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SPICe Briefing

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Further and Higher Education in Scotland: Subject Profile

Lynne Currie

This briefing provides an overview of Scotland's Further and Higher Education Institutions (FEIs and HEIs). It sets out key information about the sectors, summarises major policy developments of recent years and provides an insight into emerging issues in Session 6.

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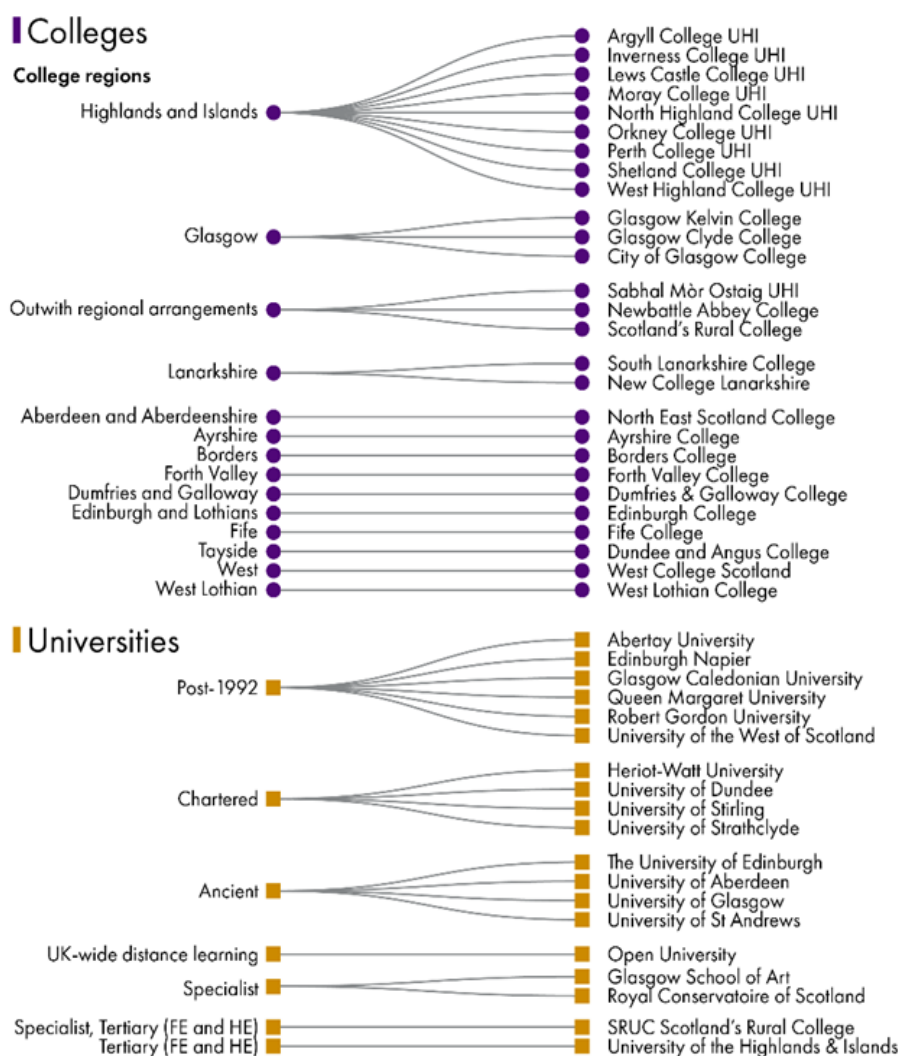
Introduction

This briefing provides an overview of Scotland's Further and Higher Education Institutions (FEIs and HEIs). It sets out key information about the sectors, summarises major policy developments of recent years and provides an insight into emerging issues in Session 6.

The further and higher education landscape

There are currently 19 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and 26 colleges in Scotland, delivering a range of qualifications from Access courses at college to PhDs at university.

Figure 1: Colleges by region and universities by type



Sources: [Colleges Scotland](#) and SPICe

Please note, Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) is classed as an HEI though it counts towards the achievement of the national targets for colleges and is therefore included under both headings.

Public sector and key stakeholder organisations

In addition to the Scottish Government, the following public sector organisations are involved in further and higher education:

Scottish Funding Council (SFC): The national, strategic body that is responsible for funding teaching and learning provision, research and other activities in Scotland's colleges and universities. SFC works closely with colleges and universities to monitor the impact of public investment to support improved educational, social and economic outcomes

Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS): SAAS assesses how much financial support for eligible higher education students in colleges and universities are entitled to. This funding includes student tuition fees for certain higher education courses.

Student Loans Company (SLC): The Student Loans Company administers student loan payments and determines and collects loan repayments UK-wide.

Skills Development Scotland (SDS): SDS is the national skills body for Scotland, working with colleges and universities to deliver Foundation, Modern and Graduate Apprenticeships.

Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA): SQA accredits and awards qualifications from secondary school up to Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND) level.

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF): The SCQF framework has 12 levels mapping out the majority of qualifications in Scotland. This provides a way to compare qualifications and credits and plan learning choices.

Education Scotland: Supports quality and improvement in Scottish education up to and including college level. Along with SFC, Education Scotland monitors college quality.

The University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS): Provides information, advice and admissions services to applicants to UK universities. Applicants pay a fee to submit one application that can list numerous courses at different universities via the same form. Some publications can be broken down by Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) to provide data on applicants and acceptances in relation to widening access to university.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA): Collects and publishes statistical data on UK universities. Some publications can be broken down by SIMD to provide data on widening access.

Student Information Scotland: The Scottish Government website for students and their parents/carers.

Key stakeholder organisations in the college and university sector include:

Universities Scotland: The membership body representing the Principals and Directors of Scottish universities.

Colleges Scotland: The membership body representing senior leadership in Scottish colleges.

National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland: Union representing a majority of college and university Students' Associations and students.

University and College Union (UCU) Scotland: Union representing around 7,000 members working in universities across Scotland.

Further Education Lecturers' Association (EIS-FELA): Autonomous organisation operating within the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) teaching union. Represents college lecturing staff and has a branch in every college in Scotland.

College management and governance

[Audit Scotland's 2019 report on the college sector](#)¹ states Scottish councils ran all publicly funded colleges in Scotland until the introduction of the **Further and Higher Education Act 1992**. Under this Act, most colleges established their own corporate body and boards of management. These boards took over responsibility for financial and strategic management. Twenty colleges currently operate in this way and are referred to as incorporated colleges, producing accounts subject to audit by the Auditor General for Scotland. The remaining six colleges are classed as non-incorporated. Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) is classed as an HEI though it counts towards the achievement of the national targets for colleges.

