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Update to the Education, Children & Young People Committee

Dear Convener,

During the evidence session on Wednesday 5 March 2025 I promised to follow up in writing on a unique learner number and support for estranged students. Please find below an update with further information on these issues which I hope you find helpful to consider alongside earlier evidence provided as part of your inquiry into widening access.

Unique learner number

Whilst I recognise the benefits of a unique learner number (ULN) for all of Scotland's students and the education sector, my officials are still very much in the early stages of considering afresh how a ULN could be delivered for Scotland.

It may be helpful to know that preliminary work was undertaken in 2017 and 2018 on enhanced use of the Scottish Candidate Number to support activity in relation to an online learner account, giving greater support for transitions and improvements in use of data. However, it was not possible to progress this further due to competing priorities at that time.

To consider afresh requires careful consideration of data protection legislation, including legal gateways and use of information sharing agreements. Data sharing on this scale, and on a consistent basis, is a lengthy process and one which my officials will need to work through. To be clear, however, this will not be resolved in the short or even medium term.



Estranged students

I am aware of the particular barriers faced by estranged students, and acknowledge the gap left by the closure of the charity Stand Alone, who were instrumental in raising awareness and improving the support of Estranged students studying in Scotland. Nevertheless, I would like to reassure the Committee that we as a Government remain committed to supporting estranged students in accessing and continuing their learner journey.

Estranged students in Higher Education (HE) are able to access a package of support equivalent to the student Living Wage of £11,400 on a non-means tested basis. In order to improve awareness of this support, we also have a bespoke application route for estranged students.

With regard to Further Education (FE), students who are estranged are able to access the maximum bursary amount of £125.55 per week on a non-means tested basis; if they are under 25 they will not be asked for their income when working out what funding is available to them. Students in FE should apply directly to their college for support.

The [Student Information Scotland portal](#) provides information and guidance for Estranged students in both FE and HE. It is worth noting that estranged students in FE are also eligible to study an FE course full-time while continuing to receive Universal Credit.

The Scottish Government will continue to consider and review the student financial support on offer for future academic years.

In terms of wider sector support, we understand that many of the Scotland's colleges and universities have additional support in place for estranged students which can be accessed both pre-entry and in the course of one's studies. This varies across institutions, but may include a named contact, access to pre-entry programmes and application support, discretionary funding, health and wellbeing support, and in the case of some universities, guaranteed 365-day accommodation on campus, with no requirement for a guarantor. Most Scottish universities will also consider being an estranged student as one of the criteria which factor into an offer of entry.

Work in both the HE and FE sector is supported by SFC's guidance on supporting Estranged students via their Outcome Agreements (OAs) and institutions have reported on their activities to support Estranged students since AY 2016-17.

The Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model replaced OAs from AY 2024-25, and we understand that SFC have agreed to continue supporting estranged students, including through their inclusion in SFC's data collections and publications, and through their wider partnership work with the sectors and stakeholders to protect the interests of current and future students.

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Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student data 2023-24

I would also like to take the opportunity to draw to the attention of the Committee the publication of the latest HESA statistics for 2023-24 on 20 March 2025. The figures show that 16.7% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities came from the nation's 20% most deprived areas. This is a welcome increase from 16.3% the previous year and demonstrates an upward trend in advance of the next interim Commission on Widening Access target.

I hope you find this information useful and I look forward to receiving the final report from your inquiry into widening access.

Yours sincerely,

GRAEME DEY

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