

Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science

Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP

T: 0300 244 4000

E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

James Dornan MSP

Education and Skills Committee

es.committee@parliament.scot

5 April 2018

Dear Convenor,

Thank you for your letter of 19 March, on behalf of the Education and Skills Committee, seeking clarification on some of the issues raised during my appearance before the Committee on 7 March.

I have responded to each in turn below and I hope you find this helpful.

Questions from Members

Whether the new higher exam materials will be ready for teachers to start using in June and...whether you have raised this issue with the Cabinet Secretary and to provide further detail on his response.

I can confirm that this matter has been raised with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. In January the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) published a document summarising assessment changes for all subjects including information on the question paper and coursework for Highers. Higher course specification documents will be published by the end of April and updated support materials on a course by course basis between May and September. This will include a specimen question paper and, where appropriate, a specimen coursework task. It may be helpful to note that course structures remain unchanged, providing continuity for teachers and young people moving through Scotland's education system.

In response to stakeholder feedback, SQA is publishing information on revisions to individual subjects as soon as they are available, and are prioritising those subjects that have new assessment components added, such as a new question paper or new piece of coursework.

The changes to National Qualifications are part of a range of activity designed to address teacher workload and free up time for teachers to teach. The removal of unit assessments represents a considerable reduction in workload for teachers and young people, and were welcomed when announced last year.

What work has been done “on analysing students who have articulated successfully into second or third year at university in terms of their final degree result or the retention rate?”

As I set out in my response to that question during the Committee session I will be happy to come back to the Committee with that analysis. Currently the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is in the process of developing a National Articulation Database which will provide the basis for the analysis. The previous articulation database was managed by an SFC funded articulation hub hosted by Edinburgh Napier University. While the SFC supported this process financially, they did not own the dataset.

Funding for articulation hubs came to a close at the end of the agreed project timeline in 2016 and at that time the dataset was provided to the SFC. At that stage, the SFC recognised the need to re-build the dataset to enable them to add more data to it and to interrogate the information in more depth. They have now completed that process and are undertaking final quality control checks on the data.

The new National Articulation Database will provide data on HNC and HND students progressing into degree level provision, including the amount of progression (i.e. students beginning a degree at year 1), partial progression (e.g. students progressing with a HND into year 2) and advanced standing (i.e. full articulation with a HNC into year 2 or a HND into year 3). The dataset will also provide details on the student profile, institutions attended, subjects studied and qualifications achieved. This will enable the SFC to analyse students who have articulated successfully into second or third year at university in more depth.

Information from the dataset will be published in their annual Access Statistics Publication 2018, due later this year, and will be used to monitor and report on articulation.

I will be happy to forward information to the Committee once available. However, in advance of that and specifically in respect of the retention rates of articulating students, it may be helpful to note that the [SFC's 10 year plan to grow articulation](#) considered both articulation and retention (see p24 – 25), and took into account data up to 2013-14. I understand their conclusion is that the performance of articulation students, in terms of retention, is reasonably close to the rates for all students, and in some cases higher.

Clarification on the rationale behind the apparent change in the approach to funding widening access policy [insofar as “in the past, moneys went to universities for widening access places, but now that is part of their core funding”] and on what leverage the Government has if any universities are underperforming under the revised funding arrangements.

With reference to this point it may be helpful if I explain that in AY 2013-14 the SFC introduced three new investment programmes, providing higher education institutions (HEI's) with additional funded places to: widen access (defined at that time as growth in the SIMD40 intake); increase articulation; and support key sectors of the economy with additional undergraduate and Taught Post Graduate skills places. The widening access places were reviewed by the SFC last year and they have confirmed that they are content with the growth achieved by these.

As a result of this the SFC has 'mainstreamed' the additional widening access places with universities' core funded places from AY 2018-19 and it has been made clear to the sector

that from AY 2018-19 onwards these places should be used to support growth in SIMD20 (the places were previously focussed on SIMD40).

In the “Outcome agreement funding for universities – indicative allocations for 2018-19” published by the SFC on 27 February it states:

- Universities must continue to use the additional funded places that have been allocated to them since AY 2013-14 for the purpose of widening access.
- We expect universities to use both these now embedded additional places and their other core places to continue to make progress in their SIMD20 intake and for this to be clearly articulated in their Outcome Agreements.

In return for the mainstreaming of these places, the SFC have been clear that they expect both the sector as a whole, and each university, to meet the 2021 targets set by the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA). These require that by 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 16% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities as a whole and 10% to every individual Scottish university.

Institutions which do not meet their SIMD20 targets, including those with embedded places, may face financial penalties. As set out in the SFC University Outcome Agreement Guidance 2018-19, published in October, “*the SFC will monitor progress and decide whether to apply a funding recovery and/or financial penalty within the Outcome Agreement process for aspects of Outcome Agreements, specifically:*

- *Outcome Agreement funded incentive mechanism;*
- *Other objectives agreed in Outcome Agreements that are aligned to Scottish Government priorities.*

When considering progress, SFC will establish evidence of under / over-delivery from a combination of the statistical data available, from the progress reported by institutions and by the information available from Outcome Agreement managers and key stakeholders. It will be the responsibility of an institution to make its case in relation to its progress, so that the decision making process is informed by a full and accurate agreement of the progress submitted by the institution.”