The **Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013** introduced college regionalisation, which saw the formation of 13 college regions. During this time, mergers brought the number of colleges down from 41 in 2011 to 26². The majority of these colleges sit within the 13 regions.

Each college is governed by a board of management, which oversees the budget and delivery of learning. The 2013 Act also introduced measures to improve board accountability. These included the appointment of regional college chairs, and two student representatives on each board. [Further information on regional chairs and principals can be found on the Colleges Scotland website.](#)

Colleges are required to comply with the [Code of Good Governance for Scotland's Colleges](#) as a condition of grant funding. This code was developed by the college sector and was last updated in 2016.

University governance

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are autonomous bodies, though they receive significant funding from the Scottish Government via the Scottish Funding Council and deliver agreed priorities in exchange for this funding.

HEIs are also charitable bodies and must comply with governance requirements set out in the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 1995. Each university has a governing body responsible for finance, governance and strategic management. Governance arrangements differ slightly by university type.

- Ancient university governance arrangements have a statutory base in the Universities (Scotland) Acts 1858 to 1966³. Each institution has: a Senate, presided over by the Principal; a Court with responsibility for finance and operation, presided over by an elected rector; and a General Council, presided over by a Chancellor.
- Chartered universities arrangements are set out by Royal Charter, established in the 1960s. They usually also have: a Court, presided over by a senior lay member; and a Senate, presided over by the Principal.
- Post-92 is the term used for former 'polytechnics' that became universities following the enactment of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Governance arrangements are usually made by the Privy Council, Court is responsible for overall governance and the Senate has responsibility for academic matters.
- Small and specialist universities' governance arrangements include a combination of the 1992 Act and the Companies Act, which requires an Annual General Meeting to be held and an updated list of directors to be maintained.

A review of HEI governance was carried out on behalf of the Scottish Government by a group chaired by former Principal of Robert Gordon University, Professor Ferdinand Von Prondzynski. The review was published in 2012, making a range of recommendations for changes to HE governance, with a focus on increasing transparency. Following the review, the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016 introduced new rules for how HEIs should appoint Chairs of Court. It also provided that all Courts must include members who are trade union representatives, staff members and students.

The Scottish Code of Good HE Governance was taken forward by the sector following the Von Prondzynski review. [The Code was last updated in 2017.](#)

Further detail on the above can be found in the 2016 [SPICe briefing on Higher Education Institutions.](#)

Response to the pandemic: a review of the sectors

In June 2020, the Scottish Government asked SFC to carry out a review of the college and university landscape in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting [Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability](#) was carried out in three phases:

- [Initial phase one considerations were published in October 2020](#);
- [a phase two progress update was published in March 2021](#);
- and [phase three recommendations were published in June 2021](#).

[For further detail about Phase 1 and 2 of the SFC Review, please see the SPICe Key Issues briefing on this topic.](#)

Two reports published during Session 5 of Parliament set the tone for the current SFC review:

- The [Driving Innovation in Scotland – A National Mission](#) report by University of Glasgow Principal, Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli, focused on universities' role in driving innovation, calling for more collaborative working between institutions.
- The [One Tertiary System: Agile, Collaborative, Inclusive](#) report. More often called the Cumberford-Little report, this recommended a rebalancing of college and university funding and making supporting business growth a top priority for the sector.

Consultation with students, academics, employers and sector bodies also informed the review findings.

SFC recommendations resulting from [Phase 3 of the review](#)⁴ include:

- a call for the Scottish Government to set out its overall strategic intent for further and higher education and research, along with a national vision and strategy for the college and university estate
- a call for multi-year funding assumptions, enabling SFC to give more certainty to institutions on continuation of project funding
- the creation of a National Impact Framework linked to [Scotland's National Performance Framework](#). SFC will also work with the sector to revise its approach to Outcome Agreements
- a call for the Scottish Government to continue funding for additional places for Scottish domiciled students (see page 13) resulting from exam disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic into 2022-23
- the development of a pilot framework for short 'micro-credential' courses to support skills needs across the economy and identifying ways to support lifelong learning
- improved engagement with employers to determine and respond to skills need

- increased collaboration between institutions across the HEI and college sectors, including consideration of shared support services and with industry. This should be supported by the Scottish Government
- a call for the Scottish Government to work with SFC to build on progress made to widen access to university
- the development of a single quality assurance and enhancement framework for colleges and universities.

SFC will now begin working with partners and the sector to take forward a number of the recommendations. The Scottish Government has not yet set out its response to the review.

Funding and outcomes

Colleges and universities receive around £1.8 billion total public investment each year. While colleges rely predominantly on public funding, universities have other income streams including tuition fees and donations.

Each year, Scottish Government funding for colleges and universities in Scotland is set out in the Scottish Budget and distributed to institutions via SFC.

Following the budget announcement, the Minister with responsibility for Further Education, Higher Education and Science writes to the Chair of SFC setting out the Government's priorities for the sector in the year ahead. This is called the Letter of Guidance.

The Letter of Guidance is used by SFC to shape priorities for each institution. These priorities are set out in [Outcome Agreements between SFC and individual institutions](#). The agreements set out what institutions plan to do in return for their SFC funding. They also act as a means of monitoring the sector's progress on certain issues, e.g. student mental health and quality of learning.

For academic year 2020-21, the Outcome Agreements process was changed to take into account the impact of the pandemic. [SFC Chief Executive Karen Watt told the Parliament's Education and Skills Committee in November 2020 that this approach was taken](#):

"... to ensure that we had not only stability but flexibility in our funding, so that universities and colleges could plan and think about what they needed to do with their resource."⁵

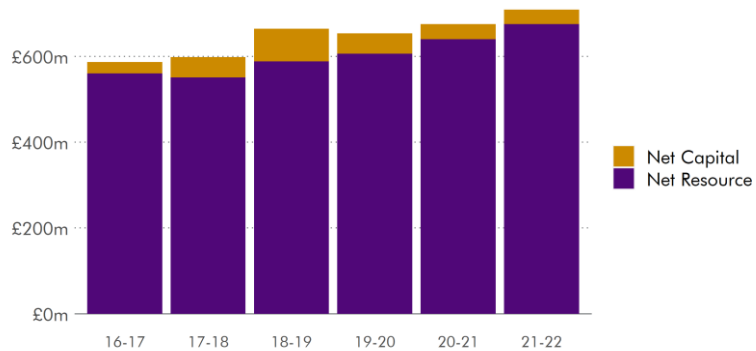
The Outcome Agreements process has evolved over the years and SFC has acknowledged that it has become time consuming. [The 2020 Cumberford-Little report on the future of the college sector stated Outcome Agreements have](#):

"... become a labour-intensive process, rarely meeting the aim of setting out succinctly what an institution is delivering for its public sector investment, and diverting precious resource from focusing on improved delivery. As it is, it is hard to see the real value the current OA process adds."⁶

In response to such concerns, the SFC [Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability](#)⁷ proposes that Outcome Agreements should develop into an National Impact Framework, with a focus on outcomes, longer term planning and gathering data and evidence to demonstrate impact.

