COMMISSION ON WIDENING ACCESS: CALL FOR EVIDENCE

ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES

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Contents

Executive Summary

This report presents an overview of findings to date from analysis of responses to the Commission on Widening Access's Call for Evidence.

The Commission has been established with a remit to advise Ministers on how to achieve the Government's ambitions to widen access to higher education. The Call for Evidence gave stakeholders an opportunity to have early input to the Commission's work, and was structured around the Commission's three strategic themes:

- Barriers preventing people from accessing and completing higher education courses;
- Identification and scaling up of best practice to improve access and completion of higher education courses; and
- Data and measures required to support widening of access and retention.

The Call for Evidence included 10 consultation questions across these themes, and ran from 23 June 2015 to 20 July 2015. The final number of responses received was 75. Of these, 64 were submitted by group respondents and 11 by individual members of the public.

Identification and Removal of Barriers

The first part of the Call for Evidence focused on the identification and removal of barriers to access and retention in higher education.

The main barriers to access

There was a clear view that those from disadvantaged backgrounds still experience significant barriers to accessing higher education. Submissions were primarily focused on barriers for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, but also highlighted a range of other groups as being significant in terms of widening access to higher education. This included care-experienced young people, those with a physical disability, those with a sensory impairment, BME populations and other protected characteristics.

In terms of the specific barriers highlighted by submissions, these were broadly around educational, personal (including economic and financial) and environmental factors. The main barriers discussed by respondents are summarised below.

- ***Financial and economic challenges*** were the most commonly highlighted barriers. This included some suggesting that finance is the main determining factor for many of those from disadvantaged backgrounds considering higher education, particularly adults considering a return to education or training.
- ***The "attainment gap" between the most and least deprived communities*** was also highlighted as a significant barrier to higher education. These cited a range of evidence on the extent and nature of this difference in attainment,

and some higher education respondents in particular suggested that this remains the most significant barrier to widening access.

- *"Cultural" barriers* included a range of specific issues such as lower aspirations and self-confidence amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds, a feeling that higher education is "not for me", a lack of role models, and peer pressure about access to higher education.

- *A lack of awareness and knowledge of pathways* to higher education amongst disadvantaged communities, including by a substantial proportion of higher education institutions and other educational sectors. Submissions also suggested there can be a lack of clarity within schools, as developments over recent years in the range of access routes and progression pathways.

- *Limited access to good quality information, advice, guidance and support* for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This was highlighted in terms of advice and support provided by properly trained guidance staff, but also from informal networks such as family and friends.

- *A lack of effective access opportunities at a local level* was highlighted with a particular focus on the importance of access provision locally in areas of deprivation. Several submissions also raised concerns around alignment between access programmes and higher education, and parity of esteem for further education and access provision.

Generating a greater volume of successful applications

Submissions cited a range of factors and specific approaches in relation to widening access to higher education. It was clear that responses here reflected views on barriers to access. There was also significant overlap in the approaches suggested in relation to generating a greater volume of successful applications and supporting course retention and completion.

- The most widely suggested approach in terms of generating a greater volume of successful applications and supporting course completion was *closer working between further education, higher education and schools*. This included specific reference to development of outreach activity with a greater focus on early intervention, supporting greater use of articulation, and better data sharing to inform the admissions process and identify potential need for additional support.

- A number of submissions, particularly from college sector respondents, also suggested *a need for greater support and parity of esteem for further education and other articulation routes*. This included greater support from higher education institutions for articulation agreements and SCQF. A small number of higher education submissions expressed reservations about the fit between current access provision, and higher education requirements.

- A *greater focus on early intervention*, including as part of partnership working across sectors in establishing higher education as "part of a pupil's landscape" from an early stage. Several submissions recommended more

access programmes at primary and secondary school stages, and suggested that current access programmes start too late in the educational career.

- ***Greater use of contextual admissions by higher education institutions*** was also referenced, including the majority of college sector and education administrative/professional respondents. Submissions were focused primarily on improving current approaches to better recognise the context in which qualifications have been achieved.

- ***Approaches to tackle the financial challenges*** faced by people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Submissions highlighted a need for clarity on finance for those considering further or higher education.

- ***Improving awareness and understanding of access routes*** was also a common suggestion. This included awareness amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and also for those most likely to inform their choices (e.g. within schools and social work teams). Some suggested the proliferation of access routes and programmes may have resulted in a lack of clarity among teachers and guidance staff.

- A significant number of submissions suggested a need for ***more and better support, information, advice and guidance***. These submissions made reference to a need for good quality support and advice throughout the journey into higher education, including more intensive input for people from disadvantaged backgrounds at key transitional stages.

Supporting people to complete their course

There was significant overlap in the points made by submissions in relation to generating a greater volume of successful applicants, and retaining these through their course of study and supporting course completion. However, a number of themes emerged as being particularly relevant to supporting retention and course completion:

- Providing a continuum of 1:1 "holistic" support, information and guidance, from school and access programmes throughout higher education – and particularly at key transition points.

- A need for financial support for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some suggested that financial difficulties are a more significant driver of failure to complete courses for some cohorts, than academic reasons.

- Better tracking of progress, from admission throughout the course, offering intervention and support where needed.

- Building a "sense of belonging" for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including reference to the potential value of "associate student status", peer support, peer learning and active learning as potential approaches here.

- Greater flexibility in further education and higher education provision, including options for part-time study and to permit breaks in studying.

Identification and Scaling Up of Best Practice

The second part of the Call for Evidence focused on identification and scaling up of best practice in widening access to higher education.

There was a clear view that a single approach does not exist. However, there was some agreement on what constitutes best practice and/or practice that could be scaled up, and several respondents suggested that there is a strong base of knowledge on good practice within the education sector.

Data and Research

Submissions widely acknowledged that a broad range of data is already being collected by further and higher education sectors to better inform admissions, student support and transitions through the system. Best practice in this area usually represented an aspiration towards **longitudinal and contextual approaches** in the collection and use of data. Many respondents suggested that there is a lack of robust longitudinal data to adequately support admissions, student support or curriculum redesign. Efforts to contextualise data and student admissions were implicitly linked to intersectional approaches, which recognise that educational outcomes are the product of multiple characteristics and experiences.

Admissions

The way in which institutions admit access to its provision was a major theme in the best practice submissions, and evidently an area where practitioners have been trying to make positive improvements. Submissions noted that admissions departments are **increasingly moving to contextualise their processes**, so that socio-economic, cultural or personal factors can be fully taken into account when recruiting students.

There was no single model of contextualised admissions in use and no definite agreement as whether a shared model could be applied nationally, or whether this would be desirable given the diversity of the college and higher education sectors. However there was broad convergence on the use of SIMD datasets in this process.

Outreach

Submissions suggest that outreach is at the forefront of the widening access agenda, and the richest source of best practice evidence and learning in widening access. Widening Access programmes are a core element of the widening access agenda and tended to dominate responses. Submissions mentioned more than 20 widening access programmes they regarded as best practice.

Many respondents shared what they felt made for **successful widening access programmes**. This was primarily around a collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders, and integrating with other provision and services; links to early years programmes and summer schools; a need for information, advice and guidance on access programmes; a need for sustained funding and long-term strategic planning; and offer multiple modes of participation.

There was disagreement over whether local or national approaches were best suited to meeting the needs of wider access students. There was a general sense that there were too many programmes currently operating, some in a state of 'unhealthy competition'. *Factors to consider when scaling up best practice* included the importance of early intervention, curriculum design to ensure study early in a student's career will be relevant to courses offered at colleges and universities, and building upon Curriculum for Excellence, the North American 2 + 2 model and scaling up existing summer schools programmes.

Digital access to courses and support materials were being used to deal with barriers caused by geography, lifestyle or employment patterns (among others). Rather than a discrete area of scaling up, it seems that online and distance learning approaches is an embedded element of other scaled up practices mentioned here (and potentially an important mechanism for doing so).

Articulation and Progression

Articulation arrangements are an important mechanism in creating a more flexible and accessible education system via the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Clarity in how and where articulation can happen emerged as a key issue, as was flexibility of such arrangements, it being noted that articulation was still largely limited to post-1992 universities.

Progression relates to the pathways through which a student makes their way through the system. These can be vertical (from secondary to college sector, college sector to HE) or as facilitated by SCQF, horizontal (from community or vocational learning over to academic). Among the best practice mentioned in relation to progression was development of curricula through cross-sectoral collaboration and sector-wide progression routes with virtually all Scottish colleges, and the SCQF as the beginnings of a national approach to scaling up best practice in progression pathways.

Strategic

Submissions suggested that widening access provision relies heavily upon *cross-institutional and sectoral working*. Largely localised or regional, these partnerships have played a major role in sustaining, evidencing and promoting the widening access agenda. *Institutional culture* was mentioned as a major aspect affecting wider access and progression, touching upon governance but also how staff are trained, developed and supported in dealing with wider access students and aligning their behaviour to widening access goals.

Partnership – to support articulation arrangements and plan wider access programmes – was identified as a critical aspect of widening access. The college-university link was seen as arguably the most central, but partnerships mentioned by respondents also included schools, employers, trade unions, pressure or representative groups and the care system. The Scottish Funding Council and Scottish Wider Access Partnership were seen as the obvious starting point for scaling up partnership working in Scotland, potentially in concert with universal services such as Skills Development Scotland.

Student Support

Submissions highlighted that *transitions into further or higher education* can be challenging for those already disadvantaged by social or economic factors. Many institutions are now addressing this through *longitudinal approaches to induction* that extend beyond initial entry, backed up by mentoring to aid retention and completion.

Widening Access provision shares an agenda with *Additional Support for Learning* provision and have similar resource needs. Needs assessment and more targeted approaches towards those with Additional Support needs were reported areas of best practice.

Data and Measures to Support Access and Retention

The third part of the Call for Evidence focused on data and measures to support access and retention, in terms of evidence considered as part of the admissions process and measuring progress.

Evidence required to measure progress on widening access

Submissions referenced a range of potential evidence and other points for consideration in terms of measuring progress on widening access. This included submissions suggesting there is scope to derive greater value from currently held data. However, most submissions referred to areas where evidence is lacking:

- Most saw *area-based indicators of deprivation* as having a role to play in measuring progress, but submissions raised a number of concerns regarding the extent to which current geographic indicators such as SIMD provide a genuine measure of progress in widening access.

- A significant number of submissions advocated *development of a broader set of indicators of disadvantage* as a basis for measuring progress in widening access. Submissions suggested a range of measures or indicators of disadvantage to supplement area-based definitions.

- *Tracking of individuals' progress from application through higher education and subsequent destinations* was the most widely suggested evidence in terms of measuring progress in widening access.

- Submissions highlighted the need for *system-wide evidence and greater consistency in the measures used in admissions and tracking progress in widening access*.

- *Longitudinal data on positive destinations from higher education* for those from disadvantaged backgrounds was also highlighted.

Evidence to be considered as part of the admissions process

Fewer submissions made specific reference to measures to be used as part of the admissions process, than for example evidence used to measure progress in widening access. The majority of substantive responses were from college sector and higher education respondents.