Whether “...any analysis been done to find out what courses young people from deprived areas are going into”. You explained that the Data Working Group has been examining this issue and we welcome your commitment to provide further information on the relevant work being done.

CoWA recommendation 33 stated that the Commissioner for Fair Access should “consider what further work is required to support equal access for other groups of learners and within specific degree subjects”. In response to this, the Commissioner will liaise with universities, the SFC, and those supporting access to high demand and low participation subjects to identify what further work can be done to support equal access to these subject areas. The Commissioner had an initial look at the distribution of entrants from deprived areas by subject and institution type in his January 2018 Discussion Paper: [Outcomes, Retention and Destinations](#). This high level analysis showed that, overall, entrants from the 20% most deprived areas study a similar range of subjects to entrants from other areas, but are more likely to go to post-92 universities.

The Access Data Working Group will look to support and complement the Commissioner's work on this topic, although the initial aim of the group is to assist with the delivery of Recommendation 31- "the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council, working with key stakeholders, should develop a consistent and robust set of measures to identify access students by 2018".

An update on the availability of the data requested by Universities Scotland [on "the achievement levels of secondary 6 pupils in the SIMD quintile, as a trend" to make it easier for universities to assess the level at which their minimum entry level requirements should be set], including whether a decision was taken to share it with universities at the most recent meeting of the Data Working Group?

The Universities Scotland request for detailed attainment data by SIMD quintile was discussed at the Access Data Working Group on 13 March and the Scottish Government will make the requested attainment data available. Officials are currently finalising the exact specifications of the data with the help of group members.

You may wish to note, however, that the Commission recommended that minimum entry requirements or 'access thresholds' should be "set as ambitiously as possible, at a level which accurately reflects the minimum academic standard and subject knowledge necessary to successfully complete a degree programme". As such, I do not expect universities to use the attainment data to set their thresholds in the first instance but to use it instead to assess the impact and implications of the minimum thresholds they have set.

Questions from the Public

David Hiddleston via Twitter–

- **What is planned to widen access in alternative university routes, such as Foundation Apprenticeships?**

The Scottish Government places great importance on having an integrated education system that supports our most disadvantaged learners and provides a range of routes into higher education. We are considering this through our 15-24 Learner Journey Review, the outcomes of which will be published in due course.

In addition CoWA recommendation 5 also aims to ensure that admissions processes take account of changes in the broader education system. It states that "universities should ensure their admissions processes and entry requirements are based on a strong educational rationale and are not unnecessarily prescriptive, to the detriment of learners who take advantage of the availability of a more flexible range of pathways." Implementation of this recommendation 5 is being led by Universities Scotland.

Institutions themselves are also considering Foundation Apprenticeships alongside all other qualifications in their admission policies and are using the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), funded by the SFC, to support this.

- **What is planned for FE College and University partnerships, increase articulation agreements?**

Growing articulation between colleges and universities is a priority for the Scottish Government.

This was emphasised in my letter to the Chair of SFC, of 18 October, which set out my expectations that the “SFC, alongside universities and colleges, closely monitors the expansion of articulation to ensure it continues to support disadvantaged learners to progress to degree level study”.

The SFC also expects both universities and colleges to make a purposeful commitment in their outcome agreements (OAs) to articulation. Their ambition for growth was to see an increase to between 4,200 and 4,500 students articulating to university with advanced standing per year by 2016-17 and to rise further to 5,500 per year by 2019-20.

As set out above they are also developing the National Articulation Database. This will report on 2015-16 and 2016-17 data shortly. The published 2017-18 OA's and draft 2018-19 OA's show a significant increase in articulation and the SFC are confident that their published data from the Database will show growth in line with their national ambitions.

- **What role will FE Colleges play in widening participation?**

Colleges play a central role in widening access by opening the first door to further and higher education for many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and, through articulation, providing a stepping stone onto degree level study. In their College Outcome Agreement Guidance the SFC sets out a range of widening access expectations. This includes the need for improvement targets in relation to:

- The intake of SIMD10, care experience students and any under-represented group;
- The successful completion rates of SIMD10 students, care experience students and students aged 16-19 on Full Time Further Education courses;
- Articulation

Scott Smith via Twitter–

- **What does the minister believe lies behind the disparity in access to university for students from deprived backgrounds between England, where tuition fees are in place, and Scotland, where they are not?**

We believe that free tuition is fundamentally important but not sufficient by itself to deliver fair access and that is why we established the Commission on Widening Access and have committed to implementing its recommendations in full.

The 2017 UCAS figures on entrants demonstrate that good progress is being made on access with a 13% increase in the number of Scots from the most deprived communities getting places to study at a Scottish university. That means 605 additional people from the most deprived communities were accepted to study at university.

I hope this update has been helpful but please do let me know if you have any further questions. As you have requested, I will be happy to provide an update to the Committee on other on-going work streams as the information becomes available.

Yours sincerely,

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE