



# Guidance on the Commission on Widening Access

## Institutional targets from AY 2026–27



---

## Guidance on the Commission on Widening Access Institutional targets from AY 2026–27

---

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Issue Date:          | 11 May 2026   |
| Reference:           | SFC/GD/04/2026  |
| Summary:             | This guidance outlines the approach SFC will take to implement the Ministerial direction and policy change to the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) institutional targets from AY 2026–27. |
| FAO:                 | Principals of Scotland’s universities and the general public.   |
| Further Information: | <b>DIRECTORATE:</b> Institutional Performance<br><b>EMAIL:</b> <a href="mailto:access@sfc.ac.uk">access@sfc.ac.uk</a>   |

---

## Table of Contents

---

|  |          |
|--|----------|
| <b>Guidance on the Commission on Widening Access institutional targets from AY 2026–27..</b>                                   | <b>3</b> |
| Introduction and purpose .....   | 3        |
| Background.....  | 3        |
| Revised Ministerial direction .....  | 5        |
| Progressing the revised institutional target recommendation through the Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model .....           | 5        |
| SFC requirement of institutions.....   | 5        |
| Reporting and Monitoring progress .....  | 6        |
| Setting an alternative benchmark .....   | 6        |
| Further information .....  | 8        |
| <b>Annex A CoWA institutional targets AY 2026–27 .....</b>   | <b>9</b> |
| Table 1: Proportion of SIMD20 Entrants (FTFD) by HEI, 2013-14 to 2023-24.....  | 9        |
| Table 2: Scottish domiciled full-time first-degree entrant proportions from SIMD20 backgrounds, AY 2013-14 to AY 2023-24 ..... | 11       |
| Table 3: Scottish domiciled full-time first-degree entrant counts from SIMD20 backgrounds, AY 2013-14 to AY 2023-24 .....      | 13       |

# Guidance on the Commission on Widening Access institutional targets from AY 2026–27

## Introduction and purpose

1. This guidance outlines the approach that the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) will take to implement the 11 March 2026 [Ministerial direction](#) and policy change in relation to the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) institutional targets originally set in the final report '[A Blueprint for Fairness](#)'. This change will be implemented from Academic Year (AY) 2026-27.

## Background

2. A Blueprint for Fairness stated that the Scottish Government and SFC should implement the following targets to drive forward the delivery of equal access in Scotland. This included milestones, institutional targets and sector targets. For ease of reference, the institutional targets are provided in bold.

To realise the First Minister's ambition of equality of access to higher education in Scotland:

- 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.
  - **By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10% of full-time first-degree entrants to every individual Scottish university.**
  - **In 2022, the target of 10% for individual Scottish universities should be reviewed and a higher-level target should be considered for the subsequent years.**
  - By 2026, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 18% of full-time first-degree entrants to Scottish universities as a whole.
  - By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to higher education. Equality of access should be seen in both the college sector and the university sector.
3. In January 2024 the Commissioner for Fair Access Professor John McKendrick published his annual report [An Introduction to Fair Access in Scotland - Renewing the Alliance for Fair Access: Annual Report 2024](#). The Commissioner's annual report included recommendation 4 in relation the SIMD20 10% institutional target to ...

“... withdraw the SIMD20 10% institutional target but introduce a commitment from each HEI to take action to increase the proportion of SIMD20 among its entrants, or, if this is demonstrably not possible without adverse consequences, to match the highest proportion and number of SIMD20 entrants that it has achieved since 2013-14.”

4. The Minister wrote to SFC on 30 July 2025 confirming the policy change to implement the Commissioner’s recommendation by removing the current target for each institution and replacing it with a commitment from each institution to increase the proportion of SIMD 20 entrants or to match the highest proportion they have achieved since 2013-14. He indicated he would like SFC to work with officials in the Scottish Government and the sector to introduce this change for AY 2026-27. The Minister’s direction was also clear that the sector targets remain in place stating,

“I also expect institutions to work towards achieving the 2026 and 2030 widening access targets and to commit to increasing the proportion of SIMD20 entrants.”

