

Response to SFC's consultation on future use of the Widening Access and Retention Fund

Dear Alyssa,

I am writing in reference to SFC's consultation on the [Widening Access and Retention Fund](#). Having read through the questions, Lead Scotland would like to express some views, however as we are not based in an institution, we feel it would not be appropriate to respond to a lot of the questions. It also wouldn't be appropriate for us to attempt to prioritise one widening access group over another. I hope it's therefore OK to express some views to you by email here.

Lead Scotland's main concerns relate to the fact disabled students are missing from the consultation, apart from the question relating to graduate related employment. The statistics evidence the fact disabled students have lower retention rates and lower degree outcomes compared to non-disabled students, and some evidence suggests disabled people could also be underrepresented at Scotland's universities. The Commissioner for Fair Access also produced a discussion paper on disabled students at university earlier in the year, attesting to these disparities. Proportion and retention rates for disabled students also vary widely at an institutional level, with some institutions being well below the sector average.

We also know from our extensive expertise in supporting disabled students that academic and welfare issues are of particular concern and relevance to this group. It is important to look at outcomes for disabled students broken down by impairment type rather than as a homogeneous group, to get a better sense of the persistent gaps in access, retention and attainment. The intersectionality of deprivation and disability is also key to understanding the level of disadvantage this group face.

In addition, as you will know, SFC co-host an advisory group with Lead Scotland that aims to improve both outcomes and experiences for disabled students. The disabled student experience is something the group have discussed in depth, with members agreeing outcomes and statistics do not always adequately reflect the student journey. Many of our helpline callers and their families tell us disabled students are continuing, progressing and attaining **despite** the lack of appropriate support, and to the detriment of their physical and mental wellbeing.

SFC currently includes disabled students within their widening access agenda - they report on their outcomes in the annual Report on Widening Access and in the Triennial Review on Widening Access, and they set targets related to disabled students as part of their national aspirations in the outcome agreement guidance. They also ask institutions to set targets related to disabled students within their individual outcome agreements. Students with mental health issues are a particular priority for both SFC and the Scottish Government.

It is therefore surprising to see disabled students have not been included by SFC as a priority group in the WARF consultation (aside from the graduate employment question). Lead Scotland believes that supporting disabled students to transition into university would be just one particularly appropriate way to use WARF funds, as there are currently no funded programmes of work for students in this area, yet it is widely acknowledged and accepted that good transition support can be key for young disabled people to succeed. We would be happy to provide further comments to SFC about how WARF funding could be used to support disabled students on request.

Kind regards,

Rebecca