Item 16a
For Information

Scottish Funding Council Report on Widening Access 2023-24

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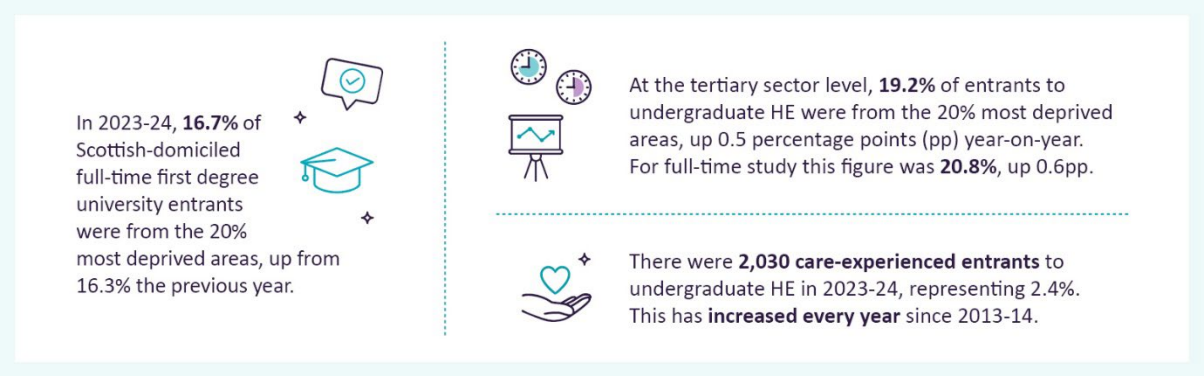
Summary

This report presents data relating to the Commission on Widening Access (COWA) targets, and on Scottish-domiciled entrants to higher and further education in Scotland by SIMD domicile, sex, ethnicity, disability, care experience and age.

Online report available at: https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/report-on-widening-access-2023-24/

Overview



Introduction

1. This is the ninth SFC Report on Widening Access, providing updated statistics relating to equality and diversity of the student population across Scotland's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and colleges for 2023-24. The background tables provide extensive breakdowns covering entrants, qualifiers, college student outcomes, college leaver destinations, university graduate outcomes, and university staffing.

2. This publication primarily uses three metrics: (i) Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants to university (FTFD), (ii) Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants to university (SDUE),[1] and (iii) Scottish-domiciled all undergraduate HE entrants to the tertiary sector. The report presents data relating to the

Commission on Widening Access (COWA) targets. An overview of COWA is contained in the Annex.

3. To avoid delays, this publication was initially released without articulation data, which were then incorporated into this updated version. The introduction of HESA Data Futures presented challenges in the matching of student records between academic years, meaning deeper data quality checks were required, thus delaying the availability of articulation analysis.

Notable Changes in Reporting

4. For 2023-24 university data, we have amended the HESA derived fields used to identify Scottish-domiciled and full-time entrants or qualifiers from university. This is a minor technical change that ensures alignment across HESA and SFC data reporting. The impact on the data is minimal: the new technical definition identifies 60 more Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants in 2023-24 than the technical definition used previously, resulting in a total population of 32,810. This represents an increase of 0.2% in the population of students used in the statistics. Figures prior to 2023-24 have not been restated due to the minimal change, and historical figures therefore remain identical to those published previously. The change in population has minimal impact on the statistics, so figures are still comparable across academic years. A technical breakdown of the variables used and a full explanation of the change are provided in the Notes sheet in the background tables.

5. A change to the funding qualifying date for full-time college students in 2023-24 has meant that more students are eligible for inclusion in our analysis. This particularly affects SIMD20, care experienced and disabled students as they are more likely to withdraw early.[2] Therefore more full-time college entrants from these groups are being counted and this has increased the rates of non-completion. Full details are provided in the Notes sheet in the background tables.

Key Indicators for SIMD

Table 1: Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants at university and Scottish-domiciled all undergraduate HE entrants (both sectors), from the 20% most deprived areas (SIMD0-20) and care experience (CE), 2013-14 to 2023-24

- Full-time First Degree
- All Undergraduate HE

Academic Year	Total Entrants	Entrants from MD20	% MD20 entrants	CE Entrants	% CE entrants
2013-14	28,285	3,850	13.7%	145	0.5%
2014-15	28,640	3,965	13.9%	170	0.6%
2015-16	28,770	4,015	14.0%	160	0.6%
2016-17	28,885	3,965	13.8%	170	0.6%
2017-18	29,880	4,650	15.6%	255	0.8%
2018-19	31,065	4,900	15.9%	320	1.0%
2019-20	30,620	4,970	16.4%	370	1.2%
2020-21	33,290	5,515	16.7%	510	1.5%
2021-22	33,885	5,595	16.5%	545	1.6%
2022-23	32,760	5,310	16.3%	585	1.8%
2023-24	32,810	5,445	16.7%	620	1.9%

6. Table 1 above shows the key indicators for Scottish-domiciled entrants to full-time first degree at university and all undergraduate HE study at Scottish institutions (both sectors).