5. On 6 February 2026 the Commissioner for Fair Access published his second annual report [Progress as a precursor to a pivot: fair access in Scotland in 2026 and beyond](#) where he outlines engagement with the sector and the Ministerial Access Delivery Group, which led to a refined recommendation and approach to his 2024 recommendation:

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.

The Commissioner considers that this change of approach at the level of institutions will increase the likelihood of achieving the national targets.

6. We have been advised that the Scottish Government intend to respond to the full Commissioner’s second annual report in due course. However, to ensure clarity on the Ministerial position and their expectations of SFC and institutions from AY 2026-27, the Scottish Government have revised their target direction to SFC as outlined below.

## Revised Ministerial direction

7. The Minister [wrote](#) to SFC on 11 March 2026 to confirm an updated policy direction for 2026-27 based on the amended recommendation:
  - Each university is challenged to improve upon, or at least match, the highest proportion and number of SIMD20 entrants that it achieved since AY 2013-14 (outside the ‘pandemic years’ 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23) 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 been previously able to achieve, it is reasonable that an alternative benchmark is proposed.
  - Institutions are expected to continue to work towards achieving the 2026 and 2030 widening access targets and to commit to increasing the proportion of SIMD20 entrants.

## Progressing the revised institutional target recommendation through the Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model

8. SFC is not seeking any additional monitoring or reporting from institutions as a result of the Ministerial policy change to the institutional targets. We will continue to use the [SFC Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model](#) (OFAM) to monitor institutional and sector progress and to seek assurance of delivery of the CoWA targets. Already within this Model, SIMD recruitment is considered within the ‘Student Interests Access and Success’ Outcome. As is the current position, this approach considers performance for this measure alongside other national measures considered within the Outcome. Please see p28 to 32 of the [Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model: Guidance for Institutions](#) for more details on what this includes.
9. This guidance outlines the existing overarching process and engagement process between SFC and institutions, the review of performance against key monitoring sources, and outlines risk flags and potential interventions. The OFAM guidance also includes a published [technical annex](#) for universities on the measures used within the OFAM. This includes the CoWA measure (see 4a and 4b in the technical guidance).

## SFC requirement of institutions

10. Institutions will be expected to improve on, or at least match, the targets outlined by the Commissioner and confirmed by the Ministerial direction. The target proportions and numbers are provided by SFC in annex A. Please note that this:

- Excludes the three AYs 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23 in light of feedback from the sector that it would be challenging to match the levels of recruitment they achieved during these ‘pandemic years’.
- Includes the CoWA proportion and numbers. However, the priority for the Scottish Government, the Commissioner and SFC is to achieve growth in the proportion.
- Will be updated annually by SFC taking into account any agreed alternative benchmarks (see paragraph 16) i.e. AY 2027-28 expectations will be based on the period AY 2014-15 to 2024-25 (the pandemic years will be excluded permanently).

## Reporting and Monitoring progress

11. SFC will continue to report CoWA institutional and sector progress annually through the SFC Report on Widening Access (RoWA). This will continue to include CoWA numbers and proportions. For clarity, the official data for institutional and sector progress on CoWA is included in RoWA background Table 1B and reports on longer trend data back to 2013-14. We recognise that at the time of writing this guidance the latest RoWA data available (based on HESA official data) is up to AY 2023-24 and that AY 2026-27 official data will be published in RoWA 2028.
12. SFC conducted a consultation on the RoWA publication over the period 9 February to May 4, 2026. The findings will inform the next iteration of the RoWA in summer 2026 which will include the sector and institutional official CoWA position up to AY 2024-25.
13. Where an institution believes they cannot improve or match the best number and proportion of Scottish domiciled full-time first degree SIMD20 entrants that they previously have been able to achieve over the reporting period 2013-14 to 2023-24 in 2026-27, they can propose an alternative benchmark to SFC. More details on the process for doing this and how an alternative will be agreed are outlined below.
14. Where an institution does not propose an alternative benchmark and/or is unable to deliver their CoWA institutional targets for AY 2026-27, as referenced in paragraph 8, SFC will consider if any specific intervention is necessary in the context of the Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model under the Student Interests Access and Success Outcome.

