

# Consultation on the Report on Widening Access – Colleges Scotland Response – April 2026

## Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the voice of the sector, supporting the delivery of thriving colleges at the heart of a thriving Scotland. When Colleges Thrive, Scotland Thrives. As the membership body, Colleges Scotland represents all 24 colleges in Scotland, which deliver both further education and around 20% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

Scotland's colleges have a strong commitment to widening access and play a central role in delivering this agenda. Colleges support a high proportion of learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and provide flexible, local routes into further and higher education, as well as into employment. They are often the first point of entry for learners who may not otherwise engage with education.

The college sector has a clear interest in how progress on widening access is measured and reported. It is important that the Report on Widening Access (RoWA) continues to reflect the full range of learner journeys across the tertiary system, including the role of colleges in supporting access, progression and successful outcomes.

## Key Points

### 1. What do you value in the RoWA currently?

Colleges Scotland is responding on behalf of the college sector. The RoWA is a useful and well-established source of evidence on widening access across Scotland. From a college perspective, it is particularly valuable that it brings together data across both colleges and universities and tracks progress over time. The coverage of different widening access characteristics is also helpful, as it reflects the diversity of learners across the system. Overall, it provides a solid evidence base to support policy discussions and institutional planning.

### 2. Are there any parts you would like to see improved or enhanced?

There is scope to strengthen how the report reflects the full learner journey, particularly movement between colleges and universities. At the moment, this is not always as visible as it could be. It would also be helpful to see more focus on outcomes such as retention, completion and progression, rather than just entry. In addition, clearer contextual information alongside institutional data would support more balanced interpretation, given the different roles and student populations across the sector.

### 3. Is there anything you would like to see added?

It would be helpful for the report to include more information on student outcomes, including retention and progression. There is also a case for extending the range of indicators used to understand disadvantage, and for better reflecting part-time study, flexible provision and adult learners, all of which are central to the college sector.

#### 4. Are there any parts of the RoWA you find less useful or could be removed?

Some of the more detailed background tables can be difficult to use in their current format. There may be an opportunity to streamline these, particularly where information is repeated elsewhere. However, it will be important to retain the underlying data and ensure that any changes do not reduce transparency or limit the ability to carry out more detailed analysis.

#### 5. Do you support proposal A?

**Removing articulation reporting from the RoWA and publish this separately as part of a new 'student journeys' publication (we plan to launch a separate consultation on this later in 2026)?**

No

##### **Further comments on proposal A:**

The college sector does not support moving articulation data into a separate publication. Articulation is a core part of Scotland's widening access approach and is central to the role colleges play in supporting progression into higher education. Separating it from the RoWA risks reducing its visibility and weakening the overall picture of learner journeys across the tertiary system.

At present, articulation data is already subject to delays due to the timing of HESA returns, meaning it can be out of sync with the main RoWA publication. Moving this into a separate report would be likely to increase that gap, making it harder to bring together a clear, current and coherent account of progress.

Separating articulation risks reinforcing a narrow focus on entry to higher education, rather than recognising progression as a central part of widening access. For many learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the route into higher education is through college, and articulation is a key mechanism for achieving fair access. Keeping this data within a single, integrated publication helps ensure that widening access is understood as a whole-system issue, with equal weight given to both entry and progression.

#### 6. Do you support proposal B?

**Over time, moving the information from the background tables into an interactive Power BI dashboard?**

Yes

##### **Further comments on proposal B:**

An interactive dashboard would make the data easier to explore and more accessible to a wider range of users.

#### 7. Do you support proposal C?

**To include data showing Scottish-domiciled students at all undergraduate levels of study at university, in addition to the Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree (FTFD) or**

**Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants (SDUE) populations. The latter only includes HNC, HND, DipHE, and CertHE at the 'other undergraduate' level.**

Yes

**Further comments on proposal C:**

The view of the college sector is that this would be a positive change. Including all undergraduate levels would give a more accurate picture of higher education across Scotland, particularly the significant amount of provision delivered in colleges. It would also better reflect the different routes learners take into and through higher education.