Submissions across a range of respondent groups raised concerns regarding the *use of area-based indicators of disadvantage* such as SIMD, and the extent to which these provide a comprehensive measure of disadvantage. However, there was a common view across respondent groups that *area-based measures should form part of a wider "basket" of measures* to support more effective targeting of interventions, recognising that there is no single measure that can provide an accurate indicator of socio-economic disadvantage. In terms of the specific measures to be used, several submissions suggested that further work was required to identify the most significant drivers of the differential in access. However there was some consensus around the role of the following in the admissions process: location; household income; pre-school and school education; SCQF credit attainment; participation in widening access provision; family circumstances; care experience; health/disability; and equality characteristics.

Submissions, and particularly higher education respondents, highlighted the importance of *access to individualised data*, and the *need for greater consistency in the approach to contextual admissions* in terms of the measures used.

A robust evidence base on the effectiveness of existing programmes

The majority of submissions suggested areas where the current evidence base on the effectiveness of widening access programmes is insufficient. While there was broad agreement that more work was required to develop a robust evidence base, submissions were more varied in terms of the work required:

- A significant number of submissions made reference to *scope for better use of existing datasets*. Linkage of existing datasets was seen as the key development required, and this linked to views discussed earlier around the need for better tracking of post-school progression.

- A number of *submissions highlighted limitations in current approaches to measuring progress* in widening access. Several respondents expressed concerns around use of SIMD assuming that all deprived areas face the same challenges, failing to acknowledge the number of disadvantaged young people in less deprived areas, and particular limitations in use of SIMD for rural areas where datazones are larger and can include a diverse set of communities.

- Submissions highlighted a number of *areas where further evidence is required* to assess the effectiveness of widening access programmes. The key areas were a need for comprehensive tracking of young people through school, further education and higher education; better evidence on the effectiveness of existing access programmes and interventions; longitudinal evidence to provide a meaningful assessment of the effectiveness of widening access programmes; wider access to individualised data available for research purposes; evidence on barriers to access, and in particular relationships between various forms of disadvantage, and educational attainment and outcomes; and primary evidence on what does and does not work for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Introduction

This report presents an overview of findings to date from analysis of responses to the *Commission on Widening Access's Call for Evidence*.

The Call for Evidence

The Commission on Widening Access has been established with a remit to advise Ministers on how to achieve the Government's ambition (central to its overall vision) that a child born today in our most deprived communities should have the same higher education chances as a child born in our least deprived communities. The Commission issued the Call for Evidence to give stakeholders an opportunity to have early input to the Commission's work, and to help shape future policy and legislation in this area.

The Call for Evidence was structured around the Commission's three strategic themes, and focused primarily on widening access specifically for those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds:

- Barriers preventing people from accessing and completing higher education courses;

- Identification and scaling up of best practice to improve access and completion of higher education courses; and

- Data and measures required to support widening of access and retention.

A response form was provided as part of the Call for Evidence, including ten consultation questions: three in relation to each of the above themes and a further question inviting respondents to raise any other issues. All ten questions were open, inviting qualitative comment. Respondents were asked to limit their responses to a total of 1500 words.

The Call for Evidence was published on the Commission's website on 23 June 2015, and was open for written responses to 20 July 2015.

Overview of written submissions

The final number of submissions received was 75. Of these, 64 were submitted by group respondents and 11 by individual members of the public (most of these being individuals with experience of working in the education and/or research sectors). A profile of respondents by type is set out in Table 1 below.

Respondent Type	
College sector	12
Higher Education sector	16
Other educational sectors	12
Education administrative, professional & representative bodies	13
Research Centres/Organisations	4
Student Representative Bodies	3
Other group respondents	4
Groups (Total)	*64*
Individuals	11
TOTAL	**75**

Seven broad respondent groups have been used for the main analysis. A full list of group respondents is provided at Annex 1, and the main points to note about the composition of the groups are:

- The *higher education and college sectors* account for more than a third of all respondents; 16 higher education and 12 college/further education institutions responded, including the membership bodies for each sector.

- *Other educational sectors* accounted for 12 submissions, including from the Schools for Higher Education Programme (and the four SHEP projects), the Scottish Wider Access Programme and a number of third sector organisations.

- *Education administrative, professional and representative bodies* accounted for 13 submissions, including a number of public bodies and professional or representative bodies.

- Four *research centres* made submissions, three of these being based at Scottish universities. As noted above, a number of individual respondents also worked in the higher education and research sectors.

- Three *student representative bodies* made submissions.

- The four *"other group" respondents* are third sector bodies who do not have a specific education focus.

Submissions across all respondent groups specifically welcomed the Commission's focus on widening access as an opportunity to maximise the effectiveness of widening access approaches through a comprehensive review. This reflected a view expressed through a number of submissions that there is a need for a more coordinated national strategy, recognising the importance of widening access across a range of policy areas.

Some variation was evident across submissions in terms of focus across the strategic themes around which the Call for Evidence was based. Nearly all respondents commented on potential barriers for access, with most of these suggesting approaches to address these barriers. Fewer submissions commented specifically on good practice examples (responses primarily coming from those active in education) and data or measures to support good practice. Nevertheless, the Call for Evidence received a very good depth of material across all three strategic themes.

Structure of the report

The remainder of this report presents a theme-by-theme analysis of submissions.

The Call for evidence sought qualitative responses, and most used the response form provided. Where submissions did not follow the structure of the response form, content has been analysed qualitatively under the most relevant theme. Some submissions using the response form also included further statements and again these have been included within the qualitative analysis set out within this report.

Our analysis also sought to identify variation in issues raised across respondent groups. The qualitative nature of the Call for Evidence means it was not appropriate to undertake quantification of material submitted. Nevertheless, the report highlights where there is a clear difference in the focus of submissions across respondent groups.

Identification and Removal of Barriers

The first part of the Call for Evidence focused on the identification and removal of barriers to access and retention in higher education. The Call for Evidence requested submissions in relation to the following 3 questions.

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?

A total of 71 of 75 submissions included comment under this theme. Nearly all of these commented specifically on barriers to higher education access, the first of the three questions listed above. However, submissions generally discussed potential approaches to generate a greater volume of successful applications and/or support more students to complete their course as inter-related issues. This section therefore considers findings in relation to the second and third questions jointly.

A number of respondents cited specific research or evidence in support of their submission. A full list of references cited in relation to the identification and removal of barriers to access is presented at Annex 2. The table over the page provides an overview of respondents to this theme.

	Comment	No comment	Total
College sector	12		12
Higher Education sector	16		16
Other educational sectors	12		12
Education administrative, professional & representative bodies	13		13
Research Centres/Organisations	3	1	4
Student Representative Bodies	3		3
Other group respondents	4		4
Groups (Total)	*63*	*1*	*64*
Individuals	10	1	11
TOTAL	**73**	**2**	**75**
Percentage of all respondents	**97%**	**3%**	**100%**

The main barriers to access

There was a clear view across the 73 submissions making comment under this theme that those from disadvantaged backgrounds still experience significant barriers to accessing higher education. This included submissions citing a range of evidence on the extent of disparity in higher education participation, as an indicator of the significance of these barriers.

Consistent with the focus of the Call for Evidence, submissions were primarily focused on barriers to access for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, many submissions noted that barriers to higher education are not limited to those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and highlighted a range of other factors and population groups as being significant in terms of widening access to higher education. This included specific reference to care-experienced young people, those with a physical disability, those with a sensory impairment, BME populations and other protected characteristics. Several submissions noted the extent of overlap between these characteristics and socio-economic deprivation. However some suggested that a focus on socio-economic deprivation risked excluding other disadvantaged groups, including for example evidence that the majority of care-experienced young people do not live in the most socio-economically deprived areas.

In terms of the specific barriers highlighted by submissions, these were broadly around educational, personal and environmental factors – personal including economic or financial barriers, and environmental factors including reference to geographical and cultural challenges.

This range of barriers was acknowledged by submissions across all respondent groups. However there was some variation across respondent groups in terms of the focus on specific barriers. For example financial barriers were highlighted by submissions across all respondent groups, while educational attainment was primarily cited as a barrier by higher education and other educational sectors (and was generally not seen as a major barrier by college sector respondents). Personal and cultural barriers were also highlighted by submissions across most respondent groups, but were particularly commonly cited by college sector and higher education respondents.

Over the following pages we consider the main barriers highlighted by submissions in turn.

Financial and economic challenges were the most commonly highlighted barriers to access to, and progression within further and higher education. A substantial number of submissions across all respondent types referred to specific financial barriers to access. This included some suggesting that financial considerations are the main determining factor for many of those from disadvantaged backgrounds considering further or higher education, and particularly for adults considering a return to education or training.

In terms of specific barriers referenced by submissions these included loss of benefit or employment income for those entering education and training, lack of clarity on funding, reluctance to incur debt associated with further study, time pressures for those required to work while studying, and other associated costs:

- Difficulties for those whose income prior to entering education and training was primarily from welfare benefits, and the potential for a loss of income and/or debt to have a significant impact on an individual and their family.

- A lack of clarity, and some misinformation, around student debt. This is a particular concern for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and was also linked to some misinformation around the extent of graduate opportunities. For those experiencing socio-economic deprivation, an "all or nothing" requirement of 3-4 years higher education study requires a clear focus on (and confidence in achieving) a subsequent career path.

- Concerns regarding debt incurred by further or higher education, including family pressures to avoid incurring significant debt. This was identified as a barrier to accessing education and training, and was also linked to a focus on these courses leading to "safe job opportunities" (including reference to over-subscription of nursing and teaching courses). Submissions referred to a lack of tailored guidance on other job opportunities to which degree-level qualifications may provide access.

- Time pressures and other challenges for young people required to take up or maintain employment alongside further or higher education.

- Financial challenges around the cost of education and training, including costs of studying away from home (especially for those in rural communities), cost of extra-curricular activities, cost of placement opportunities (where these are

reimbursed retrospectively, and costs of textbooks. Submissions also referred to greater access to costly one-to-one tutoring for less deprived young people.

- Particular challenges for disabled people and carers for whom there may be difficulties transferring funding support across local authority boundaries.

The *"attainment gap"* between the most and least deprived communities was also highlighted by a significant number of submissions as a barrier to higher education. Submissions cited a range of evidence on the extent and nature of this difference in attainment, and some suggested that this remains the most significant barrier to widening access. This was particularly the case for higher education and other educational sector respondents; the majority of these respondents cited educational attainment as a significant barrier to access, while relatively few college sector respondents made reference to attainment.

- Several submissions cited evidence indicating a correlation between areas of deprivation (as defined by SIMD data[1]), and low educational attainment. However, there was also a common view that the attainment gap is the result of a complex set of causal factors including some which have only an indirect connection with socio-economic disadvantage. This included a lack of effective advice and support; lack of awareness and experience of higher education amongst family support networks; practical difficulties such as time pressures associated with maintaining employment; access to a quiet work space home; and the "double disadvantage" experienced by those from a socio-economically deprived background who are also affected by other disadvantages (such as care experience, or physical or sensory impairment).

- Submissions also suggested that evidence shows that the attainment gap is established in the early years, sustained through primary and secondary education, and "inherited" by the further and higher education sectors. It was suggested that this reinforced the need for early intervention, and that longer term planning and targeted intervention was required to effect a significant change in patterns of attainment. Several submissions specifically stated that the attainment barrier could not be resolved by a single education sector, but rather needed a coordinated approach.