## Setting an alternative benchmark

15. Institutions who believe they cannot at least match the best number and proportion over the reporting period for 2026-27 should, at the earliest opportunity, inform their Outcome Manager in the first instance. The institution should then propose an alternative benchmark for approval by **Monday 12 October 2026**. This proposal should be provided by email, with confirmation that it has been approved at Principal level, to the relevant institution SFC Outcome Manager and the SFC access team at [access@sfc.ac.uk](mailto:access@sfc.ac.uk)

16. Proposals will be considered by SFC by exception and should include:
  - The reasons why the institution believes they cannot match their best proportion and number target and in particular set out what has changed since this target was previously achieved.
  - A timeline for how long the alternative benchmark needs to be in place.
  - What the alternative benchmark is and what evidence it is based on.
17. Please note that we expect all institutions to be working towards stretching targets regardless of whether they are seeking an alternative benchmark or not. Excluding the pandemic years, it is helpful to note the Commissioner's observation that had every institution achieved its highest ever proportion of SIMD20 entrants in 2023-24, then 17.5% of entrants would have been from one of Scotland's 20% Most Deprived Areas – this is below the interim target for 2026-27.
18. We will also consider the data provided to SFC in an individual institution's previous years Early Access Return when considering any proposal for an alternative benchmark. This high-level, in-year data return is confidential and can only be discussed with the institution that provided the data to SFC.
19. The proposal will be considered by SFC's Director of Institutional Performance and the outcome will be confirmed in writing. This will outline that the proposal has been either:
  - Accepted in full and implemented.
  - Partly accepted pending additional evidence requested from the institution.
  - Rejected with an alternative benchmark proposed by SFC to the institution based on the evidence outlined in the proposal and evidence held by SFC.
  - Rejected and the institution will be expected to improve upon, or at least match, the highest proportion and number of SIMD20 entrants that it achieved since 2013-14 (outside the 'pandemic years' 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23) and to make continuous annual improvements thereafter as outlined in the Ministerial Guidance.
20. Please note that the Minister will be notified of confirmed alternative benchmarks.
21. If an institution does not meet their alternative benchmark, SFC will consider if any specific intervention is necessary in the context of the Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model under the Student Interests Access and Success Outcome.

## Further information

22. If you have any queries or require any further information, please contact the SFC Access team, email: [access@sfc.ac.uk](mailto:access@sfc.ac.uk)

## Annex A CoWA institutional targets AY 2026–27

The Commissioner for Fair Access, in his [annual report for 2025-26](#) table 1, highlighted the CoWA target proportions:

Table 1: Proportion of SIMD20 Entrants (FTFD) by HEI, 2013-14 to 2023-24

| Higher Education Institution | 13-14 | 14-15 | 15-16 | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 | 19-20 | 20-21 | 21-22 | 22-23 | 23-24 | Target |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| Aberdeen, University of      | 4.2%  | 5.3%  | 4.3%  | 5.1%  | 6.0%  | 4.4%  | 8.6%  | 7.9%  | 7.9%  | 6.9%  | 6.5%  | 8.6%   |
| Abertay University           | 15.5% | 15.6% | 16.7% | 15.1% | 19.1% | 15.1% | 16.3% | 16.8% | 18.7% | 20.1% | 19.8% | 19.8%  |
| Dundee, University of        | 14.9% | 15.0% | 14.3% | 15.5% | 15.8% | 16.2% | 16.2% | 16.4% | 16.0% | 16.9% | 17.6% | 17.6%  |
| Edinburgh Napier Univ.       | 11.3% | 10.0% | 10.7% | 10.7% | 10.9% | 12.4% | 15.1% | 12.5% | 13.4% | 13.1% | 11.9% | 15.1%  |
| Edinburgh, University of     | 6.1%  | 6.0%  | 5.6%  | 6.4%  | 8.1%  | 10.8% | 10.8% | 9.1%  | 10.2% | 13.1% | 10.6% | 10.8%  |
| Glasgow Caledonian Univ.     | 22.7% | 20.9% | 22.6% | 20.9% | 23.5% | 22.6% | 22.5% | 23.0% | 22.1% | 22.2% | 22.8% | 23.5%  |
| Glasgow School of Art        | 14.4% | 22.1% | 14.6% | 21.1% | 13.9% | 18.8% | 21.1% | 25.8% | 23.9% | 21.7% | 22.6% | 22.6%  |
| Glasgow, University of       | 13.3% | 12.7% | 12.1% | 12.3% | 12.3% | 13.3% | 13.5% | 14.8% | 16.7% | 15.0% | 16.1% | 16.1%  |
| Heriot-Watt University       | 8.2%  | 10.8% | 9.8%  | 8.5%  | 11.2% | 10.9% | 11.0% | 13.4% | 11.5% | 9.5%  | 9.9%  | 11.2%  |
| Univ of Highlands & Islands  | 12.0% | 11.0% | 8.0%  | 7.3%  | 8.3%  | 10.0% | 10.5% | 8.6%  | 12.1% | 12.2% | 14.3% | 14.3%  |
| Queen Margaret Univ.         | 10.7% | 11.0% | 9.1%  | 9.1%  | 9.9%  | 11.7% | 13.8% | 13.1% | 13.8% | 13.1% | 13.8% | 13.8%  |
| Robert Gordon Univ.          | 6.4%  | 7.0%  | 6.7%  | 6.4%  | 6.5%  | 6.7%  | 5.2%  | 6.1%  | 6.2%  | 7.1%  | 7.2%  | 7.2%   |
| Royal Conservatoire of Scot. | 8.2%  | 7.4%  | 13.1% | 13.3% | 13.2% | 15.0% | 19.4% | 21.6% | 16.7% | 11.7% | 16.5% | 19.4%  |

|                            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| SRUC                       | 5.5%  | 10.5% | 8.3%  | 7.5%  | 10.4% | 10.5% | 10.1% | 13.5% | 5.1%  | 11.8% | 11.3% | 11.3% |
| St Andrews, University of  | 5.2%  | 5.0%  | 5.1%  | 5.5%  | 7.5%  | 10.6% | 11.0% | 10.2% | 14.9% | 12.9% | 12.5% | 12.5% |
| Stirling, University of    | 11.7% | 14.1% | 12.3% | 12.0% | 15.9% | 14.4% | 13.1% | 13.4% | 12.9% | 11.6% | 11.7% | 15.9% |
| Strathclyde, University of | 11.8% | 12.3% | 13.7% | 14.5% | 16.6% | 17.4% | 19.6% | 21.6% | 17.7% | 18.8% | 20.5% | 20.5% |
| West of Scotland, Univ. of | 24.3% | 27.7% | 27.5% | 27.5% | 29.4% | 28.2% | 29.6% | 29.9% | 30.7% | 29.0% | 31.4% | 31.4% |

### Legend

Highest proportion (outside 'pandemic years')



Highest proportion ('pandemic years')



Target = highest proportion (outside 'pandemic years')

Highlighting indicates whether the target was also the highest ever proportion (during or outside the 'pandemic years') or whether the target is a lower proportion than what was achieved during the 'pandemic years'.

**Source:** RoWA Background Tables 2023-24: CoWA Table 1B.

However, the new institutional target recommendation from the Minister includes both the proportion and number of Scottish domiciled full-time first-degree entrants from SIMD20.

