at the end of S4. Historically, S4 would be the last year of school for a significant cohort of pupils who turn 16 during this academic year however, CfE reprofiled the senior phase so that pupils could continue to progress from the level they were studying at e.g. if a pupil stayed on at school and undertakes study towards school-level qualifications in the later part of the senior phase.

At the same time, school-college partnerships provide a regional offer to school pupils which allows them to study at college within their school timetable. Edinburgh College’s [College Courses for Senior Phase Pupils \(S4-S6\)](#) illustrates some of the offers available to pupils in the senior phase, in the Edinburgh region. The offers include the ability to undertake a Higher National Certificate (HNC) which is the equivalent to an Advanced Higher (the highest qualification available at school) and this is also the equivalent of first year at university at Level 7 of the [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\)](#).

Also available are a range of Foundation Apprenticeships currently distributed across 10 different pathways, all of which cover professions with skills gaps. These pathways are due to expand in academic year 2018/19. Foundation Apprenticeships are delivered within the school timetable and in partnership with the local college. It is important to note that this provision supports working class pupils to remain in education when, historically, they may have left to pursue employment, an apprenticeship or in some cases have left school with no positive destination in place. However, it is crucial that this provision is viewed as an attractive opportunity for all school pupils. With Scotland's higher education system having a capped number of places, in order to ensure that our higher education establishments reflect the communities they serve not only is there a need for more students from working class backgrounds to enter university, there is similarly a need for more young people from affluent backgrounds to take a work-based or apprenticeship pathway. Only when these pathways are considered to have equal merit, will there be parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes from compulsory education into the workplace.

In Scotland, many students begin their higher education journey in college. This can include undertaking further education level study (up to SCQF Level 6) before progressing onto higher education at college. After completing an HNC (SCQF Level 7) or Higher National Diploma (HND) (SCQF Level 8) students can use this qualification to articulate with advanced standing directly into the next level of study at university e.g. a student with an HNC can articulate directly into 2<sup>nd</sup> year at university and a student with an HND can articulate directly into 3<sup>rd</sup> year. As the college route is the route most popular with students from SIMD40 backgrounds, this is a tried and tested, proven mechanism for widening access to higher education. However, this is not a universal opportunity as many universities do not accept HN level qualifications as equivalent to degree level study, despite them being pegged at the same SCQF level. Articulation has been identified as a mechanism requiring greater expansion in Scottish tertiary education. Currently, six universities in Scotland carry over 80% of all articulation routes and these are all post-92 universities who have traditionally had to recruit students rather than be selective in the way that the ancient universities have. In order to ensure that a two-tier education system does not pervade, all universities are being instructed via the outcome agreement process managed by the SFC, to expand their articulation offer.

These are very broad examples of the ways in which the Scotland's colleges support and enhance the opportunities available to working-class people to access and succeed in post-16 education however, good practice exists in every college at a more local and personalised level. This ranges from education being delivered within the criminal justice system to projects which specifically target and support individuals in addiction recovery to holistically build their confidence, skills and competencies, and to ultra-local delivery in satellite campuses which enables those most distanced from education and the labour market to access opportunities.

Although not specifically an issue which impacts the working-class, poverty has historically been a concern for those who have experience of being in care. The Scottish Government has addressed this by providing a vacation grant to all care experienced people who meet the criteria ([Students Awards Agency Scotland \(SAAS\) Support for Care Experienced Students 2017-18](#)) and this funds up to £105/week rent or accommodation costs during the Summer. Additionally, all care experienced people who meet the criteria will have their student support paid as a bursary. This is a direct consequence of the Scottish Government adjusting the approach as 'corporate parents' enshrined in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.

Finally, mindful that retention and success rates for students who undertake post-16 study in college has been lower than success rates for those studying at university, the college sector in Scotland is undertaking a pilot project on improvement and retention in partnership with the Scottish Government. Five colleges are using improvement methodology under the guidance of Scottish Government improvement specialists to test approaches to improve retention and attainment, meeting fortnightly to discuss and compare results to adjust and model.

## **What would your top three policy recommendations be to support the access and success of working class people in post-16 education?**

### **1. Sustainable funding and support**

To deliver high-quality education opportunities for the learner in the right place, at the right time, it is essential that post-16 education institutions are funded sustainably and at a level which ensures support for the learner as required. This includes student support, as the recently concluded [independent review of student support](#) in Scotland notes that students should be able to meet their financial commitments between their student support and no more than 10 hours per week of paid employment.

### **2. Efficient and appropriate learner journey**

As highlighted earlier, students who undertake HNC or HND study in Scotland can use their qualification to apply for direct entry with advanced standing. However, many students are required to repeat years of study when the institution they progress on to, does not recognise the value of their qualification. As this pathway is utilised by students from SIMD40 backgrounds, it is a fair extrapolation to state that this policy leads to working class students having to take out additional debt in order to complete their studies. Although Scotland does not charge tuition fees to Scottish domiciled students, student support is comprised of mostly loan and an oddity of the current student support system is that those students from low-income households are entitled to a higher level of student loan than those students from higher income households, so poorer students are incumbered with more debt. It is important to note the household income brackets for student support entitlement are low and a student with a total household income of £34k or more will receive no bursary ([SAAS Funding Guide 2017-2018](#)).

### **3. A robust and effective mechanism to track learners**

As noted in the research by the University of Glasgow on SIMD40 background progressing to university and by the final report by the Commission on Widening Access, a unique learner identifier which is trackable through each pupil's learner journey, would allow for swift identification and interventions, including those which underpin activity supporting fair access to post-16 pathways.

Colleges Scotland  
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