Figure 1a: Proportion of college HE entrants, all undergraduate HE entrants (both sectors), and Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants to university from SIMD0-20 areas, 2013-14 to 2023-24

7. In 2023-24, 16.7% of Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants to university were from the 20% most deprived areas, up from 16.3% in 2022-23. See Table 1 and Figure 1a above. For a breakdown by institution, see COWA Table 1B in the background tables.

8. The next interim target for COWA is 18% by 2026.[3] Early indicators from UCAS undergraduate admissions data and SFC's Early Access Return (not published) suggest this proportion from the most deprived areas is likely to increase further for 2024-25 entrants.

Figure 1b: Scottish-domiciled full-time entrants from SIMD0-20 by level and sector of study, 2015-16 to 2023-24

9. Figure 1b above shows that 20.8% of Scottish-domiciled full-time entrants to all undergraduate HE at universities and colleges were from the 20% most deprived areas in 2023-24, up 0.6pp (percentage points) year-on-year. Whilst students from the 20% most deprived areas make up just over 20% of undergraduate full-time HE entrants at tertiary level, there is variance in levels of representation by mode of study, institution and sector.

Figure 1c: Proportion of Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants by SIMD quintile, 2013-14 to 2023-24

10. The share of Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants from the most deprived areas increased by more percentage points year-on-year than all other SIMD quintiles. Meanwhile the proportions from some of the least deprived areas (SIMD60-80 and SIMD80-100) grew only slightly year-on-year but make up less of a share than a decade prior. See Figure 1c above.

Table 2: Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree university qualifiers and all undergraduate HE qualifiers, from the 20% most deprived areas (SIMD0-20), 2013-14 to 2023-24

- Full-time First Degree
- All Undergraduate HE

Academic Year	Total Qualifiers	Qualifiers from MD20	% MD20 qualifiers
2013-14	22,515	2,620	11.7%
2014-15	22,145	2,650	12.0%
2015-16	22,970	2,820	12.3%

Academic Year	Total Qualifiers	Qualifiers from MD20	% MD20 qualifiers
2016-17	23,475	3,055	13.1%
2017-18	23,640	3,150	13.4%
2018-19	23,570	3,270	13.9%
2019-20	22,565	2,930	13.0%
2020-21	22,475	2,960	13.2%
2021-22	23,775	3,405	14.4%
2022-23	22,265	3,010	13.6%
2023-24	24,090	3,370	14.0%

Please note: Qualifier figures in 2019-20 and 2020-21 were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and are not directly comparable with past academic years. Additionally, the year-on-year decline in university qualifiers in 2022-23 is in part due to a marking and assessment boycott in 2022-23. This led to the deferral of reporting for some qualifiers from the 2022-23 academic session into 2023-24. As such, qualifier figures should be treated with caution.

11. In 2023-24, 53,305 students successfully achieved an undergraduate level HE qualification from Scotland's colleges and universities. Of those achieving qualifications, 17.6% were from the 20% most deprived areas. Note that the year-on-year decline in university qualifiers in 2022-23 is in part due to a marking and assessment boycott that year. This led to the deferral of reporting for some qualifiers from the 2022-23 academic session into 2023-24. As such, qualifier figures should be treated with caution. See Table 2 above.

Care Experienced and Disabled Students

12. Looking at Table 1 above, care experienced students represented 2.4% of Scottish-domiciled entrants to all undergraduate HE courses at Scotland's colleges and universities in 2023-24, with 2,030 entrants. This is up from 2.1% in 2022-23 and an increase of 235 students. Both the numbers of care experienced students and the percentage of student intakes have increased every year since 2013-14. According to Scottish Government's Children's Social Work

Statistics an estimated 11,844 children were looked after in Scotland on 31 July 2024 – 1.2% of the population aged under 18.[45]

13. When interpreting figures relating to care experienced students it is important to note that students self-report their status. Therefore it is possible that not all care experienced students chose to report themselves as such. The reporting of students from care experienced backgrounds has been given more focus in recent years, with increased efforts made to encourage students to declare themselves as being care experienced. Financial support has been made available to care experienced students in Scotland at HE and FE level since 2017-18 and 2018-19 respectively.[6]

14. In the university sector, 1.9% of Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants in 2023-24 were care experienced, at 620 entrants. This has increased every year since 2016-17. See Table 1.

15. A record proportion of entrants to full-time HE and full-time FE at college were care experienced in 2023-24, at 4.7% and 10.4% respectively. See Background Table 5.

16. Care experienced graduates from full-time first degree university courses in 2022-23 were slightly less likely to be in work or further study 15 months after completing their course than those not declaring themselves as care experienced, at 93.0% and 95.1% respectively. See Background Table 18.