The tables 2 and 3 below outline the best position achieved by every HEI (excluding the three pandemic years of 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23) over the 10-year reporting period 2013-14 to 2023-24 for both proportion and entrant numbers and which institutions are asked to improve upon or match from AY 2026-27:

Table 2: Scottish domiciled full-time first-degree entrant proportions from SIMD20 backgrounds, AY 2013-14 to AY 2023-24

Highlighted figures for each HEI show the highest\_best target position excluding AY 2020-21\*, 2021-22\*, 2022-23\* (pandemic years)

| Institution                              | 13-14 | 14-15 | 15-16 | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 | 19-20 | 20-21* | 21-22* | 22-23* | 23-24 |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Aberdeen, University of                  | 4.2%  | 5.3%  | 4.3%  | 5.1%  | 6.0%  | 4.4%  | 8.6%  | 7.9%   | 7.9%   | 6.9%   | 6.5%  |
| Abertay University                       | 15.5% | 15.6% | 16.7% | 15.1% | 19.1% | 15.1% | 16.3% | 16.8%  | 18.7%  | 20.1%  | 19.8% |
| Dundee, University of                    | 14.9% | 15.0% | 14.3% | 15.5% | 15.8% | 16.2% | 16.2% | 16.4%  | 16.0%  | 16.9%  | 17.6% |
| Edinburgh Napier University              | 11.3% | 10.0% | 10.7% | 10.7% | 10.9% | 12.4% | 15.1% | 12.5%  | 13.4%  | 13.1%  | 11.9% |
| Edinburgh, University of                 | 6.1%  | 6.0%  | 5.6%  | 6.4%  | 8.1%  | 10.8% | 10.8% | 9.1%   | 10.2%  | 13.1%  | 10.6% |
| Glasgow Caledonian University            | 22.7% | 20.9% | 22.6% | 20.9% | 23.5% | 22.6% | 22.5% | 23.0%  | 22.1%  | 22.2%  | 22.8% |
| Glasgow School of Art                    | 14.4% | 22.1% | 14.6% | 21.1% | 13.9% | 18.8% | 21.1% | 25.8%  | 23.9%  | 21.7%  | 22.6% |
| Glasgow, University of                   | 13.3% | 12.7% | 12.1% | 12.3% | 12.3% | 13.3% | 13.5% | 14.8%  | 16.7%  | 15.0%  | 16.1% |
| Heriot-Watt University                   | 8.2%  | 10.8% | 9.8%  | 8.5%  | 11.2% | 10.9% | 11.0% | 13.4%  | 11.5%  | 9.5%   | 9.9%  |
| Highlands and Islands, University of the | 12.0% | 11.0% | 8.0%  | 7.3%  | 8.3%  | 10.0% | 10.5% | 8.6%   | 12.1%  | 12.2%  | 14.3% |
| Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh     | 10.7% | 11.0% | 9.1%  | 9.1%  | 9.9%  | 11.7% | 13.8% | 13.1%  | 13.8%  | 13.1%  | 13.8% |
| Robert Gordon University                 | 6.4%  | 7.0%  | 6.7%  | 6.4%  | 6.5%  | 6.7%  | 5.2%  | 6.1%   | 6.2%   | 7.1%   | 7.2%  |
| Royal Conservatoire of Scotland          | 8.2%  | 7.4%  | 13.1% | 13.3% | 13.2% | 15.0% | 19.4% | 21.6%  | 16.7%  | 11.7%  | 16.5% |
| SRUC                                     | 5.5%  | 10.5% | 8.3%  | 7.5%  | 10.4% | 10.5% | 10.1% | 13.5%  | 5.1%   | 11.8%  | 11.3% |
| St Andrews, University of                | 5.2%  | 5.0%  | 5.1%  | 5.5%  | 7.5%  | 10.6% | 11.0% | 10.2%  | 14.9%  | 12.9%  | 12.5% |

|                                     |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Stirling, University of             | 11.7% | 14.1% | 12.3% | 12.0% | 15.9% | 14.4% | 13.1% | 13.4% | 12.9% | 11.6% | 11.7% |
| Strathclyde, University of          | 11.8% | 12.3% | 13.7% | 14.5% | 16.6% | 17.4% | 19.6% | 21.6% | 17.7% | 18.8% | 20.5% |
| West of Scotland, University of the | 24.3% | 27.7% | 27.5% | 27.5% | 29.4% | 28.2% | 29.6% | 29.9% | 30.7% | 29.0% | 31.4% |

**Source:** SFC Report on Widening Access for AY 2023-24 background table 1B.

Table 3: Scottish domiciled full-time first-degree entrant counts from SIMD20 backgrounds, AY 2013-14 to AY 2023-24

Highlighted figures for each HEI show the highest best target position excluding AY 2020-21\*, 2021-22\*, 2022-23\* (pandemic years)

| Institution                              | 13-14 | 14-15 | 15-16 | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 | 19-20 | 20-21* | 21-22* | 22-23* | 23-24 |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Aberdeen, University of                  | 45    | 75    | 55    | 80    | 70    | 60    | 125   | 115    | 150    | 125    | 110   |
| Abertay University                       | 145   | 135   | 170   | 145   | 215   | 190   | 175   | 195    | 215    | 205    | 200   |
| Dundee, University of                    | 260   | 275   | 270   | 305   | 325   | 325   | 335   | 355    | 335    | 365    | 350   |
| Edinburgh Napier University              | 230   | 255   | 255   | 265   | 245   | 315   | 375   | 365    | 410    | 380    | 295   |
| Edinburgh, University of                 | 135   | 120   | 120   | 125   | 160   | 190   | 190   | 185    | 245    | 290    | 240   |
| Glasgow Caledonian University            | 780   | 725   | 685   | 665   | 825   | 860   | 860   | 950    | 855    | 900    | 1,160 |
| Glasgow School of Art                    | 20    | 40    | 25    | 35    | 30    | 40    | 50    | 55     | 75     | 70     | 70    |
| Glasgow, University of                   | 390   | 335   | 345   | 365   | 370   | 400   | 395   | 505    | 605    | 545    | 570   |
| Heriot-Watt University                   | 115   | 125   | 120   | 115   | 155   | 155   | 165   | 165    | 170    | 125    | 145   |
| Highlands and Islands, University of the | 65    | 55    | 45    | 45    | 60    | 75    | 70    | 60     | 85     | 75     | 90    |
| Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh     | 70    | 80    | 65    | 65    | 65    | 90    | 110   | 120    | 120    | 110    | 110   |
| Robert Gordon University                 | 125   | 135   | 130   | 135   | 140   | 145   | 115   | 160    | 135    | 150    | 165   |
| Royal Conservatoire of Scotland          | 10    | 10    | 20    | 20    | 20    | 20    | 25    | 25     | 25     | 20     | 25    |
| SRUC                                     | 10    | 25    | 20    | 15    | 20    | 20    | 15    | 30     | 15     | 30     | 25    |
| St Andrews, University of                | 25    | 35    | 25    | 30    | 40    | 75    | 75    | 65     | 90     | 90     | 85    |

|                                     |     |     |       |     |       |       |       |       |       |       |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|-----|-------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| Stirling, University of             | 200 | 245 | 190   | 150 | 270   | 235   | 200   | 220   | 230   | 215   | 230 |
| Strathclyde, University of          | 330 | 370 | 425   | 435 | 490   | 510   | 610   | 690   | 595   | 605   | 610 |
| West of Scotland, University of the | 875 | 910 | 1,045 | 965 | 1,150 | 1,190 | 1,080 | 1,240 | 1,240 | 1,020 | 960 |

**Source:** SFC Report on Widening Access for AY 2023-24 background table 1B.