- Linked to the gap in attainment, submissions also highlighted school subject choice as a significant barrier to access. Again submissions cited evidence of a differential in subject choice linked to socio-economic background, suggesting that those from disadvantaged backgrounds typically take fewer subjects in S5-S6, and are less likely to take subjects which best facilitate entry into university (such as English, Languages, Maths and Sciences). . Some higher education sector respondents suggested that this "compounds" the barrier of lower attainment amongst those from deprived backgrounds, and highlighted a need for better curriculum guidance and support as part of approaches to raise attainment.

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[1] Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

"Cultural" barriers were also cited by a substantial number of submissions, including the majority of respondents across college, higher education and other educational sectors, and the majority of education administrative/professional respondents. Specific issues highlighted by these submissions included lower aspirations and self-confidence amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds, a feeling that higher education is "not for me", a lack of role models, and peer pressure or pre-conceptions about access to higher education:

- A lack of aspiration or self-confidence that higher education could be an option. Some submissions suggested that young people in deprived communities are less likely to be exposed to discussion or environments that create an expectation that they could achieve a place in higher education. This was a particular concern for young people where no-one in the family had experienced higher education, although submissions also referred to the role of schools in raising aspirations. However, there was some difference of opinion around the extent to which aspirations amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds have an impact on access to higher education; for example, some were of the view that attainment and financial challenges were more significant barriers.

- A lack of role models in higher education for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those with no family history of higher education.

- A lack of understanding, amongst young people and families, of the highly competitive nature of access to higher education in Scotland.

- Parental or peer pressure based on pre-conceptions about further education and higher education provision, and the access routes available. Submissions highlighted a need to raise awareness amongst parents and carers of available educational and career pathways – for themselves and young people.

A number of respondents noted that these issues include a range of potential barriers which policy makers may be able to influence only indirectly. However, as is discussed later in this section, submissions did suggest a range of approaches and good practice points that may help to address these issues.

A lack of awareness and knowledge of pathways to education and training amongst disadvantaged communities was highlighted as an issue by a range of submissions, including a substantial proportion of higher education and other educational sectors. This was also cited as a barrier by all student representative bodies responding to the Call for Evidence. In addition to a lack of awareness amongst people from a disadvantaged background, submissions also suggested there can be a lack of clarity within schools. This was seen as a growing issue, given developments over recent years in the range of access routes and progression pathways.

Linked to issues around this lack of awareness and understanding, submissions also highlighted ***limited access to good quality information, advice, guidance***

and support for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This was highlighted in terms of the need for advice and support provided by properly trained guidance staff, but also availability of informed advice and support from informal networks such as family and friends. A significant number of respondents made reference to the importance of good quality advice and support as vital to assist entry into education and that training. The challenges faced by those from disadvantaged backgrounds also result in a need for greater support. This included references to informing subject choice at secondary stage, and support in negotiating higher education recruitment and admissions processes which some suggested can be unresponsive to the needs of people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A lack of effective access opportunities at a local level was highlighted as a barrier by a range of submissions, including a number of other educational sector respondents in particular. This submissions noting the importance of access provision locally in areas of deprivation, and the need for stability of provision in these areas to establish higher education as an option for communities. Several submissions also raised concerns over the alignment between access programmes and further education provision, and higher education over, for example, parity of esteem between further education and access provision. A small number of higher education respondents also suggested that some access provision does not meet higher education requirements, and that the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is not a sufficient indicator of coherence.

Submissions noted a range of **practical barriers** for those from disadvantaged backgrounds seeking to access education and training. These included access to transport and affordable childcare, availability of support with applications for those who have already left school, and access to extra-curricular activities to make entrants more recruitable. A number of submissions highlighted a lack of flexibility in higher and to some extent, further education provision for adult learners re-entering the system. This included challenges for those who need to accommodate employment or care responsibilities while studying.

Several higher education respondents made reference to **limited funding for higher education places**, including places for access specifically. This included suggestions that additional funded places for access can lead to growing competition between institutions for applicants from socio-economically deprived areas, and potential to exclude other Scottish domiciled young people from accessing higher education. More widely, these and other respondent groups suggested that sustained funding of higher education places and access provision, and a clear policy framework is required for widening access to succeed.

A number of submissions, particularly from higher education respondents, expressed concern that *a narrow definition of "disadvantage" means that opportunities are not available to some from disadvantaged backgrounds*. This included evidence that a substantial proportion of those experiencing socio-economic deprivation, and other forms of disadvantage such as care experience, live outwith SIMD areas. Submissions also suggested that access programmes with a focus on socio-economic deprivation may not recognise (and can be inappropriate for) the specific issues faced by care experienced young people.

As noted earlier in this section, several submissions noted the *degree of overlap between socio-economic disadvantage and other factors* that may present barriers to accessing higher education. This included reference to higher incidence of factors such as poor health, physical disability, and mental health problems in areas of significant socio-economic disadvantage. Specific barriers facing particular population groups referenced by submissions included:

- Challenges for care experienced young people, including poorer attainment and lack of confidence as a consequence of interrupted learning, and limited access to advocates to provide support and encouragement. It was also suggested that interventions focused on socio-economic deprivation can fail to recognise other (more significant) needs of care experienced young people, and as such act as barriers to widening access.

- People living in rural areas were identified as a particularly disadvantaged group. This included evidence that people from a deprived background are less likely or able to move to access higher education, meaning that those in rural areas can have very limited opportunities. Submissions also referred to family expectations in rural communities to remain home post-school age, limitations to transport and ICT infrastructure, and smaller schools often with a reduced curriculum.

- Those with physical or sensory impairment were identified as being significantly less likely than others to access education or employment. This included reference to research evidence on the complex range of factors influencing access to education and training for those with a disability. Submissions also highlighted access to financial and practical support networks as a significant factor for those with a physical or sensory impairment, and noted the difficulties of moving support infrastructure to access further or higher education.

- Adults seeking to access further or higher education were also highlighted as a key group in terms of widening access, One respondent noted that there had been a decline in provision to assist adult access to education and training, as access programmes had become more focused on school-leavers. This included reference across a number of submissions to a lack of flexibility in timing, location and structural arrangements to accommodate the needs of adult learners – for example full-time and part-time provision, at suitable times and locations, with routes based on accreditation of learning other than formal qualifications.

Generating a greater volume of successful applications and supporting people to complete their course

Submissions cited a range of factors and specific approaches in relation to widening access to higher education. It was clear that responses here reflected views on barriers to access discussed over the previous pages, and some cited specific approaches as a direct response to specific barriers. There was also significant overlap in the approaches suggested in relation to generating a greater volume of successful applications, and supporting course retention and completion, and we consider these together below.

Several submissions cited evidence on trends in higher education applications from those from disadvantaged backgrounds, primarily based on SIMD areas. These suggested that, while evidence shows progress in widening access, there is a need for a "step change" in access to higher education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A number of submissions noted that the degree of change required would involve long-term work including clear policy and funding commitments.

The range of suggested approaches and other points made in relation to generating a greater volume of successful applications and supporting people from disadvantaged backgrounds to complete their course are detailed below.

The most widely suggested approach was *closer working between further education, higher education and schools*. This included specific reference to further developing outreach activity with a greater focus on early intervention, and supporting greater use of articulation. A substantial number of submissions across all respondent group cited this in the context of generating a greater volume of successful applications from people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This included the majority of submissions by college and higher education sectors, and from education administrative/professional respondents. These submissions made reference to a need for more partnership working between schools and further and higher education institutions to support joint development of access programmes, and better data sharing to inform the admissions process and identify potential need for additional support. Development of clearer and smoother articulation pathways was also a key factor highlighted by submissions. This reflected a wider view that there is a need for greater clarity on progression routes, providing prospective applicants with a "clear line of sight" of their pathway into higher education and of post-higher education career destinations.

A number of submissions, particularly from college sector respondents, also suggested a need for *greater support and parity of esteem for further education and other articulation routes*. This included respondents suggesting a need for greater support from higher education institutions for articulation agreements and Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Several college sector respondents expressed a view that some higher education institutions lack confidence in the curriculum fit between further education and access provision and higher education requirements, and submissions do indicate some difference of opinion across sectors on this issue. A small number of higher education submissions did express reservations about current access provision,

and the extent to which this fits with higher education provision. In contrast, a number of college sector and other respondents suggested a need for institutions to demonstrate their commitment to widening access, including a requirement for regular action plans on access and retention. A small number of submissions also suggested a need for national direction to facilitate articulation, including for example nationally coordinated admissions agreements. One respondent suggested that higher/further education links via SWAP[2] and articulation have plateaued or declined in volume terms over recent years, and that articulation is largely confined to post-1992 universities.

Also related to suggestions of a need for closer working across sectors, several submissions specifically suggested a **greater focus on early intervention** in raising awareness of and ambition for higher education amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This included the potential role of early intervention in establishing higher education as "part of a pupil's landscape" from an early stage. Several submissions recommended more further education and higher education programmes at primary and secondary school stages, and suggested that current widening access programmes commence too late in a student's educational career. Specific approaches referenced by submissions included "course tasters" and other approaches to enable young people to find out about higher education and university life, better careers advice and information at an earlier age, and access to career exploration opportunities. More and better learning support at primary and secondary school stages, continuing through further and higher education, was also suggested by a small number of submissions as a significant element in improving access and retention for young people from deprived backgrounds.

Greater use of contextual admissions by higher education institutions was also referenced by a substantial number of submissions, including the majority of college sector and education administrative/professional respondents. Although a number of higher education respondents made reference to current approaches to contextual admissions, few suggested expanding contextual admissions.

- Submissions recommending greater use of contextual admissions were focused primarily on improving current approaches to better recognise the context in which qualifications have been achieved (including area-based deprivation, attendance at a low progression school, disrupted learning experiences, and previous care experience) and giving greater weight to wider achievements and skills. Several submissions suggested that, while a large majority of institutions are using contextual admissions, further development was required to ensure this approach has a positive impact in widening access. This included references to evidence that those from disadvantaged backgrounds can show stronger university performance than those with similar attainment from the least deprived backgrounds and/or private schools.

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[2] Scottish Wider Access Programme.

- Submissions described a range of specific approaches to contextual admissions including factors such as closer working between higher education institutions and access programmes to identify potential applicants, discipline-specific contextual admissions, and a need to ensure transparency for applicants. Views on the specific measures to inform contextual admissions are discussed under the "Data and measures" theme at section 4 of this report.

Approaches to tackle the financial challenges faced by people from disadvantaged backgrounds were also referenced by a number of submissions across respondent groups. This included the potential role of means-tested financial support to cover the costs of attending university for those from the most deprived backgrounds, targeting of Higher Education Discretionary Funding towards those on benefits prior to entering higher education, use of other higher education funding such as bursaries and scholarships, and sponsorship by business. Several of these submissions specifically noted the importance of assistance with accommodation costs. Submissions also highlighted a need for clarity on finance for those considering further or higher education. As is noted earlier, a lack of clarity on higher education funding was cited as a potentially significant barrier to access to those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Several submissions, primarily those from higher education sector respondents, also referenced *current funding policy*. This was most commonly in relation to limits on the number of funded places, and included reference to evidence that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to access higher education when the total number of places is expanding. In terms of potential funding policy approaches, suggestions included that widening of access should be in the context of overall growth in funded higher education places, that ring-fenced funding of access provision is required, or that competitive higher education institutions are allowed to "trade above the cap" to allocate non-government funded places. Funding recommendations also included expansion of funding for part-time study, and that current funding arrangements defined around advanced/non-advanced or higher/non-higher are not consistent with the focus on articulation.