College funding

The college resource budget has increased in recent years, with the 2021-22 budget up by £35.7 million on the previous year to £675.7 million. The capital budget has fallen from a high of £76.7 million in 2018-19 to £33.7 million in 2021-22. **Figure 2** shows the total budget in each year from 2016-17.

Figure 2: College budget 2016-17 - 2021-22

Source: [Scottish Budget 2018-19](#) and [Scottish Budget 2021-22](#)

Each year, additional in-year funding allocations can also be announced by the Scottish Government and distributed via SFC. [Following the initial budget allocations, the Scottish Government has since announced a further £60 million for further and higher education in 2021-22.](#)⁸ [Following the UK Government's Budget in March 2021, the Scottish Government allocated a further £23.4 million of Barnett consequentials funding to colleges](#)⁹.

The sector faces financial challenges for the foreseeable future. [Audit Scotland's 2020 report on college finances notes that the gap between total income and expenditure for the sector has "grown to £54m"](#)¹⁰. This gap is forecast to grow due to pension costs and depreciation of assets. However, once these costs are stripped out:

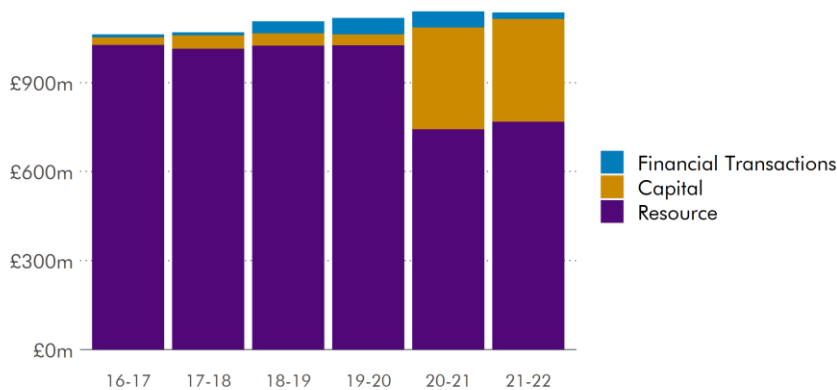
“... the sector's underlying financial position (adjusted operating position) was a surplus of over £3 million in 2019-20. This was a far healthier position than the £9 million deficit colleges had forecasted in June 2020.”

Audit Scotland has highlighted "robust long-term financial planning" will be critical for the future of the sector.

A detailed look at the 2019-20 financial position by college is available in the Audit Scotland report.

University funding: Scottish Budget

Figure 3: University budget 2016-17 - 2021-22



Source: [Scottish Budget 2018-19](#) and [Scottish Budget 2021-22](#)

The Scottish Government allocates over £1 billion of funding to universities in the Scottish Budget each year. This funding is distributed via SFC. **Figure 3** shows the total budget in each year from 2016-17.

The total resource and capital budgets for 2021-22 see a funding increase of 2.7% on the previous year. There can also be additional in-year allocations distributed via SFC and, following the initial budget allocations, [the Scottish Government has since announced a further £60 million for further and higher education](#)¹¹. [In addition, in March 2021 the Scottish Government allocated a further £27 million to universities from Barnett consequentials following the UK Government's budget announcement](#)¹².

Following a technical review, from 2020-21 onwards re-categorisation of research funding saw over £300 million of resource expenditure reclassified to capital, reducing the resource budget and increasing the capital budget by that amount. [This is a change in accounting practice in keeping with the UK Government approach and has no impact on funding streams](#)¹³.

Funding for teaching of students

[As SPICe's 2016 subject profile on Higher Education Institutions sets out](#)¹⁴, funding for teaching of Scottish-domiciled university students is provided via a combination of teaching grant funding from SFC and tuition fee income from SAAS:

- A block teaching grant is provided to each HEI by SFC to support delivery of agreed teaching activity as set out in its published Outcome Agreement.
- A tuition fee of £1,820 for each eligible Scottish-domiciled student accepting a place on an approved full-time, degree level course is paid by SAAS to the institution.

SAAS does not limit the number of eligible Scottish domiciled students it will pay

tuition fee support for, however the funding provided by the SFC for teaching may restrict the number of Scottish domiciled students that HEIs recruit.

COVID-19 additional funded places

SFC and the Scottish Government provides funded places for around 130,000 eligible students each year. [Each university is allocated a number of full-time equivalent places and can recruit up to 10% over this allocation](#)¹⁵.

[Following last year's announcement that pupils who received results downgraded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority \(SQA\) would receive new grades based on teacher estimates](#), around 75,000 pupils had their original grades adjusted up. The Scottish Government then made additional funding available for universities to provide additional student places.

As a result of this, SFC funded an additional 1,297 FTE student places in 2020-21. [For 2021-22, SFC is providing funding for a further 2,500 school leavers](#). Both cohorts will be funded for the duration of their degree programmes.

University income and expenditure

Table 1 shows university income and expenditure for Academic Years 2018-19 and 2019-20 (financial year end 31 July). The 2019-20 figures include four months of COVID-19 impact.

[SFC analysis of the financial sustainability of the university sector highlights that the situation is “extremely fluid” and the “sector-wide position masks particular financial challenges” for some institutions](#). In particular, ancient universities tend to be in a more sustainable financial position.

Table 1: University income and expenditure

	AY 2018/19 £000s	AY 2019/20 £000s
Tuition fees and education contracts	1,287,104	1,400,429
Funding body grants	1,202,429	1,195,453
Research grants and contracts	818,237	791,155
Other income	666,112	610,046
Investment income	36,888	38,530
Donations and endowments	60,638	68,519
Total income	4,071,408	4,104,132
Staff costs	2,767,692	1,931,708
Restructuring costs	17,209	14,579
Other operating expenses	1,454,382	1,413,215
Depreciation and amortisation	261,177	250,409
Interest and other finance costs	75,194	76,491
Total expenditure	4,575,654	3,686,402

Source: [HESA Income and Expenditure](#)

[Audit Scotland's 2019 report on university finances found that from 2017-18 tuition fees replaced Scottish Government/SFC funding grants as the sector's main source of income, largely due to income from international student fees.](#)¹⁶ This trend has continued in 2018-19 and 2019-20, with tuition fees accounting for 30% and 34% respectively.