17. Of those who successfully qualified from college courses in 2022-23, 94.6% of care experienced leavers from full-time HE courses and 91.7% of care experienced from full-time FE were in work or further study 3-6 months after qualifying. For those not declaring themselves as care experienced, these figures were higher at 96.1% and 94.4% respectively. See Background Table 13.

Figure 2: Distribution of Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree university entrants across SIMD quintiles by care experience status, 2023-24

18. Care experienced entrants are much more likely to be from more deprived areas, as shown in Figure 2 above. In 2023-24, 30.9% of Scottish-domiciled care experienced entrants to full-time first degree university courses were from the 20% most deprived areas, compared to 16.4% of those not declaring themselves as care experienced.

19. The number of Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree students entering HEIs with a declared disability has increased every year of this publication, and currently make up 23.3% of these entrants, a record high. See Background Table

1 for a breakdown of this data for the university sector and Background Table 5 for a breakdown for the college sector.

University Retention

Figure 3: Proportion of Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants continuing their studies in year 2, 2013-14 into 2014-15 to 2022-23 into 2023-24

20. Of the Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree students who entered in 2022-23, 89.5% returned to study in year two. This is up 1.5pp on the previous year and shows some recovery from last year's record low for this publication. As noted in the 2022-23 publication, the previous decline was likely caused by a multitude of factors including the end of many 'no detriment' marking policies implemented by schools, colleges and universities, and the 2021-22 session coinciding with a buoyant labour market. Despite the latest increase, retention was still below pre-pandemic figures. Research has shown that the cost of living crisis has had a significant effect on students on all levels of study but has had a disproportional impact on widening access students and those who are care experienced or estranged.[7]

21. Retention rates for SIMD0-20, care experienced,[8] and disabled students have seen some recovery year-on-year, as shown by Figure 3 above. Retention for SIMD20 entrants has increased sharply by 3.0pp year-on-year to 86.1%. Meanwhile retention rates for care experienced students have recovered by 1.3pp to 84.9%, and for disabled students recovered 1.6pp to 88.6%. A breakdown of retention rates by specific disability group can be found in Background Table 3. Overall retention rates for individual providers can be found in COWA Table 2A of the background tables.

Articulation

22. In the Main Articulation Measure, 3,100 students entered university via Advanced Standing, receiving full credit for their prior learning and entering directly into year two with an HNC or year three with an HND. This is a slight increase of 10 students year-on-year following 2022-23's record low. The slight increase in Advanced Standing should be seen in context of overall articulation numbers decreasing, which is a result of the decline in the supply of students qualifying with an HNC/D from college. Looking further ahead, the number of HNC/D college entrants increased slightly in 2023-24, suggesting the downturn in HNC/D college qualifiers may stabilise in future years.[9]

23. Proportionally, utilisation of the Advanced Standing pathway increased in 2023-24, with 53.6% of articulating students using this pathway, up 1.9pp. See

Background Table 14a. For an overview of the articulation methodology, see the supplement published alongside this report.

24. Positively, this has resulted in a record high proportion of Advanced Standing students from SIMD20, at 25.8% for 2023-24. See Background Table 14b.

25. SFC have re-run articulation analysis for 2022-23 following minor improvements to the matching of student records in the National Articulation Database. The total numbers articulating in 2022-23 as part of the Main Articulation Measure have been revised up by 275 to 5,985 — a 5% uplift. Of these, the number articulating with Advanced Standing has been revised up by 195 to 3,090 for 2022-23 — a 7% uplift. Data for 2021-22 and prior are unchanged.

26. Of the 5,445 Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants from SIMD0-20 reported against the COWA measure, 32.5% (1,770) entered via college routes. Proportionally, this is the lowest share of COWA students entering via college routes, down 2.2pp year-on-year. See Background Table 14d.

Footnotes

1. SDUE is only shown in the background tables and includes first degree plus other undergraduate sub-degree provision at HN-level. HN-level includes Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE), Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE), Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND) qualifications. For a technical definition of how these are coded and for a numerical breakdown of the metrics, see the Notes and Context Data sheets in the background tables.↩

2. As SFC's College Student Outcomes 2023-24 publication has shown.↩

3. See Annex A for an overview of COWA and its targets.↩

4. Note that SFC's definition is broader as it includes those who have been care experienced at any time, no matter how short, whereas Children's Social Work Statistics do not. See Annex B for a full definition of how SFC defines care experienced.↩

5. National Records of Scotland - Mid-Year Population Estimates 2023↩

6. Scottish Funding Council - Care experienced bursaries↩

7. See findings from the Scottish Government's Student Finance and Wellbeing Study Scotland 2023-2024 report.↩

8. Retention rates for care experienced students are calculated for a relatively small population of entrants (580 in 2023-24), therefore these retention rates are more susceptible to volatility and should be interpreted with caution.↩

9. See Background Tables 24 and 13 in SFC's HE Students and Qualifiers 2023-24 publication.↩