Improving awareness and understanding of access routes to further and higher education was also a common suggestion across submissions, and particularly for further and higher education respondents. This included reference to understanding for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and also for those most likely to inform their choices such as within schools and within social work teams (particularly young people with care experience). Submissions referred to a lack of an impartial "one stop shop" for prospective applicants, in the context of higher education institutions operating competitively. Some also suggested that the proliferation of access routes and widening access programmes, including use of contextual admissions, over recent years may have resulted in a lack of clarity among teachers and guidance staff regarding what admissions services are looking for.

Linked to the need to improve awareness, a significant number of submissions suggested a need for ***more and better support, information, advice and guidance***. This was raised as a key issue by all respondent groups, and particularly for further and higher education sectors, and for student representative bodies. These submissions made reference to a need for good quality support and advice throughout the journey into higher education, including more intensive input for people from disadvantaged backgrounds (and particularly for care experienced young people) at key transitional stages. This included a focus on ensuring good awareness of the range of access routes into further and higher education, but also providing practical support and pastoral care to assist progression through these routes. Specific approaches referenced by submissions included induction or orientation events prior to or shortly after admission, mentoring and coaching (including peer mentoring), use of online support networks, and subject-specific and broader academic-skills workshops.

Encouraging ***approaches that increase engagement of those from disadvantaged backgrounds*** was also recommended by a number of submissions, with a focus on providing an accessible route into further study and enabling young people to participate in decisions about their progression. The importance of ensuring programmes are open and accessible was highlighted by some, noting that some of those from disadvantaged backgrounds may not be ready to consider education and training as an option at the point of first engaging or re-engaging with access provision. In terms of specific approaches these included reference to a range of projects and initiatives which sought to engage disadvantaged communities, including partnership working between schools, further and higher education institutions, and employers. Several submissions also highlighted the importance of locally based access provision, particularly for those in rural areas, that demonstrates the value of engaging with education including in terms of future career opportunities.

Linked to the focus on a need to engaging and accessible provision, and closer working across sectors, several submissions suggested a need for work to ***ensure higher education institutions are perceived as welcoming to applicants of all backgrounds***. Several submissions highlighted the importance of a "sense of belonging" for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, in terms of being part of the community and also feeling that they deserve a place in higher education. Submissions also made particular reference to ensuring that care experienced young people entering higher education are not stigmatised, but are discretely signposted to appropriate support. The potential for Corporate Parenting to provide a framework for institutions to further develop their support was highlighted here.

Work to raise aspirations and understanding of the value of higher education
was also recommended by a number of submissions, in addition to work to raise awareness of available opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In terms of recognising the value of higher education, submissions referred to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but also to the need to reinforce this amongst families, communities, and within schools serving disadvantaged areas. Potential approaches included the value of support and mentoring from an early stage (S1 upwards) for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and particularly for those who have experienced the care system. This included student role models as a means of demonstrating the possibility of success for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and engagement with parents and carers to build their capacity to provide support.

Reflecting the practical barriers to access highlighted earlier, ***greater flexibility in access, further education and higher education provision*** was recommended in terms of meeting the needs of young people and adults from disadvantaged backgrounds. This included greater use of articulation, part-time and distance learning, allowing breaks in study, and use of web-based support networks. Other practical barriers such as childcare, transport and access to ICT were also cited as areas where further support can assist.

Cutting across a number of specific approaches to widening access, several submissions suggested a need for a ***broader definition of disadvantage***. This was primarily in relation to views that SIMD areas are a crude measure of disadvantage, and has the potential to exclude a substantial number of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A small number of submissions highlighted specific groups where a more tailored approach is required to widen access. This included care experienced young people; a number of submissions highlighted this group as in need of approaches focused on improving self-esteem, addressing challenging behaviour, and providing role models in higher education.

Factors of particular importance to retention and course completion

There was significant overlap in the points made by submissions in relation to generating a greater volume of successful applicants, and retaining these through their course of study and supporting course completion. However, a number of themes emerged as being particularly relevant to supporting retention and course completion. Submissions made specific reference to financial difficulties, attainment prior to admission (including those who have not completed Advanced Highers being more likely to have difficulty adjusting to independent study), "time on task" pressures such as having to work while studying, and lacking a "sense of belonging" as being key drivers of course withdrawal. Specific approaches recommended by submissions were focused on the following key themes:

- Providing a **continuum of 1:1 "holistic" support, information and guidance**, from school and access programmes throughout higher education – and particularly at key transition points (e.g. around enrolment) or in response to an emerging risk of course withdrawal. This should have a particular focus on practical support at key transition points, and on building/maintaining confidence. Submissions also highlighted potential concerns for some of those in need of support to disclose factors such as previous care experience or additional support needs, and the risk that these can undermine the effectiveness of support provision. A small number of higher education respondents highlighted the resource implications of the one to one support required by some students.

- A need for **financial support for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds**. Some suggested that financial difficulties are a more significant driver of failure to complete courses for some cohorts, than academic reasons. Submissions made reference to specific approaches including allowing students to retain benefits, bursaries and scholarships, targeting of the Higher Education Discretionary Fund, and funding opportunities for summer work and internships.

- **Better tracking of progress**, from admission throughout the course, offering intervention and support where needed. This included interventions for all students such as emails providing timely advice at key points in the year, and flagging of individuals where more intensive and personalised support may be required.

- **Building a "sense of belonging" for people from disadvantaged backgrounds**. Submissions made reference to the potential value of "associate student status", peer support, peer learning and active learning as potential approaches here. More broadly, several submissions cited evidence on the success of "mainstreaming" support and other activities to nurture a sense of belonging. It was also noted that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to live at home and have to work while studying, both of which can prevent students from developing a "sense of belonging". This included limiting students' capacity to take part in non-academic activities; these were highlighted as an important element in supporting course completion, and an area where those from deprived backgrounds may lack the time, finances and/or confidence to take part.

- **Greater flexibility in further education and higher education provision**, to support those who require to maintain employment income while studying, or to permit breaks in studying.

- **Reviewing higher education curriculum and delivery strategies** to ensure these are inclusive and engaging for all students.

- **Training for further education and higher education staff** to extend awareness of the challenges faced by young people from deprived backgrounds, and how these can be addressed – ensuring that this reaches beyond a core of specialist admissions and support staff.

Identification and Scaling Up of Best Practice

The second part of the Call for Evidence focused on identification and scaling up of best practice in widening access to higher education. The Call for Evidence requested submissions in relation to the following 3 questions:

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?

A total of 60 of 72 respondents provided comment in relation to this theme. Submissions made reference to a broad range of best practice examples, some in considerable detail. Relatively few respondents linked these examples to the three questions listed under this theme, although most comments related to learning points and potential to scale up current approaches or programmes in Scotland. Reflecting the profile of submissions, this section considers the main themes emerging in relation to best practice.

The table over the page below provides an overview of respondents.

	Comment	No comment	Total
College sector	11	1	12
Higher Education sector	13	3	16
Other educational sectors	11	1	12
Education administrative, professional & representative bodies	11	2	13
Research Centres/Organisations	3	1	4
Student Representative Bodies	3		3
Other group respondents	4		4
Groups (Total)	*57*	*7*	*64*
Individuals	7	4	11
TOTAL	**64**	**11**	**75**
Percentage of all respondents	**85%**	**15%**	**100%**

There was a clear view that a single "magic bullet" approach does not exist. However, there was *some agreement on what constitutes best practice and/or practice that could be scaled up*. Indeed several respondents suggested that there is a strong base of knowledge on good practice within the education sector, but that more work was needed to ensure learning points are shared, and that successes are communicated to deprived young people and communities. A number of submissions also highlighted that experience has shown that success in widening access takes time.

Best practice highlighted by submissions generally related to the following broad categories of practice:

- *Data and research* relating to best practice in improving what data is collected and how it is used to widen access and participation, as well as the evidence base educators are using to guide their approach.

- *Admissions* relating to how institutions recruit students and assess their applications.

- *Outreach* relating to specific and bespoke programmes run by, or between institutions to improve access, and this section looks at the best practice reported in current and pilot widening access programmes and in the design of curricula to widen access and participation.

- *Articulation and Progression* relating to how students can move through the educational system (and how easily they are able do so), including arrangements between institutions, and specific routes for students to move through the system.

28

- ***Strategic issues*** relating to best practice in strategic arrangements and interventions to allow widening access, articulation or progression, as well as the design and joint delivery of programmes.
- ***Student Support and mentoring*** emerged as an important element that affected the success of widening access schemes, articulation and the various transitions that have a bearing on how students access further and higher education.

We consider each of the best practice themes, and specific aspects and approaches linked to these, in turn below. This includes consideration of input from submissions on the key learning points for each theme, implementation considerations, and potential to scale up existing best practice.

Data and Research

Submissions widely acknowledged that a broad range of data is already being collected by further and higher education sectors to better inform admissions, student support and transitions through the system. Best practice in this area usually represented an aspiration toward improving the use of data, and linking available datasets to make more informed and contextual decisions or resource allocations.

Submissions focused on longitudinal and contextual approaches, and a detailed account of views expressed in this areas is set out in the next section under "Data and Measures to Support Access and Retention". Below we provide an overview of the issues highlighted in relation to best practice in relation to data and research.

In relation to ***longitudinal data and research***, many respondents questioned established explanations for barriers to access and suggested that there is a lack of robust longitudinal data to adequately support admissions, student support or curriculum redesign. Best practice in this area related to longer-term data collection efforts from school throughout further and higher education, including reference to existing datasets and other types of non-statistical data:

- A research unit offered an example of cross-institutional action research across 8 colleges, as one such programme that had begun to generate ongoing data to track progress, and data used in student recruitment and admissions.
- It was pointed out that the longer running widening access programmes (GOALS, FOCUS West, LEAPS and SWAP[3]) would be excellent sources of longitudinal evidence on what works in widening access.
- Another research unit recommended that high quality longitudinal data tracking be made available for all young people (regardless of background) be implemented by linking the existing administrative datasets (see above), using students at Scottish schools aged 16-19 as a starting point.

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[3] GOALS: Greater Opportunity for Access and Learning with Schools, LEAPS: Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools, SWAP: Scottish Wider Access Programme.

In relation to ***contextualised data and admissions***, there was broad agreement amongst respondents that the context against which applicants access further or higher education is an important strand in widening access. This appeared to be linked to intersectional approaches, which recognise the complexity of identity and personal characteristics, and that educational outcomes are the product of multiple such characteristics and experiences. While the role of intersectionality was only explicitly mentioned by one respondent, intersectionality did seem to be an implicit theme in much of the comment on contextualisation. In terms of best practice in use of contextual data, the key points were:

- Respondents suggested that the range of data and criteria used in contextual admissions varies; some institutions were clearly very reliant on particular datasets such as SIMD data, while others sought to cross-refer and triangulate between different sources of information. It was also noted that concerns remain around the indicators of context to be used by institutions, availability of reliable contextual data, and the extent to which contextual admissions policies are also promoting student achievement at university (i.e. after admission).