Institutions were already facing cost pressures before COVID-19. These included increases in employer pension contributions, building maintenance and costs associated with Brexit. [SFC's analysis states:](#)

“The COVID-19 crisis has heightened those challenges particularly for institutions with high levels of commercial and international income albeit 2019-20 fee income, including international fee income, was improved on 2018-19 levels.”¹⁷

In the years ahead, the sector faces uncertainties resulting from the continued impact of COVID-19 and Brexit. While the feared drop in international students due to COVID-19 restrictions has not emerged, future numbers remain uncertain. In addition, while one-off Scottish Government funding provided to the sector during the pandemic has helped to stabilise finances, this is non-recurring. [A rise in sector borrowing is highlighted by SFC as a potential risk.](#)¹⁸

The SPICe briefing [The Impact of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) on University Funding](#)¹⁹ looks at sector income pre-pandemic in more depth. It also includes a breakdown of income by university for 2018-19. [A breakdown of income by university for 2019-20 is available on the HESA website.](#)

Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC)

UK universities use the Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) methodology for costing activities. This approach was introduced in 2000 to improve accountability and inform decision making. It was later extended to other university activities, including teaching. [TRAC analyses institutional activities across the headings of:](#)

- teaching (subdivided into publicly funded and non-publicly funded, with non-publicly funded including overseas students)
- research
- other.²⁰

[Audit Scotland has previously highlighted that funding for publicly funded teaching and research does not always cover the full costs of delivery](#)²¹. [SFC analysis of TRAC data from 2017-18 shows that Scottish universities recovered 91.1% of publicly funded teaching costs and 77.8% of research costs](#)²². The data also shows that 140.8% of non-publicly funded teaching costs were recovered and 110.4% of the costs of other income generated were recovered. Overall, the sector in Scotland recovered 95.7% of full economic costs, which is in line with the UK total.

COVID-19, Brexit and tuition fee income

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tuition fee income from international students is not yet clear. Income from international student tuition fees represented 57% of the sector's fee income in 2018-19, so there is concern about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions may have on international student numbers in the long term. [However, it is worth noting that the latest UCAS applicant figures for 2021 show international applicant numbers have increased.](#)

The introduction of tuition fees for EU students presents another variable. [Following the UK's exit from the EU last year, the Scottish Government announced that EU students would begin paying the same fees as international students from academic year 2021-22²³.](#) Fees for EU students enrolled in undergraduate courses prior to 2021-22 will continue to be paid by the Scottish Government for the duration of their courses.

[While the latest UCAS data shows EU applicants to Scottish universities have fallen by 41% on 2020 figures,](#) tuition fees paid by those who do study in Scotland from 2021 will contribute to university income. [In addition, the Scottish Government has confirmed that funding provided for EU student fees for new entrants - estimated to be around £19m in 2021-22 - will stay in the sector. Universities Scotland has said the change in fee status of EU students should be used as an opportunity to "fully-fund the undergraduate education of Scottish students".](#)

It is also likely that Brexit will have an impact on research funding. Although the UK will continue to participate in the Horizon Europe research and innovation programme, it will do so as an associate member. [The UK's association is currently being formalised by the EU, though UK universities can still apply.](#)²⁴

Student mobility

Student exchange programme Erasmus+ was not included in the UK-EU Brexit Agreement and the UK will no longer participate. The UK Government has since set up the Turing Scheme, which will enable students studying at Scottish universities to go on overseas placements and exchanges. [It will not support inward placements into the UK²⁵. The Welsh Government has announced it will set up its own scheme, the New International Learning Exchange, from 2022-23²⁶. More information about post-Brexit university research funding and student mobility can be found in the SPICe blog on the topic.](#)

Student numbers

College student numbers

The figures in **Table 2** show there were a total of 245,962 students at colleges in Scotland in 2019-20. Of these, 44,661 students were studying Further Education (FE) courses and 201,301 were studying Higher Education (HE) courses.

Table 2: Students at college 2015-16 - 2019-20

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Higher Education courses	46,970	47,937	47,062	46,557	44,661
Further Education courses	185,460	193,382	200,949	224,322	201,301
Total	232,430	241,319	248,011	270,879	245,962

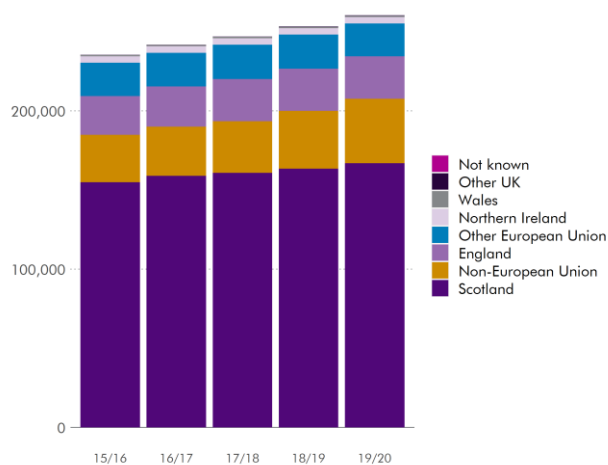
[Source: Scottish Funding Council Infact database](#)

University student numbers

There are around 260,000 students studying in Scotland's universities, and this number has shown a year on year increase over the past five years to 2019-20. This can be seen in **Figure 4** below.

In 2019-20, students domiciled in Scotland accounted for 64% of the overall student population; non-EU students made up 16%; students from England accounted for 10%; EU students 8%; Northern Ireland 1.5%; and Wales 0.3%.

Figure 4: Students enrolled at Scottish universities by domicile (all levels of study)

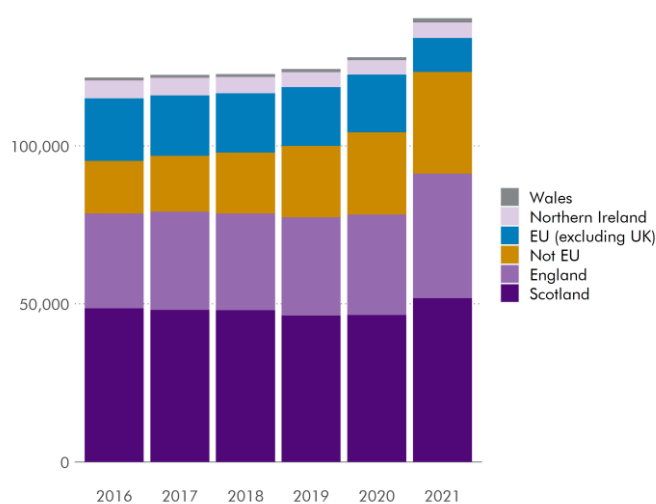


Source: [HESA](#)

While the domicile breakdown of students has followed a consistent trend in recent years, some change is likely in the years ahead. Uncertainty in the sector around international student numbers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of tuition fees for EU students following Brexit are two of the main reasons for this. Increased demand from Scottish students may also factor.