**8. Do you support proposal D?**

**Including more data on part-time students at university and adding a new part-time first degree (PTFD) measure.**

Yes

**Further comments on proposal D:**

Part-time and flexible routes are a key part of widening access, particularly for adult learners and those with other commitments. At present, this part of the system is not always well captured, so expanding the reporting here would be valuable.

**9. Do you support proposal E?**

**Allowing more disaggregation by SIMD decile. At present, almost all reporting is at the SIMD quintile level.**

Yes

**Further comments on proposal E:**

More detailed SIMD reporting should be helpful in providing a clearer picture of patterns within deprivation. Breaking this down further allows for more nuanced analysis. However, it remains important that SIMD is not relied on as the only measure of disadvantage.

**10. Do you support proposal F?**

**Adding filters to include college students on courses less than 160 hours in duration.**

Yes

**Further comments on proposal F:**

Including shorter courses could help reflect the role colleges play in engaging learners who are not yet ready for longer programmes. These courses can be an important first step into education. However, it will be important to clearly distinguish between different types of provision so that the data remains meaningful and comparable.

**11. Do you support proposal G?**

**Adding reports on other widening access groups, such as estranged students and veteran status (service leavers).**

Yes

**Further comments on proposal G:**

This would better reflect the range of learners supported across the sector and recognise that disadvantage is not limited to a single set of characteristics.

**12. Do you support proposal H?**

**Removing HESA PI Table 2023-24 from the background tables.**

Yes

**Further comments on proposal H:**

Simplifying the report in this way could improve clarity.

**13. Do you support proposal I?**

**Removing Background Table 12 (HESA Staff data)**

Not Sure

**Further comments on proposal I:**

It may be worth considering whether this information should be retained in another form rather than removed entirely.

**14. Do you agree/disagree with the keeping all charts and tables limited to a 10-year time series, with the exception of CoWA tables?**

Not Sure

**Please add your reasoning below:**

A shorter time series could make the report easier to read, but there is also value in being able to see longer-term trends.

**15. To what extent would you be interested in seeing additional disaggregation by undergraduate qualification types, such as integrated masters, first degree with honours, Graduate Apprenticeship HNC, etc.**

Very interested

**16. To what extent would you like to see statistics added for degree classification outcome (first class, upper-second class, etc).**

Interested

**17. To what extent would you be interested in seeing statistics added on rurality and remoteness?**

Very interested

**18. Please let us know if you have any further comments or concerns about these proposed changes**

Overall, the proposed changes are sensible and should make the RoWA easier to use. In particular, breaking data down further, for example by qualification type or rurality, would give a better reflection of how the system actually works in practice and the different contexts learners are coming from.

Any new data, such as degree classifications, would need to be handled carefully and properly explained so it doesn't lead to misleading comparisons.

From a college perspective, it is important that the report continues to reflect the full range of learner journeys. As long as this remains central, these changes should strengthen the report overall.

**19. Are there any other comments you would like to make?**

The RoWA remains an important part of how progress on widening access is understood in Scotland. As it develops, it will be important to ensure it reflects the full range of learner journeys, including the significant role colleges play in supporting access and progression. There is also an opportunity to place more emphasis on outcomes, not just entry, to give a fuller picture of success. Taking a broad and inclusive approach to measuring disadvantage will be key to ensuring the report continues to support effective policy and practice across the sector.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the college sector is supportive of the proposed direction of travel and the focus on improving how widening access is reported. The suggested changes should help make the RoWA more accessible and better reflect the complexity of the system. The main exception to this is the proposal to separate out articulation data, which we do not support.

It will be important that any revisions continue to present a clear, joined-up picture of learner journeys across the whole tertiary system. In particular, the role of colleges in supporting access and progression, including through articulation, needs to remain visible and fully recognised. There is also an opportunity to strengthen the focus on outcomes, alongside entry, to give a more complete view of success.

Taken together, the changes should support a more accurate and meaningful understanding of widening access, provided they continue to reflect the full contribution of colleges and the diverse routes taken by learners.

Colleges Scotland  
April 2026