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11 March 2026

Dear Francesca,

My predecessor, Graeme Dey MSP, wrote to you in July 2025 asking that SFC colleagues work with my officials in SG and the sector to introduce a change to the targets individual universities were expected to work towards in relation to the admission of students from SIMD20 backgrounds. As you will be aware, it was previously expected that institutions would aim to recruit at least 10% of their annual intake of full-time, first degree entrants from such backgrounds. The Ministerial letter of July 2025 directed the SFC to implement the change set out below, in line with one of the recommendations from the Commissioner for Fair Access' annual report in 2024:

removing the current target for each institution and replacing it with a commitment from each HEI to increase the proportion of SIMD 20 entrants or to match the highest proportion they have achieved since 2013-14.

In his most recent annual report, published January 2026, Professor John McKendrick, Commissioner for Fair Access, made a slight change to the 2024 recommendation. I understand that this was in light of feedback from the higher education sector that it would be challenging to match the levels of recruitment they achieved during the 'pandemic years' of 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23, when teacher-assessed grades were implemented in place of exams.

The amended recommendation is as follows:

Recommendation 4. Monitor the impact of the new institutional commitment, which will be introduced in 2026-27, and which challenges each HEI to improve upon, or at least match, the highest proportion and number of SIMD20 entrants that it achieved (outside the 'pandemic years') since 2013-14, and to make continuous annual improvements thereafter. Where it can be demonstrated that it is not possible for an institution to now match what they have previously been able to achieve, it is reasonable that an alternative benchmark is proposed.

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I am writing to ask the SFC to work with the sector to implement the new target with this amended wording for academic year 26/27. I would also reiterate that I expect institutions to continue to work towards achieving the 2026 and 2030 widening access targets and to commit to increasing the proportion of SIMD20 entrants.

I should be grateful for written confirmation of your acceptance of this amended direction.

Best regards,



BEN MACPHERSON MSP
Minister for Higher and Further Education

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