Figure 5 shows UCAS applicant figures for the June 2021 deadline. The total number of applicants is up 10% on the same period last year. In 2020, a total of 128,110 applicants applied to study in Scotland, while the 2021 figure is 140,450. Scottish-domiciled applicants are up 11% to 51,810. International applications are up 23% - a sign that the COVID-19 pandemic may not have a negative impact on income generated by international student tuition fees. However, there has been a 41% fall in EU applications - this is likely to be a consequence of Brexit and the introduction of tuition fees for EU students. Future application cycle data will show whether this decline in numbers will continue, or whether it will begin to stabilise and recover.

Figure 5: Applicant figures at June 2021 deadline



Source: [UCAS applicant data](#)

Student support and fees

Financial support for students at college and university is often discussed in Parliament, with issues around student poverty and debt frequently raised.

For students studying Higher Education (HE) courses at college or university, the overall amount of financial support available and the balance between non-repayable bursary and repayable loan are key considerations.

For students enrolled in Further Education (FE) courses at college, changes in recent years have seen a more uniform approach to levels of bursary support available. Previously, FE support was a matter for colleges. [This changed in 2019 and now, while support remains locally delivered, all FE students over 18 receive a bursary award](#)²⁷.

An [independent review of student support](#) was carried out during the last session of Parliament. [The review published its recommendations in November 2017, calling for parity of support across FE and HE and an entitlement to a Minimum Student income of £8,100 - funding equivalent to the Living Wage](#)²⁸.

In June 2018, the then Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP, set out the Scottish Government response to the review. [This included](#)²⁹:

- an increase in bursaries for full-time care experienced FE and HE students to £8,100 per year from 2018-19
- an increase in bursary support for the poorest HE students from £1,875 per year to £2,000 per year, and an increase in the bursary income threshold from £19,000 to £21,000 from 2019-20
- a guaranteed bursary award of up to £4,500 per year for all eligible FE students over the age of 18 from 2019-20
- improved information, advice and guidance for students to help them find out what support they are eligible for. [SAAS led this work and the Student Information Scotland website has since been launched](#)
- an increase in the student loan repayment threshold to £25,000 in 2021 and a reduction in maximum repayment period from 35 to 30 years
- work with the Department for Work and Pensions to explore a new approach for FE students eligible for social security benefits
- a commitment to review discretionary support and support for part-time and disabled students and carers
- a commitment to explore the introduction of loans for FE students.

In June 2019, the then Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Richard Lochhead MSP, [wrote to the Education and Skills Committee to update on progress](#), stating completion of work to explore loans for FE students, the interaction between student support and the benefits system, discretionary support and support for part-time students was not certain due to

the need to focus on Brexit-related student support issues. [A review of support available to students over the summer was announced by the Scottish Government in July 2021.](#)

Recent trends in student support for those enrolled in HE courses at college and university show an increasing reliance on loans, particularly for those from the least well-off backgrounds. [In 2020, Audit Scotland found the total amount of support provided via loan has increased in recent years while bursary support has declined slightly.](#)

[The latest SAAS statistics on student support by Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation \(SIMD\) showed:](#)

- 66.7% of students from the most deprived areas of Scotland (SIMD20) received non-repayable bursary and grant support, compared to 21.5% of those in the most well-off (SIMD80).
- 77.6% of students from SIMD20 areas received loan support, meaning that these students will have student debt following their studies.

Student support: Further Education

Students studying FE courses at college are eligible for financial help to cover living costs, study and travel expenses. (Students studying HE courses at college are eligible for student loan support and can apply for this through SAAS.)

Those aged 18-24 living with parents are eligible for up to £84.30 per week, while self-supporting students are eligible for up to £106.53.

Students under the age of 18 are eligible for [Education Maintenance Allowance](#) of £30 per week, with an additional weekly payment of up to £42.35 for those living away from home.

[Each college has its own arrangements for providing students with bursary support. Links to each college's funding support team website can be found on the Student Information Scotland website.](#)

[Further information about support available for childcare costs, discretionary funding and other support can be found on the Student Information Scotland website.](#)

[The Student Information Scotland funding calculator can help students find out what funding they are eligible for.](#) It is important to note that this should only be used as a guide and FE students must confirm funding with their college.

Student support: Higher Education

Students living in Scotland studying Higher Education courses at college or university are entitled to have their undergraduate tuition fees paid for them by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) for five years in total. Four years for a degree and what is known as a '+1' year to allow for course change or repeating a year. [Tuition fees for a degree are currently £1,820 per year](#)³⁰. Fee levels for students not domiciled in Scotland are detailed in the 'Tuition fees' section of this briefing.

Students can also apply to SAAS for cost of living support. Payments will be made in the form of repayable loans or non-repayable bursaries depending on the age and household income of the student and the course they are studying.

For students who are over 25, married, in a civil partnership, have dependent children or are self-supporting, the maximum loan amount is £6,750. [A bursary of £1,000 is available for those with income of £21,000 or less per year](#)³¹.

For students under 25 who are not self-supporting, parental income is taken into account when assessing the funding allocation. The maximum loan amount for dependent students is £5,750³². A bursary of between £500 and £2,000 is available for those with household income under £34,000 per year.

[Further information on loan amounts and income thresholds is available on the SAAS website.](#)

[Care experienced students are eligible for a non-income assessed bursary of £8,100. Initially this had an upper age limit of 26, but this was removed in 2019.](#)³³

[Nursing and midwifery students are eligible for a bursary of £10,000 per year in their first to third years of study and £7,500 in their fourth year](#)³⁴.

[For eligible postgraduate students, loans of up to £4,500 are available](#)³⁵.

[The Student Information Scotland funding calculator can help students find out what funding they are eligible for.](#) It is important to note that this should only be used as a guide and HE students must apply for support through SAAS.

Tuition fees: Higher Education

Tuition fees are determined on the basis of where a student lives. **Table 3** sets out fee arrangements by domicile and level of study.