- Contextualised data was mentioned by a number of respondents as something they would like to see incorporated into best practice on admissions and student monitoring and support. In the main, such data was seen as a desired change or aspiration, rather than something that currently existed.

- A number of respondents expressed a view that contextual data needed to be widely and universally available on applicants, entrants and transferring students. Indeed, it was implied that a national approach based on broadening or extending the criteria against which data was assembled was the best way to make progress

Admissions

The way in which institutions admit access to its provision was a major theme in the best practice submissions and evidently, an area where practitioners have been trying to make positive improvements. Submissions noted that admissions departments are increasingly moving to contextualise their processes, so that socio-economic, cultural or personal factors can be fully taken into account when recruiting students. Another area of best practice emerging from the submissions was cross-disciplinary expertise, drawing upon learning support, professionals in other sectors and services, to ensure a coherent and consistent approach in recruitment processes.

Contextualised Admissions

Contextual admissions take a range of contextual data or criteria into account when dealing with a student application, including non-academic achievement. This applies both to decision-making, and in organising support infrastructures for new entrants according to their likely need when in the institution. As with other areas of best practice related to contextualisation, respondents seemed to feel they knew

what such practice would potentially look like once systems were in place and it was adopted more widely, rather than being able to point to cases where this was being achieved.

- Institutions seem to be moving towards contextualised admissions on an individual basis, adopting localised innovations within their own structures. There was broad convergence however, on the use of SIMD datasets to help contextualise an applicant's information and apply any special considerations that might be necessary. The notion of 'fair admissions' can be closely linked to contextualised admissions and it was pointed out that the UK wide Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme had published resources and criteria to aid institutions in improving this area of work .

- The definition of contextual admissions seems still to be evolving in its area of application – not just to the background data of a candidate, but also to other life achievements or experience that could perhaps, be taken into account. A third sector organisation also emphasised the value of contextualised admissions that looked to non-academic achievement

- Uncertainty remained as to whether any one model of contextualised admissions could be scaled up and imposed across an entire sector or sectors. This was particularly in relation to the varied starting points and geographically diverse communities served by the higher education sector. Others were more optimistic. One ancient university argued its system of contextualised offers, supported by *'academically rigorous'* pre-entry programmes, allowed it to make adjusted offers to access applicants – and would be a *'sensible national approach'*. Another ancient university claimed that its use of contextualised admissions has led to 55% of its Scottish undergraduates met at least one of six criteria used to define an 'access candidate'.

Encouraging Inter or Cross-Disciplinary Expertise and Collaboration

It is recognised that widening access goes beyond just the admissions phase of the student experience to how students are inducted and supported during their time in an institution. Cross-disciplinary expertise was a theme that emerged in some of the responses.

A research unit listed building cross-disciplinary teams as an important element of best practice it had identified in its research into widening access. This allows staff to compare and collaborate in acting on student records, staff awareness and disability issues, among others. Other cross-disciplinary approaches went beyond the institutions – with for example, social work departments.

There were no obvious ways in this could be scaled up at a national level, but practitioner groups and fora were being set up at a regional level that brought together local practitioners in this area, allowed them to network and share practices.

Outreach

Submissions suggest that outreach is at the forefront of the widening access agenda, and the richest source of best practice evidence and learning in widening access. At the core of this is what has been learned from delivering access programmes as individual institutions or partnerships. Emerging areas of best practice mentioned early intervention and cross-sectoral curriculum design. Closely linked to these (and to other areas of institutional practice such as Student Support) is the use of online and distance learning in delivering these programmes and overcoming barriers to participation.

Wider/Widening Access Programmes

Access programmes are a core element of the widening access agenda and tended to dominate the responses during the consultation. Most programmes are offered at a regional or local level, and many institutions – particularly universities – offer their own particular widening access programmes. There is no national, or standardised programme.

Accounts of best practice tended to emphasis the longitudinal work of widening access programmes, and a number of responses linked this area of best practice to early intervention and schools collaborations (see below). Respondents also made this link between early interventions and ongoing work between wider access practitioners and all stages of the educational system to better equip young people to make better choices in terms of access to higher education.

Many respondents shared what they felt made for a successful widening access programme. The following digests the criteria for successful programmes:

- Programmes should be integrated with other practices and provision in their institutions, including student support and counselling services.

- Widening Access programmes should be linked to early years programmes, summer schools and targeted programmes to support retention, student transitions, mentoring and progression

- Information, advice and guidance for teachers, parents, and college advisers on the goals and substance of Access programmes.

- Programmes should be collaborative and involve multiple institutions and stakeholders, focusing on transitions and progression to further study

- Programmes should have sustained funding and set out long-term plans through strategic partnership and cross-sectoral planning between schools, the college sector, HE, the voluntary sector and industry.

- Programmes should encourage support and engagement from parents or carers.

- Programmes should also offer various modes of participation time – full and part-time, distance learning and more casual courses to fit with individual lifestyles.

As noted above, wider access programmes are implemented at local or regional level, with the Scottish Wider Access Forum offering more of a national perspective and approach. Submissions mentioned more than 20 widening access programmes they regarded as best practice.

Some felt that local approaches were best suited to meeting the needs of wider access students, and were thus resistant to scaling up *'one model [as] appropriate to address all circumstances'*. Others disagreed, and argued that particular programmes (such as SWAP, LEAPS or Reach Scotland) could be scaled up to national level although there was no unanimity on which. There was a sense that there were too many programmes currently operating and that schools found the current landscape confusing.

Localised or regional approaches continue to dominate. A higher education institution argued that a first step towards a national approach would be to implement a widening access network that gathered together the local widening access programmes, and encouraged cross-regional arrangements. This respondent also observed that the tendency to benchmark against other widening access schemes tended to promote "unhealthy competition" and hindered constructive, positive work. The sense that widening access activity could be disjointed seemed to be shared by other respondents. One argued that a single point of contact, with simple, clear information would be a step forward, and that FOCUS West's online hub could be a model for this. The low cost and depth of experience in access courses was also offered as the basis for a future national model of widening access.

Respondents also recommended looking at other national approaches, such as Ireland's Strategic National Plan.

Cross-Sectoral Curriculum Design and Early Intervention

The importance of early intervention was noted by a number of respondents as an important area for improving and developing best practice. The rationale being that rather than try to make up for disadvantages relatively late in a student's educational career, early engagement can ameliorate these well in advance and allow a student to begin preparing for transitions to further or education while still in school.

This is linked closely to curriculum design itself, ensuring that the course of study followed early in a student's career will be relevant and generally in sync with courses offered at colleges and universities. These curriculum interventions are increasingly packaged with support to identify appropriate learning pathways and workable progression routes through the system.

The main points raised by respondents in relation to cross-curriculum design and early intervention are highlighted below.

- Curriculum interventions can mean linking to existing curricula and wider agenda (such as Curriculum for Excellence), or highly bespoke provision such as the Divert Programme, which uses sport to mentor young offenders and encourage them into education or training. In other cases widening access provision such as New National Progress Awards, Access or Bridging programmes, Taster programmes and Induction programmes were being embedded within the mainstream curricula of responding institutions.

- Cross-sectoral working – for example, college and university lecturers developing a curriculum area together so that transitioning students are well-prepared to continue study was also mentioned. Wider partnerships than such cross-sector working were also alluded to including third sector organisations, representative bodies, small and medium enterprises, and others. Other institutions also seemed to be experimenting with student involvement in curriculum design and review, particularly in using the experience of articulating students to design transitions programmes and student support.

- Co-curriculum schemes are being used in institutions to aid articulation and the navigation of progression pathways, and will be discussed in section 5. Schemes such as YASS[4] allow secondary school students to study University degree level courses while in school – with no fees or financial barriers to participation to prevent them from taking part. Institutions were also applying measures to the curriculum to ensure access principles were embedded, such as Glasgow Caledonian University's FAIR (Flexible, Accessible, Inclusive, Relevant) curriculum. It was noted that even national curricula such as HNC/D could vary greatly in content between institutions, which could add an additional layer of disadvantage to students looking to articulate into university courses. Addressing this would therefore remove a barrier the system itself creates.

- A number of respondents mention links to Curriculum for Excellence, and this would be a rational first step in exploring how best practice could be implemented and embedded at a national level. Cross-sectoral working seemed to be reaping rewards at a localised or bilateral level, and there were calls for taking a much more integrated and strategic approach – in particular, the college sector and HE practitioners cooperating to design college curricula. Universities Scotland also argued that systematic schools programmes were already in place and Scottish Funding Council Supported, and this offered an existing infrastructure around which scaling up could take place.

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[4] Young Applicants in School Scheme.

- The North American 2+2 model, where the first two years of a degree are undertaken in a college has been experimented with in Scotland (at North East Scotland College) but is not widely practiced. The Australian model, where the college sector and HE provision are offered within the same institutions was advanced as an example where curricula could offer more seamless and smooth transitions for students. While not a 'panacea' these international examples offer a template for rolling out a national approaches to curriculum design for facilitating access and progression. A research centre noted that Scotland could not only adopt such approaches, but potentially improve on them for example through shared teaching between the college sector and HE.

- Summer schools were also praised by respondents and a number were in operation across the country – although some suggested that these are 'resource intensive' and 'over-subscribed'. It was suggested that these existing initiatives could be the foundation of a national network of summer schools. American models such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) were also mentioned as worth emulating.

Online Resources and Distance Learning

Digital access to courses and support materials were being used to deal with barriers caused by geography, lifestyle or employment patterns (among others). The notion is that using these methods can supplement (but not necessarily replace) other widening access practices and help open up the education system. It had been noted by some respondents that online courses could come with their own cost, especially on particular high-aspiration career paths, such as medicine and law.

Online provision is part of mainstream curriculum provision across the sectors and so there is a potentially very broad range of practice that might have a bearing on widening access not specifically mentioned by consultees. Particular examples however, include online summer schools, FOCUS West's online portal or REACH West's online virtual classroom aimed at remote and rural areas, or employability programmes that use online learning to offer certificated programmes outside of traditional institutional settings. As well as support for students, parents and carers could also access support materials and resources online through schemes such as CIAG (Careers Information, Advice and Guidance). It was noted, through reference to distance learning models used in the Highlands and Islands, that staff development and training was necessary to support such approaches and any potential scaling up.

It was suggested that a proposed national network of summer schools would also embed online and distance learning in their delivery models which seems to link in with how institutions and wider access initiatives such as REACH are already operating. Respondents indicated that they would welcome the development of a national network of resources. Rather than a discrete area of scaling up, it seems that online and distance learning approaches is an embedded element of scaled up practices (and potentially an important mechanism for doing so).

Articulation and Progression

Articulation arrangements are an important mechanism in creating a more flexible and accessible education system. Clarity in how and where articulation can happen emerged as a key issue in the submissions, as was flexibility of such arrangements, it being noted that articulation was still largely limited to post-1992 universities. There was much good practice evident in identifying progression pathways through articulation arrangements and other strategic agreements.

Clear, Flexible Articulation Routes

An articulation route or arrangement allows a learner to move from a previous course of study to a further level of study in a way that recognises their existing achievement and pick up their studies at an appropriate level. It recognises or offers, parity of esteem between academic or vocational learning to pave the way for this process. Since the implementation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Scotland has had a single, credit-based system of promoting articulation between educational sectors, accrediting learning and ensuring parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning (HN qualifications were originally vocational). SCQF levels are now an embedded part of student certification (with exam certificates showing the SCQF level) and it was noted by some respondents that a focus on levels of study, rather than particular qualifications, could be a healthy further development that would aid the widening access agenda.

Articulation arrangements were in place between partnered institutions; usually, it was noted, between post 1992 universities and colleges (with little penetration into the 'ancients'), and usually in relation to Higher National Qualifications. An good example of this would be the College Connect programme between Glasgow Caledonian University and three Glasgow college sector institutions which is linked to the Greater Glasgow Articulation Hub, which provides a broader strategic infrastructure for articulation arrangements. Other such regional hubs are replicated elsewhere in Scotland and funded by SFC and were trying to innovate in this area – through, for example, closer collaboration with student bodies and other stakeholders.

College Connect links into specialised student support, such as the College Connect Academy, discussed in Section 6. Schemes based around Higher National qualifications are evidently quite successful and look likely to continue expanding and developing.

The SCQF felt such bilateral arrangements and its own work supported access and articulation, but that its current scope was too narrow – focused largely on HNC/D links to degrees, to the detriment of other areas, such as community learning and development who often lacked resources to take advantage of SCQF in its provision, mostly for those with economically deprived backgrounds. This being acknowledged, the evidence and experiences gained from Higher National articulation routes will greatly inform the wider development of such arrangements in the future.

As the most developed area, arrangements in Higher National Qualifications is the most fertile ground for scaling up best practice, with the network of Articulation Hubs presenting a potential framework on which this could be built. More localised practices with the potential to scale up included the Academies' models being tested in a range of different settings and subject areas across Scotland.

Progression Pathways

Progression relates to the pathways through which a student makes their way through the system. These can be vertical (from secondary to college sector, college sector to HE) or as facilitated by SCQF, horizontal (from community or vocational learning over to academic). The recording of credit and achievement is an important aspect of setting up and implementing progression pathways. Students seen to be disadvantaged or wider access eligible often need help and support, as well as some flexibility, in how their progression takes place.

An important facility in widening access through progression routes is the recognition of Access courses or programmes in admission processes, usually through accreditation. As with articulation, the SCQF is an important reference point for quantifying and evaluating student credit and taking it into account during admissions and college-university transitions. Parity of esteem is an important principle when recognizing a student's progress. SWAP programmes such as FOCUS West's in-school sessions or SHEP have advice and counselling on progression routes embedded into their design, meaning these two themes, as well as those relating to student support, need to be understood in close relation to each other.

Progression routes are particularly important for adult learners returning to education after some time away and disabled learners, many of whom follow longer, more complex and horizontal routes through the system. Among the best practice mentioned in relation to progression was development of curricula through cross-sectoral collaboration (see 3.2) as well as with the Scottish Qualification Authority at an institutional, or national level. The Open University noted that it has progression routes agreed with virtually all Scottish colleges (save for UHI).

The SCQF represents the beginnings of a national approach to scaling up best practice in progression pathways. Institutional and regional approaches are developing in response to SCQF and articulation arrangements. Models of good practice mentioned for upscaling mentioned included the REACH project and the Pathways to the Profession Programme. The Associate Student scheme (within the Additional Articulation Places Schemes) was also mentioned as a progression-focused programme that could be implemented and embedded nationally.

Strategic

Submissions suggested that widening access provision relies heavily upon cross-institutional and sectoral working. Largely localised or regional, these partnerships have played a major role in sustaining, evidencing and promoting the widening access agenda. Submissions on best practice focused on institutional and staff development and moves towards contextual finance or funding to help remove barriers and encourage students to stay within their programmes of study.

Institutional and Staff Development

Institutional culture was mentioned as a major aspect affecting wider access and progression – for example, suggestions that while articulation arrangements have gained traction with 'post 1992' universities, the 'ancients' have remained largely untouched. Changing institutional culture touches on their governance but also how staff are trained, developed and supported in dealing with wider access students and aligning their behaviour to widening access goals. This relates to staff not just in institutions, but stakeholder and referring organisations, including the care system.

Developing institutional cultures to support widening access could be linked to strategic partnerships, but also the adoption of standards and measures such as FAIR and the SPA's guidance on admissions. A trade union suggested that institutional governance – university courts, boards or senates - rarely reflected the wider community and were largely white and male in their demographic. For this respondent, best practice would therefore involve making major changes to the composition of these bodies and how their members were recruited. More broadly, it was recognized that other stakeholders, such as professional bodies and employers, may need CPD (Continuing Professional Development) to mitigate against unconscious biases in their recruitment and training practices.

Continuing Professional Development was mentioned in reference to teachers at secondary, college and university level, its focus ranging from ensuring relevance in curriculum design (and awareness of progression needs) to helping support students through UCAS applications to better preparing staff at the target institutions to deal with more diverse, and potentially challenging, students. Professional Development programmes were being offered for schools and stakeholders by projects such as LEAPS and SHEP. A number of stakeholder and development agencies were also, evidently tailoring CPD to support access and equalities issues

There were no clear indicators as to how these elements could be scaled up in any single effort; the Higher Education Governance Bill was mentioned as a critical development that would allow institutions to address issues caused by the governance arrangements. Initiatives such as CPD for Social Workers, careers advisers or sector wide training (in the college sector, for example) around widening access issues all seemed to offer the potential for scaling up.

Contextualised Finance/Funding

Contextualised Finance relates to not just direct financial support for students from widening access backgrounds, but also at an institutional or strategic level to support the planning and packaging of provision. Some respondents – especially individuals – were able to report on ways in which personal costs could make widening access provision unviable, even an additional barrier, for them. Best practice based on overcoming personal costs will be dealt with in the Student Support section. This section will largely discuss responses at the institutional level, and the key points are set out below.

- 'Robust', 'consistent' or 'sustainable' financial arrangements that ensure programmes have continued funding and adequate resources, often organised around a particular set of student needs, were acknowledged as both an ongoing problem as well as a aspiration towards best practice. It was noted in a number of responses that widening access could incur a range of institutional costs, especially in relation to additional resources that might be needed (such as CPD), and there did seem to be concerns among some that it was an area where funding could be unreliable and hard to sustain.

- The personal financial barriers facing learners seemed to be widely recognised and many First Steps programmes are planning their courses taking travel time into account and ensuring a learner's benefits are not affected through their participation. The Royal Conservatoire's Transitions Programme also reported success in tackling financial issues through its case-by-case approach. Care agencies and other referring or support bodies seem to be playing an important role in signposting where financial assistance can be found. Overall, best practice in meeting the financial challenges met by students was seen to be something that went beyond a *"simply 'no student fees' mantra"*.

- The LEAPS programme was cited as a good example of how consistent funding for widening access could be embedded into the strategic plans of participating institutions.

- Initiatives such as 'corporate parenting' were cited as strategic approaches that began to address some of the issues around contextualising student finance, with local authorities taking on the role of coordinating and cross-referencing funding and finance around the individual. Colleges have also been embedding financial counselling and support into their induction and advisory services, as discussed in the next section.

- It was felt though that the best way to scale up contextualised funding would be to pump prime funding into certain areas, such as subject-specific university outreach and increasing the number of available programmes in accordance with regional outcome agreements. Other areas where direct SFC funding could help was in rolling out the Industry Academies Model and into funding work that tackled particular areas of widening access, such as disability . It was stressed that building on the success of regional initiatives such as Articulation Hubs and Contextualised Finance partnerships would be dependent on also achieving greater consistency in how these are funded.

Partnerships

Partnership – whether to support articulation arrangements, or plan wider access programmes – was identified as a critical aspect of widening access strategy and the means through which most of it is delivered. Respondents highlighted a range of points in relation to good practice around partnerships, and these are highlighted below.

- The college-university link was seen as arguably the most central, but partnerships mentioned by respondents also included schools, employers, trade unions, pressure or representative groups and the care system. The Scottish Funding Council was also highlighted as an important partner and collaborator, often teaming up directly with institutions to deliver pilot programmes.

- Partnerships were often local, with colleges or universities working through knowledge of their context to address particular needs or issues, though there are signs of moves towards cross-regional and national partnerships. One of the most common partnerships were direct collaborations between an institution and an industry to create a particular programme – for example, Project Search and the NHS – or an agency, such as Action for Children.

- Partnership was also seen as important in developing training and professionalism in the widening access sector, promote cross-disciplinary expertise and to create new frameworks such as the Industry Academies Models. Respondents noted the need to build partnerships around different strengths and capacities available across education sectors and other agencies.

- Co-curriculum design was identified as an area where partnership working was seen as essential component and there is evidently a considerable body of good work taking place at institutional and regional level. Partnership also played an important role in transitions and progression and training and professional development, as well as sharing cross-disciplinary expertise.

- The Scottish Wider Access Partnership was seen as an obvious starting point and conduit, for scaling up other partnership working in Scotland. School partnerships, particularly for interventions into the curriculum and progression pathways, were seen as particularly important. In particular, schools were looking towards a more national approach to partnership to help navigate what seemed to be a confusing system of initiatives and interventions, and are already collaborating with 'universal services' such as Skills Development Scotland.

- The various Academies instituted across Scotland, such as Strathclyde's Engineering Academy were mentioned as a scalable industry-college sector-HE partnership worth rolling out into other professions and industrial sectors. Universities Scotland noted that multiple institutional involvement was often the most constructive, as this avoided partnerships becoming about promoting a single institution or programme and instead, promoted sectoral development.

Student Support

Submissions highlighted that transitions into further or higher education can be challenging for learners already disadvantaged by social or economic factors, and indicated that many institutions are now addressing this through longitudinal approaches to induction that extend beyond initial entry, backed up by mentoring to aid retention and completion. Submissions pointed to an increased role for student representative bodies and peer networks, as well as better systems to identify additional support needs widening access students may have.

Transitional/Progression Support and Mentoring

Also referred to as longitudinal induction, or contextualised student support, institutions are increasingly looking to how they support students coming through widening access initiatives, in particular the many transitions between modes of learning and institutions this can involve. Adjusting to an institution's culture, or the pressures of student life can also be more difficult where there have been additional barriers to participation. Therefore, many of the respondents reported best practice in efforts to ensure students are adequately supported as they attempt to progress through the system, especially in the mentoring given to student, often through peer-to-peer schemes. Key best practice points are noted below.

- Mentoring or 'buddying' approaches were evidently a core part of many existing programmes and had been developed by those institutions most experienced in widening access students. Clarity over finance and potential costs for the student were being addressed early on, but also throughout the course of study, in case new problems developed.