Table 3: Tuition fee levels

Domicile	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
Scotland	Students who live in Scotland can apply for a SAAS loan to cover their tuition fees. This is usually income assessed. Current tuition fee rates are £1,820 per year for a degree and £1,285 per year for an HNC or HND. Students from Scotland studying elsewhere in the UK can also apply to SAAS for a loan of up to £9,250 to cover tuition fees. ³⁶	Students on certain courses such as social work and teaching are eligible for tuition fee support. Students on other courses can apply for a tuition fee loan of up to £5,500. ³⁷
Rest of UK	Students coming to study in Scotland from elsewhere in the UK are not eligible for free tuition and pay fees of up to £9,250 per year.	Tuition fees vary by institution. Students can apply to Student Finance England for support to cover fees and living costs.
EU	Prior to Brexit, EU students were treated the same way as Scottish-domiciled students and did not have to pay tuition fees. ³⁸ In July 2020, the Scottish Government announced this arrangement would come to an end and universities can charge EU students international rates of student fees from academic year 2021/22. EU nationals with 'settled' or 'pre-settled' status will remain eligible to apply for tuition fee support if they meet residency conditions. More on this can be read in the SPICe FAQ on study after Brexit.	From 2021/22, EU students will pay the same postgraduate fees as international students. Fees are set by course and institution and can be between £10,000 to £50,000 per year.
International	Tuition fee rates for international students are set by institutions and can range from £10,000 to £50,000 per year depending on course and institution.	Fees are set by course and institution and can be between £10,000 to £50,000 per year.

Learning and attainment

Course standards at Scotland's colleges and universities are monitored with an emphasis on quality, evaluation and improvement. [SFC has a statutory responsibility to secure provision for assessment and enhancement of quality in further and higher education](#)³⁹. This is set out in Section 13 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005. This duty is met in different ways for each sector.

- For colleges, Education Scotland and SFC monitor learning quality. The [How Good is Our College framework](#) sets out evaluation and reporting standards.
- For universities, a partnership approach to quality assurance is taken forward via the [Quality Enhancement Framework \(QEF\)](#). Scottish universities also have the option to join the UK-wide Teaching Excellence Framework.

SFC distributes funding to the sector, and this is done via the Outcome Agreements process. Each year, SFC agrees aims on a range of issues with every college and university. These agreements are required in order for institutions to receive funding. More detail on this process is available in the Outcome Agreements section of this briefing.

The [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\)](#) maps out the learning level and credit award attached to the majority of qualifications in Scotland. Qualifications from universities and colleges are represented on this.

COVID-19 and attainment

The Scottish Government set up the [COVID-19 Learner Journey Ministerial Task Force](#) in January 2021 to look at concerns around student attainment and progression during the pandemic. The task force, which has now concluded, brought together representatives from the college and university sector, qualifications agencies, government and government agencies and unions. It considered the immediate challenges for institutions and students and informed the Scottish Government's response to these.

Some students who were unable to complete course work, placements or practical work due to the pandemic may choose or be required to repeat a year of learning. Higher education students can do this using their additional year of funding (known as a +1 year). [Students who have used their +1 year of funding are advised to apply to the Student Awards Agency Scotland \(SAAS\) to have their request considered on compassionate grounds](#)⁴⁰.

Financial support is also available for students repeating up to 16 weeks of study. In a letter to college and university higher education students in March 2021, the then [Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Richard Lochhead MSP, said](#):

"Full-time higher education students who find themselves in this position of having to repeat or extend study will receive a guaranteed one-off Covid-19 payment of up to £1,600 for additional study of 16 weeks or less. This will be made at £400 per four week period up to a maximum of 16 weeks."⁴¹

The National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland called for institutions to adopt a policy of 'no detriment' in relation to students' grades to mitigate against the impact of the pandemic. Some universities have adopted such a policy, but others have not.

[Universities Scotland, the body representing institutions, has described mitigations as being "baked in" to assessment plans during pandemic years, though also point to the need to ensure "validity and reliability" of degrees](#)⁴².

More information on mitigation measures and 'no detriment' is available in the SPICe briefing [COVID-19: Scotland's Colleges and Universities](#)⁴³.

Further Education quality arrangements

[Arrangements for monitoring college quality may change during this session of Parliament. Following the recent OECD report into Scotland's curriculum, the Scottish Government has announced plans to remove inspections from Education Scotland's remit.](#) Evaluative Reports are currently paused as discussions take place between SFC and Education Scotland (ES) on future arrangements.

Currently, HM Inspectors of Education reports on quality and improvement in Scotland's colleges using the [How good is our college? \(HGIOC\) framework](#) developed by SFC and ES. The framework has four principles:

- leadership and quality culture
- delivery of learning and services to support learning
- outcomes and impact
- capacity for improvement.

This approach is intended to give colleges an evaluation tool they can use to identify strengths and weaknesses. Colleges are asked to evaluate their services using 12 quality indicators. Colleges then update Evaluative Reports and Enhancement Plans as part of their Outcome Agreement arrangements with SFC. Progress Visits for external evaluation purposes take place annually, with ES producing progress reports for each visit.

[Further information about college quality arrangements is available on SFC's website.](#)

Higher Education quality arrangements

Teaching quality

Universities across the UK have a significant degree of autonomy around course design and content. Course quality is assessed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), an independent body that monitors standards and quality in higher education institutions. It also maintains the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#).

In Scotland, the approach to quality and improvement is set out by the [Quality Enhancement Framework \(QEF\)](#). [This focuses on continuous improvement of university courses, partnership working across the sector and student engagement](#). QEF is taken forward by a partnership of organisations in the higher education sector. Partners are SFC, QAA Scotland, Universities Scotland, the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland and Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs).

[QAA Scotland oversee key elements of the framework, and there are five components involved](#)⁴⁴:

- **Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR):** External quality reviews of institutions to maintain academic standards and enhance quality of learning. [ELIR reports are available on the QAA Scotland website](#).
- **Institution Led Review (ILR):** In addition to the external ELIRs, institutions must also carry out ILRs, reviewing all subject provision over a six-year cycle.
- **Student engagement:** Students are encouraged to engage in shaping quality education. All ELIR teams include a student member and students also take part in ILRs.
- **Enhancement Themes:** Sector-wide work exploring a specific area in depth. [The theme for 2017-20 was improving the student experience](#).
- **Public information:** Universities are asked to provide published public information on quality assurance and standards.

At UK level, Universities in Scotland also have the option of participating in the [Teaching Excellence Framework \(TEF\)](#). [This is overseen by the Office for Students \(OfS\) and any Scottish institution choosing to participate does so in addition to QEF](#)⁴⁵. [OfS sets out the purpose of TEF as:](#)

[TEF] assesses excellence in teaching at universities and colleges, and how each higher education provider ensures excellent outcomes for their students in terms of graduate-level employment or further study.⁴⁶

[Five Scottish universities participate in TEF](#): University of Abertay; University of Dundee; Heriot-Watt University; Robert Gordon University and the University of St Andrews.⁴⁷

For the sector in Scotland, QEF remains the main framework for evaluating the quality of learning and teaching. [Universities Scotland's response to the UK Independent Review of TEF stated:](#)

“Our view is that the QEF provides a more effective mechanism for monitoring and improving the quality of teaching in Scotland than the TEF.”⁴⁸

Institutions in England can charge the higher rate of tuition fee of £9,250 per year if they have a TEF award. The maximum that can be charged by institutions with no award is £9,000. [In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, holding a TEF award has no effect on tuition fee rates.](#)⁴⁹

Research quality

Universities are also assessed on the quality of research they produce. The [Research Excellence Framework \(REF\)](#) was established in 2008 and is the UK-wide system for assessing research carried out at UK universities. It is conducted jointly by SFC, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Northern Ireland Executive and Research England.

REF results are used to benchmark and establish universities' research reputations, provide accountability for public investment and inform decision making about future funding. [More information is available on the REF website.](#)

SFC funds research at Scottish universities via the Research Excellence Grant (REG) and the Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG). REG funding allocations take REF results into account, while the RPG supports postgraduate research.

College and university qualifications

Scottish qualifications are mapped out on the [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\)](#) from level 1 to 12, taking in qualifications awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), Further and Higher Education Institutions, and apprenticeships and vocational qualifications (including Modern Apprenticeships). The boxes below summarise qualifications offered at colleges and universities.

College Qualifications

Colleges typically offer courses from SCQF Level 4 to SCQF Level 8. This means learners can study everything from National 4 and 5 and Higher to vocational courses and ordinary degrees.

- **Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs)** are higher education qualifications delivered at college
- **[HNCs \(SCQF Level 7\)](#)**⁵⁰ are generally one year long college courses equivalent to year one of a university degree programme.
- **HNDs (SCQF Level 8)** are two-year college courses, equivalent to year two of a university degree programme.

Successful completion of some HNC/HND courses allow direct entry into the second year of a degree programme. In addition, articulation enables learners to enter university at the third year of a degree programme where agreements are in place between colleges and universities. [More information about articulation is available in our SPICe blog.](#)

University Qualifications

Universities offer qualifications from SCQF Level 7 to SCQF Level 12. These include:

- **Bachelors/Ordinary Degree (SCQF Level 9):** A three-year, first degree without honours.
- **Honours Degree (SCQF Level 10):** A four-year, first degree with honours.
- **Masters Degree (SCQF Level 11):** [A further study option following a first degree, usually completed in up to two years full time or two to four years part time.](#)⁵¹
- **Postgraduate Diploma/Postgraduate Certificate (PGDip/PGCert) (SCQF Level 11):** [Further study options following a first degree. Courses take one or two terms with no dissertation.](#)⁵²
- **Doctoral Degree (SCQF Level 12):** [Known as PhDs, these qualifications involve students conducting independent and original research over three or four years full time or up to seven years part time.](#)⁵³

Access to Higher Education

Since 2016, universities and colleges have been working towards the mutual aim of widening access to university for students from the most deprived backgrounds.

This work is guided by Scottish Government targets put in place following the recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access (COWA). The overarching target is that by 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to Higher Education.

The interim COWA target of at least 16% of first year, first degree entrants to university being from the 20% most deprived areas by 2021 appears to have been met by the sector ahead of time. [The latest statistics, published by HESA, show 16% of first year, first degree entrants were from the 20% most deprived backgrounds in 2018-19 and 2019-20⁵⁴](#). The next key target is for students from SIMD20 backgrounds to make up 18% of full-time, first degree entrants by 2026.

Commission on Widening Access

[On becoming First Minister in 2014, Nicola Sturgeon set a target to ensure equal access to university, stating in Parliament:](#)

"I want us to determine now that by the time a child who is born today in one of our most deprived communities leaves school, he or she will have the same chance of going to university as a child who is born in one of our least deprived communities. That means that we would expect at least 20 per cent of university entrants to come from the most deprived 20 per cent of the population."⁵⁵

The Commission on Widening Access (COWA) was then set up to recommend how this ambition might be achieved. [Its final report was published in March 2016 setting out 34 recommendations around how equal access to education might be achieved. A Scottish Government motion in June 2016 accepted the recommendations⁵⁶.](#)

Key COWA recommendations included:

- By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of full-time, first degree entrants to Higher Education. An interim target of 16% was also set.
- The appointment of a Commissioner for Fair Access. [Sir Peter Scott](#) was appointed to this post in December 2016. [This is a non-statutory role and the Commissioner cannot take forward individual cases⁵⁷](#).
- Using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) to track and monitor access targets initially, with the Scottish Government working with the sector to further develop measures to identify 'access' students longer term.
- Access thresholds for those from the least well-off backgrounds should be established, separate to standard entry requirements. These should reflect the minimum academic standard and subject knowledge needed to complete a course.

- Establishment of more pathways between college and university courses, giving learners the opportunity for entry into university at second or third year. This is known as articulation; [more information about the sector's progress in this area is available in a SPICe blog.](#)

[Universities Scotland's Working to Widen Access document](#) set out 15 actions for universities to take toward implementing the COWA recommendations. This has seen progress in areas including:

- agreement of a sector-wide approach to access thresholds - often called Minimum Entry Requirements (MERs) - for applicants from SIMD20 and care experienced backgrounds
- recognition of the need to provide a range of support for care experienced applicants
- efforts to increase articulation routes and enable more college students to enter university in second or third year following completion of a relevant college course.

Progress on widening access targets

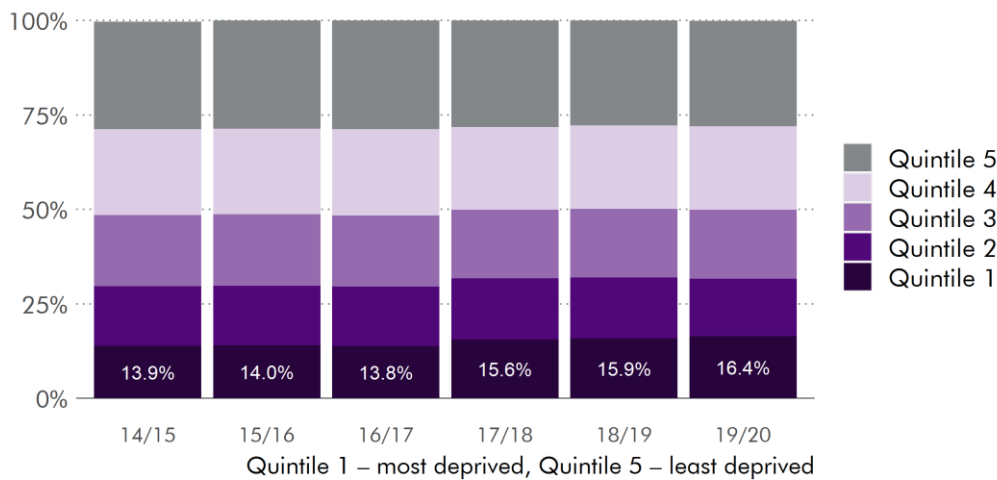
[The Scottish Government published a progress report in May 2017.](#) This report summarised immediate steps to implement recommendations, including the appointment of the Commissioner for Fair Access, Sir Peter Scott, and details of sector groups set up to take forward specific recommendations. Since then the Commissioner has reported on progress annually, [with the first report published in November 2017.](#)