- Such longitudinal induction or transition support was in place at both colleges and universities. One college ensured every student with a background in care had an initial meeting with the Bursary Officer through Learning Support, including aid with funding applications. Students attended pre-entry 1:1 meetings that continued throughout the academic year through a named student support officer and student mentor. Potentially vulnerable students were also spoken to around potentially difficult times of the year, such as Christmas. As one respondent noted, to ensure retention and progression, student support must increasingly be contextualised - it must recognise that prevailing issues such as homelessness or mental health problems, can supersede grades or attendance. Universities were also planning and packaging support specifically around college students adjusting from the shift from college sector to HE.

- Peer-Assisted student support was also highlighted is a growing area with a pilot scheme initiated by Edinburgh University Students' Association in 2013/13 and continuing to operate with some success. One respondent that the Edinburgh scheme *'now [has] over 60 peer support projects running across the University involving over 90 staff, 500 volunteer Student Leaders and 33% of the undergraduate population.'*

- Colleges also reported the use of student mentors in their programmes and there seems to be growing interest in co-opting students more directly into planning and supporting wider access provision and achieving a more authentic level of student engagement in planning and delivering provision. Peer support was thus seen as a potential growth area in these practices. Other areas of future intervention may include more active co-option of parents or carers, and in the case of the pilot Corporate Parent Programme, an entire service.

- While there was some high quality, localised best practice, there were many comments that advocated a national approach – for example a 'national repository for clear and specialist, impartial advice and guidance on training, finance and employability'. There was also strong advocacy for tailoring policies and resources towards vulnerably learners. The emphasis throughout the consultation responses on early intervention indicated that many respondents felt that students who were better prepared early on could be more easily supported at further education and higher education level.

- As with section 3, it was suggested that Scotland could learn from and build on the lessons from other educational systems. This included reference to Modernising student support as one of the five objectives of Ireland's National Strategic Plan, and the Australian PASS scheme. The work of student associations to develop peer-based mentoring support suggests the rudiments of a national framework on which to implement this best practice on a wider scale.

Additional Support Needs

Widening Access provision implies a close relationship with Additional Support for Learning provision; they share much of their respective agendas and call for similar resources in terms of finance, mentoring/counselling and advice. What constitutes Additional Support Needs (ASN) can vary according to the issue that learners face; children coming from a care background are determined by law to automatically have ASN, which allies this area of widening access very closely to ASN issues. Additional Language support is another important area where minority ethnic groups are attempting to access education

Additional Support Needs teams in colleges are often closely involved in widening access interventions and are clearly important facilitators in making these schemes work. US franchises such as project search are currently being trialled in Scottish colleges, its focus primarily to enhance the employability of those with ASN issues.

There were also areas of disability – such as sensory impairment – where it was felt new interventions were needed. It was recommended by one advocacy group that the Attainment Scotland Challenge Initiative should channel some of its resources to target learners in a particular ASN category, before then looking at how this could be rolled out to other ASN groups.

Skills Development Scotland already offers a 'universal service' of needs assessments for Scottish pupils that can help identify potential needs. This important schools partnership may be of use to the contextualisation agenda in widening access – but also could be an existing area of best practice that could be enhancing through contextualising it for widening access.

Respondents noted that current legislation such as The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 should support the scaling up of Best Practice. For example, Corporate Parenting is now a requirement of local authorities, and young people deemed to have additional support needs have a statutory right to a Coordinated Support Plan that will 'strengthen and better support their educational experience'.

Data and Measures to Support Access and Retention

The third part of the Call for Evidence focused on data and measures to support access and retention, in terms of evidence considered as part of the admissions process and measuring progress. The Call for Evidence requested submissions in relation to the following 3 questions:

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?

A total of 65 of 75 respondents provided comment in relation to this theme. The majority of submissions commented on each of the three questions above in turn. Although some considered as whole the data and measures required to support widening access, and a number of common themes emerged across submissions, in this section we consider the issues raised in relation to each of the three questions in turn.

A number of respondents cited specific research or evidence in support of their submission. A full list of references cited in relation to measures to support access and retention is presented at Annex 2. The table over the page provides an overview of these respondents.

	Comment	No comment	Total
College sector	10	2	12
Higher Education sector	15	1	16
Other educational sectors	11	1	12
Education administrative, professional & representative bodies	12	1	13
Research Centres/Organisations	4		4
Student Representative Bodies	2	1	3
Other group respondents	3	1	4
Groups (Total)	*57*	*7*	*64*
Individuals	8	3	11
TOTAL	**65**	**10**	**75**
Percentage of all respondents	**87%**	**13%**	**100%**

Evidence required to measure progress on widening access

Submissions referenced a range of potential evidence and other points for consideration in terms of measuring progress on widening access. This included submissions suggesting there is scope to derive greater value from currently held data, although most of these respondents also identified areas where further evidence is required. In terms of current datasets, respondents suggested making currently-held data available at an institution level and undertaking more detailed analysis of published datasets including data held by HESA, SQA, UCAS, SDS, ScotXed, and the School Leaver Destination Return.

Relatively few submissions provided a comprehensive account of the evidence required to measure progress, but rather focused on areas where the current evidence base is seen as lacking. Nevertheless, a number of common points emerged.

Most saw *area-based indicators of deprivation* as having a role to play in measuring progress. However, submissions raised a number of concerns regarding the extent to which current geographic indicators provide a genuine measure of progress in widening access, including some providing detailed assessment of measures such as SIMD. This included reference to inconsistency in the geographic measures used, particularly between the further education (using SIMD10 areas) and higher education (using SIMD40) sectors. Submissions also suggested that area-based definitions such as SIMD do not capture the broad range of factors that influence access to higher education. For example it was noted that use of these measures cannot assess progress in reaching the many disadvantaged people living outwith defined areas of deprivation.

On this basis, a significant number of submissions advocated development of **a broader set of indicators of disadvantage** as a basis for measuring progress in widening access. Several higher education respondents noted that this was now a common approach to admissions, and to measuring progress. Submissions also referred to existing sets of measures as being relevant to measurement of progress including the SFC's National Measures, the set of metrics developed by Universities Scotland, UK Performance Indicators Steering Group reviewing KPIs on widening access, European Commission recommendations in relation to Recognition of Prior Learning, and Skills Development Scotland's development of a Participation measure.

In addition referencing sets of indicators that could be appropriate to assessing progress in widening access, submissions also suggested a range of measures or indicators of disadvantage to supplement area-based definitions. This included:

- Household income measures, including Education Maintenance Allowance, free school meal entitlement, and other socio-economic indicators to provide a more fine-grained picture of socio-economic deprivation;
- Low progression schools and low attainment schools;
- Lack of formal education qualifications;
- First generation higher education participation;
- Progression through further education and access pathways, including engagement with SHEP;
- Rural disadvantage;
- Care experience;
- Carer status; and
- Demographic and equalities indicators including gender, ethnicity, and disability.

In addition to potential indicators of disadvantage, submissions highlighted a range of wider points in relation to assessing progress in widening access and retention. These reflected views on the nature of disadvantage, but also on how various forms of disadvantage interact to act as barriers to educational progress and access to higher education. In this regard, a number of submissions suggested a need for better evidence and understanding of the barriers to access to inform how progress is measured. Potential for statistical modelling was highlighted by a number of submissions across respondent groups, and some also suggested a need for qualitative insight.

Tracking of individuals' progress from application through higher education, and subsequent destinations was the most widely suggested evidence in terms of measuring progress in widening access. This was cited by submissions across most respondent groups, including further and higher education sectors, and education administrative/professional bodies.

These submissions suggested that this tracking would support a more "holistic" account of progress than has been the case to date, reflecting the complexity of underlying barriers to access, and that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to take a "linear" route through education. Submissions made reference to examples of longitudinal data available elsewhere in the UK, including the Higher Education Access Tracker, Youth Cohort Study, Longitudinal Study of Young People in England and the National Pupil Database. In terms of specific aspects of tracking data, submissions highlighted:

- The need for mechanisms to enable tracking individuals from entrance to exit from higher education, to compare progression of those from deprived backgrounds. The most common suggestion here was adoption of a "single unique identifier".

- The potential value of linking published statistics on recruitment, retention and completion to indicators of socio-economic and other disadvantage. This included reference to a need for progression data linked to care leavers, students from state schools, socio-economic groups, low participation areas/schools, and students who are the first in their family to access higher education.

- Better data on transitions and destinations for all young people, in terms of assessing which students do and do not access (and complete) higher education, and in tracking progress in widening access and retention. This included reference to current evidence sets such as the School Leaver Destination Return.

Submissions also highlighted the ***need for system-wide evidence and greater consistency*** in the measures used in admissions and tracking progress in widening access. A number of respondents suggested that a coordinated set of evidence sources was required at a national level, noting the difficulty of aggregating evidence produced by the diverse set of programmes and initiatives. Submissions also suggested that inconsistency in admissions and other systems across sectors presents significant difficulties in terms of measuring progress in widening access. This was most commonly in relation to differences in use of SIMD and other deprivation indicators, and the need for data sharing and benchmarking between institutions. However, a college sector respondent suggested that meaningful assessment of progress would not be possible without a unified system of applications.

Longitudinal data on positive destinations from higher education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and in particular to employment, was also highlighted as a key element in measuring progress. A number of submissions also noted the potential to use evidence on positive progression from higher education in reinforcing positive messages around the potential for people from deprived backgrounds to succeed in higher education.

Submissions made a number of suggestions in relation to the **key measures to be used in assessment of progress in widening access**. A small number of submissions noted that progress in widening access should be measured primarily on the basis of numbers of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education, rather than indicators of activity or engagement with potential applicants. This included reference to measures on application outcomes to assess any differential in offer rates and acceptance of offers linked to socio-economic disadvantage. Submissions also references measures linked to subject choice, discipline and course level as being required to ensure a meaningful measure of progress. Greater weighting to the most significant indicators of disadvantage was also suggested, such as low household income and attendance at a low progression school which evidence shows have an acute impact on access to higher education.

A small number of higher education and administrative/professional bodies recommended the establishment of **an independent research hub** to support the development and implementation of effective practice in widening access.

A small number of higher education institutions expressed concerns regarding use of targets in measuring progress, as failing to provide context to institutions' progress in widening access.

Evidence to be considered as part of the admissions process

Fewer submissions made specific reference to measures to be used as part of the admissions process, than for example evidence used to measure progress in widening access. While submissions across most respondent groups made comment here, the majority of substantive responses were from college sector and higher education respondents.

Submissions across a range of respondent groups raised concerns regarding the use of **area-based indicators of disadvantage** such as SIMD, and the extent to which these provide a comprehensive measure of disadvantage. This reflected concerns discussed earlier around the limitations of area-based deprivation measures, including that these miss the large number of disadvantaged people living outwith defined areas of deprivation. However, most saw area-based indicators as having a role to play in measuring progress. These submissions cited evidence on the strength of correlation between SIMD areas and access to higher education, and suggested that SIMD remains the most robust nationally available indicator of socio-economic deprivation.

There was a common view across respondent groups that area-based measures should form part of **a wider "basket" of measures** to support more effective targeting of interventions, recognising that there is no single measure that can provide an accurate indicator of socio-economic disadvantage. Submissions made reference to a broad range of evidence or measures as being potentially relevant. This included a small number of submissions referring to existing frameworks or approaches including those developed by Universities Scotland, and the Scottish National Expert Think Tank. Several submissions, particularly those from higher

education respondents, suggested that institutions should select from this broad set of measures, to ensure indicators are appropriate to the local or regional context.

In terms of the specific measures to be used, several submissions suggested that further work was required to **identify the most significant drivers of the differential in access**. Statistical modelling to assess the main drivers of access was recommended by some, with findings used to inform the range of evidence to be used by admissions. A small number of submissions also made reference to ongoing work by the Equality Challenge Unit considering links between widening access and equality groups.

Respondents cited a **broad range of indicators as being relevant to admissions processes**. Specific suggestions were primarily from further and higher education sector respondents, but submissions across most respondent groups made reference to key indicators to inform admissions. Specific measures included:

- Location, in terms of SIMD socio-economic deprivation, measures of rurality, Polar3 and Acorn data.

- Household income, including reference to receipt of income-related benefits, Educational Maintenance Allowance and Free School Meals, and eligibility for SAAS loans.

- Pre-school and school education, including reference to low progression schools, suggestions for measures that can be used to categorise schools, and school attendance.

- Greater emphasis of SCQF credit attainment and non-SQA qualifications, rather than current emphasis on tariff scores. This was suggested as a more representative indication of ability in a subject, than a requirement for 3 Highers which places an emphasis on more sustained engagement in education that some of those from disadvantaged backgrounds may lack.

- Participation in further education and access provision, including specific reference to SHEP.

- Skills developed through employment and volunteering activity.

- Family circumstances/history, including whether a previous family member has experienced higher education.

- Carer and/or employment responsibilities.

- Care experience.

- Refugee status.

- English use and length of time in the UK.

- Mature student status where there has been a substantial break in education experience.

- Health and disability status.

- Equality characteristics.

Within this range of measures, a number of submissions suggested greater weighting is given to the most acute indicators of deprivation relative to educational progress. This included reference to low household income, attendance at a low progression school, and care experience as being the key drivers of educational progress and access to higher education.

Submissions, and particularly higher education respondents, also highlighted the importance of **access to individualised data** to inform contextualised admissions and support construction of effective pathways for individuals. Several submissions provided a detailed description of the aggregate-level evidence used by current contextual admissions approaches, and suggested there is a need for more granular data on individual disadvantage and deprivation. This included suggestions of the need for standard national datasets being made available to institutions at an individualised level.

Several submissions made reference to the need for **greater consistency in the approach to contextual admissions** across the higher education sector in terms of the measures used, and some made reference to development of guidance in this area. This was also linked to suggestions of a need for greater transparency in contextual admissions systems, to provide potential applicants with clarity on the available pathways into higher education. However, a number of higher education respondents suggested that institutions must be allowed to tailor their approach to reflect the complexity of local circumstances.

Submissions indicated some difference of opinion in terms of the extent to which admissions should take account of "unverifiable information", such as whether a previous family member has experienced higher education. This was highlighted by some as a key indicator of disadvantage, but a small number of higher education respondents suggested an approach that gave greater weight to measures where robust verifiable data is available.

A robust evidence base on the effectiveness of existing programmes

A significant number of submissions explicitly stated that the current evidence base on the effectiveness of widening access programmes is insufficient. In addition, several submissions did not specifically comment on the robustness of the current evidence base, but suggested areas where this could be improved. This is reflected in the focus of submissions in relation to evidence on the effectiveness of widening access programmes; these were primarily concerned with more effective use of the existing evidence base, limitations of current approaches to measuring progress, and highlighting gaps or areas for further work.

While there was broad agreement that more work was required to develop a robust evidence base, submissions were more varied in terms of the work required. A significant number of submissions made reference to **scope for better use of existing datasets**. This included some of the view that maximising the value of currently held data would be sufficient to improve the evidence base on widening access, without work to develop new data. Linkage of existing datasets was seen as the key development required to make best use of the current evidence base, and this linked to views discussed earlier around the need for better tracking of post-school progression. A number of submissions suggested a need for greater analytical capacity at a local and national level to support the required work, although some made reference to existing initiatives seeking to link datasets, such as the Urban Big Data Centre. Several submissions, across respondent groups, also cited specific data sources where more detailed analysis work could improve the evidence base on widening access:

- Data supplied through annual reports to the Higher Education Statistics Agency and Scottish Funding Council;

- UCAS-held applicant data;

- SQA-held data;

- Insight school-level data;

- National Articulation Database;

- Data collected against new Scottish Funding Council "National Measures";

- The Understanding Society databases;

- The School Leaver Destination Return; and

- More detailed analysis of national demographic and socio-economic datasets.

Linked to comments around making more effective use of existing datasets, a number of submissions highlighted **limitations in current approaches to measuring progress in widening access**. This was most commonly in relation to use of SIMD. Several respondents expressed concerns around use of SIMD assuming that all deprived areas face the same challenges, a focus on SIMD areas failing to acknowledge the number of disadvantaged young people in less deprived areas, and particular limitations in use of SIMD for rural areas where datazones are (for technical reasons) larger and can include a diverse set of communities.

Submissions highlighted a number of **areas where further evidence is required** to assess the effectiveness of widening access programmes. These reflected the range of issues discussed earlier in relation to measuring progress in widening access and informing admissions. Key points raised by submissions were:

- A need for comprehensive tracking of young people through school, further education and higher education to enable assessment of socio-economic inequalities in progression and outcomes. This was linked to suggestions that an assessment of effectiveness in widening access required evidence on the extent to which programmes are reaching the full range of disadvantaged people, and comments that post-higher education progression is a key gap in the current evidence base. In this regard, submissions highlighted the need to benchmark progression by those participating in access programmes, against progression across the population as a whole. It was also noted that this would require better cohesion and data transfer between information systems.

- A need for better evidence on the effectiveness of existing access programmes and interventions, including specific reference to early intervention approaches. This included suggestions that clear targets and measures should be built into the design of widening access programmes and initiatives, although respondents did reference potentially useful datasets held by access programmes and other bodies. Submissions also highlighted the need for robust independent evaluation of programmes to provide a true picture of effectiveness. However, a small number of respondents raised concerns around difficulties demonstrating causal links for projects that can cover many years in a child's education.

- The need for longitudinal evidence to provide a meaningful assessment of the effectiveness of widening access programmes. This included reference to the range of funding initiatives in relation to widening access, and the need for evaluation to inform assessment of their sustainability.

- In addition to individual level data on post-school progression, a number of submissions highlighted a need for wider access to individualised data available for research purposes. This reflected views around the individual nature of barriers to access, and the fine-grained analysis required to provide a genuine account of progress in addressing these.

- A lack of evidence on barriers to access, and in particular relationships between various forms of disadvantage, and educational attainment and outcomes. This included reference to a need for intersectional analysis to consider the relationship between widening access measures, and protected equalities characteristics. Submissions made specific reference to data on access, retention and outcomes for those with physical disability, sensory impairment, learning difficulties.

- A lack of primary evidence, including qualitative feedback, on what does and does not work for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Other Issues Raised

The final section of the Call for Evidence provided respondents with the opportunity to provide any other comments in relation to the Call for Evidence.

A total of 45 of 75 submissions included further comment here. The majority of these were reiterating support for the Commission's work in considering how to further widen access to higher education, including reference to key issues raised in the main body of the submission (and considered over the previous sections of this report). However, submissions did raise a limited range of other issues that did not relate directly to the three main themes of the Call for Evidence.

- It is important that colleges and universities are able to take the local context into account when developing their approach to widening access, within a clear national strategy.

- Significant progress has been made in widening participation over recent years, and there is broad commitment to achieving a "step change" in access for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a depth of experience and knowledge across education sectors for the Commission to draw on.

- It is important to recognise that the education sector cannot, in isolation, provide solutions to widening access. Specific reference was made to input from health, social care and community networks.

- Protected characteristics may also have a significant impact on access; it is not just about socio-economic disadvantage.

- It is important that widening access initiatives are communicated to employers and professions, to ensure these can inform recruitment criteria.

- Widening access is an important theme across a range of government areas, and linking strategies across departments would be useful.

Some respondents commented on the approach to the Call for Evidence. This included that the Commission's remit does not allow for recommendations to be made regarding Scottish Government policies, that the timing over the summer holidays may affect the level and quality of response, that the word limit may restrict the depth of evidence submitted. Several submissions expressed a willingness from respondents for further engagement with the Commission's.

Annex 1: Group Respondents

Respondent	Respondent Type
Ayrshire College	College sector
City of Glasgow College	College sector
Colleges Scotland	College sector
Dundee and Angus College	College sector
Forth Valley College	College sector
Glasgow Clyde College	College sector
Glasgow Kelvin College	College sector
Newbattle Abbey College	College sector
SRUC (Scotland's Rural College)	College sector
West College Scotland	College sector
West Highland College UHI	College sector
West Lothian College	College sector
Abertay University	Higher Education sector
Edinburgh Napier University	Higher Education sector
Glasgow Caledonian University	Higher Education sector
Heriot-Watt University	Higher Education sector
Queen Margaret University Edinburgh	Higher Education sector
Robert Gordon University	Higher Education sector
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	Higher Education sector
The Open University	Higher Education sector
Universities Scotland	Higher Education sector
University of Aberdeen	Higher Education sector
University of Dundee	Higher Education sector
University of Edinburgh	Higher Education sector
University of Glasgow	Higher Education sector
University of St Andrews	Higher Education sector
University of Stirling	Higher Education sector

Respondent	Respondent Type
University of Strathclyde	Higher Education sector
Access to Industry (AI)	Other educational sectors
ASPIRENorth	Other educational sectors
Children's University	Other educational sectors
Equality Challenge Unit	Other educational sectors
FOCUS West	Other educational sectors
LEAD Scotland	Other educational sectors
LEAPS (Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools)	Other educational sectors
LIFT OFF programme	Other educational sectors
Opening Education Practices in Scotland	Other educational sectors
Schools for Higher Education Programme	Other educational sectors
Scottish Wider Access Programme	Other educational sectors
University of Glasgow - Community Development Programme	Other educational sectors
City of Edinburgh Council	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
Further Education Regional Board for the Highlands and Islands (UHI)	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
Higher Education Academy	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Scotland	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
School Leaders Scotland	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
SCQF Partnership	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
Skills Development Scotland (SDS)	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
South Lanarkshire Council	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
SQA	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
The Education Institute of Scotland	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
The Law Society of Scotland	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies

Respondent	Respondent Type
University & College Union Scotland	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
Voice the Union	Education administrative, professional and representative bodies
AQMeN (Applied Quantitative Methods Network)	Research Centres/Organisations
Centre for Educational Sociology	Research Centres/Organisations
Centre for Research & Development in Adult Lifelong Learning	Research Centres/Organisations
Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity	Research Centres/Organisations
Edinburgh University Students' Association	Student Representative Bodies
NUS Scotland	Student Representative Bodies
Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs)	Student Representative Bodies
Children in Scotland	Other group respondents
National Deaf Children's Society	Other group respondents
The Robertson Scholarship Trust	Other group respondents
Who Cares? Scotland	Other group respondents

Annex 2: References to Research or Evidence

A full list of references provided by submissions is included below.

To be provided under separate cover.