[In his annual report for 2021](#)⁵⁸, the Commissioner highlighted that while institutions had made good progress, “the ‘last mile(s)’ would be the most difficult”. The Commissioner states “even before the arrival of Covid-19, there were signs that the rate of progress was slowing.”

The Commissioner’s report contains a range of recommendations, including a call for the Scottish Government to:

- publicly reaffirm its commitment to fair access
- consider the introduction of targets for entrants from the 40% most deprived (SIMD40) areas
- ensure funding for access places and initiatives is continued.

Figure 6: Entrants to university by Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 2014-15 - 2019-20



Source: [2014-18 HESA data](#) and [2019-20 HESA data](#)

2017-18 was the first year in which the impact of the COWA recommendations can be seen. As the table above shows, between 2016-17 and 2017-18, the percentage of student enrolments from SIMD20 backgrounds increased by almost 2%. Since then, the percentage of SIMD20 enrolments has risen very slightly each year, meeting the interim target of 16% by 2021 ahead of schedule.

[SFC's Report on Widening Access for 2019-20](#)⁵⁹ found that while the percentage of students from SIMD20 backgrounds returning to study in year two increased slightly from 86.8% in 2017-18 to 87.5% in 2019-20, the overall retention rate remained at 90.9%. This is an area that will likely be of growing interest to institutions and the Scottish Government as they work to steadily build on progress made in the past few years.

[A further breakdown of the most recent widening access figures can be found in the SFC Report on Widening Access.](#)

Tackling racism in further and higher education

In October 2019, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) published [Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged](#)⁶⁰. This report was highly critical of higher education's progress on tackling racism at universities.

The report found that students and staff from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups at universities across the UK commonly experienced racial harassment, with 24% of students experiencing racial harassment during their studies. Of those students, 20% reported physical attacks, while 56% had experienced racist name-calling, insults and jokes.

Students had also commonly experienced subtle 'microaggressions'; these are intentional or unintentional hostile or derogatory behaviours that make people feel unwelcome. More than a quarter of staff experienced racist name calling and insults. [Around 1 in 20 students left their studies and 3 in 20 staff left jobs as a result of racial harassment](#).⁶¹

The report also found racist incidents were under-reported by students and staff, while institutions were "overconfident in their complaint handling process".

SFC is coordinating work to address the issues raised by EHRC. Though colleges did not feature in the report, they are involved in the [sector-wide response](#) to it.

In addition, Universities Scotland and Universities UK published [Tackling racial harassment in higher education](#) guidance in November 2020. This guidance also focuses on taking forward the EHRC recommendations.

Response to the EHRC report

In March 2020, [the SFC and EHRC signed a Memorandum of Understanding \(MoU\)](#) outlining the two organisations' role in supporting universities and colleges to work toward achieving the report recommendations, as well as equality and compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED).

SFC then funded Advance HE to take forward the [Tackling racism on campus: raising awareness and creating the conditions for confident conversations project](#). The project is led by an Expert Group of equality and diversity practitioners, academics and college and university staff and students. Its work over the past year has included a focus on lived experiences of students and staff and webinars discussing race, racism and whiteness.

In August 2020, colleges and universities signed up to an [anti-racism declaration](#), which states:

"Racism exists on our campuses and in our society. Call it what it is and reject it in all its forms. We stand united against racism."⁶²

This was described by Advance HE as a “landmark commitment”. It is endorsed by the SFC and the then Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Richard Lochhead MSP.

All 19 universities and 25 of Scotland's 27 colleges have signed up to the declaration.

In March 2021, [resources developed as a result of the project were launched](#). These provide institutions with leaflets and social media branding that can be used to raise awareness of work to tackle racism.

The next phase of the work looks at [establishing an anti-racist curriculum](#). The Anti-Racist Curriculum Project, also led by Advance HE, will focus on defining an anti-racist curriculum, supporting staff and students to have conversations about improvement and identifying how this can be embedded in colleges and universities in the years ahead.

Mental health and wellbeing

Session 5 of the Scottish Parliament saw the issue of mental health rise up the policy agenda. The Scottish Government's [2018-19 Programme for Government](#) included a commitment to:

“... provide more than 80 additional counsellors in Further and Higher Education over the next four years with an investment of around £20 million.”⁶³

Around £3.5 million was provided by the Scottish Government to SFC in each year of the last session to achieve this. [In September 2020, the Government reported it was "over two-thirds of the way to meeting that commitment"](#)⁶⁴.

[The Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group has members from across the college and university sector.](#) The group oversees progress on student mental health, though it has been on pause during the pandemic.

Despite progress to increase counsellor numbers, universities and colleges continue to see considerable demand for mental health support services. [NUS Scotland research published in October 2020 found that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, of students seeking support from their institution:](#)

- 53.9% waited more than one month;
- 20.8% waited more than three months.⁶⁵

[Data on the impact of the pandemic on waiting times is not available, though NUS Scotland stated in their 2021 Scottish Parliament manifesto:](#)

“We are in the midst of a student mental health crisis that has been exacerbated by Covid-19.”⁶⁶

NUS Scotland has called for a student mental health action plan to be implemented in Session 6 to address the impact of the pandemic.

[The Scottish Government provided additional one-off funding of around £6 million for mental health and wellbeing services in colleges and universities.](#) Of this funding:

- £1.32 million was announced for student mental health support
- £750,000 was allocated to students' associations to be spent on wellbeing support
- £4.4 million was announced for college student and staff mental health and wellbeing.

To meet the challenges resulting from the pandemic, continued investment in mental health and wellbeing will be needed in Session 6.

The level of funding and whether it will be widened to include other forms of support such as mental health nurses or co-ordinators will be a key issue for policy makers and sector groups.

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