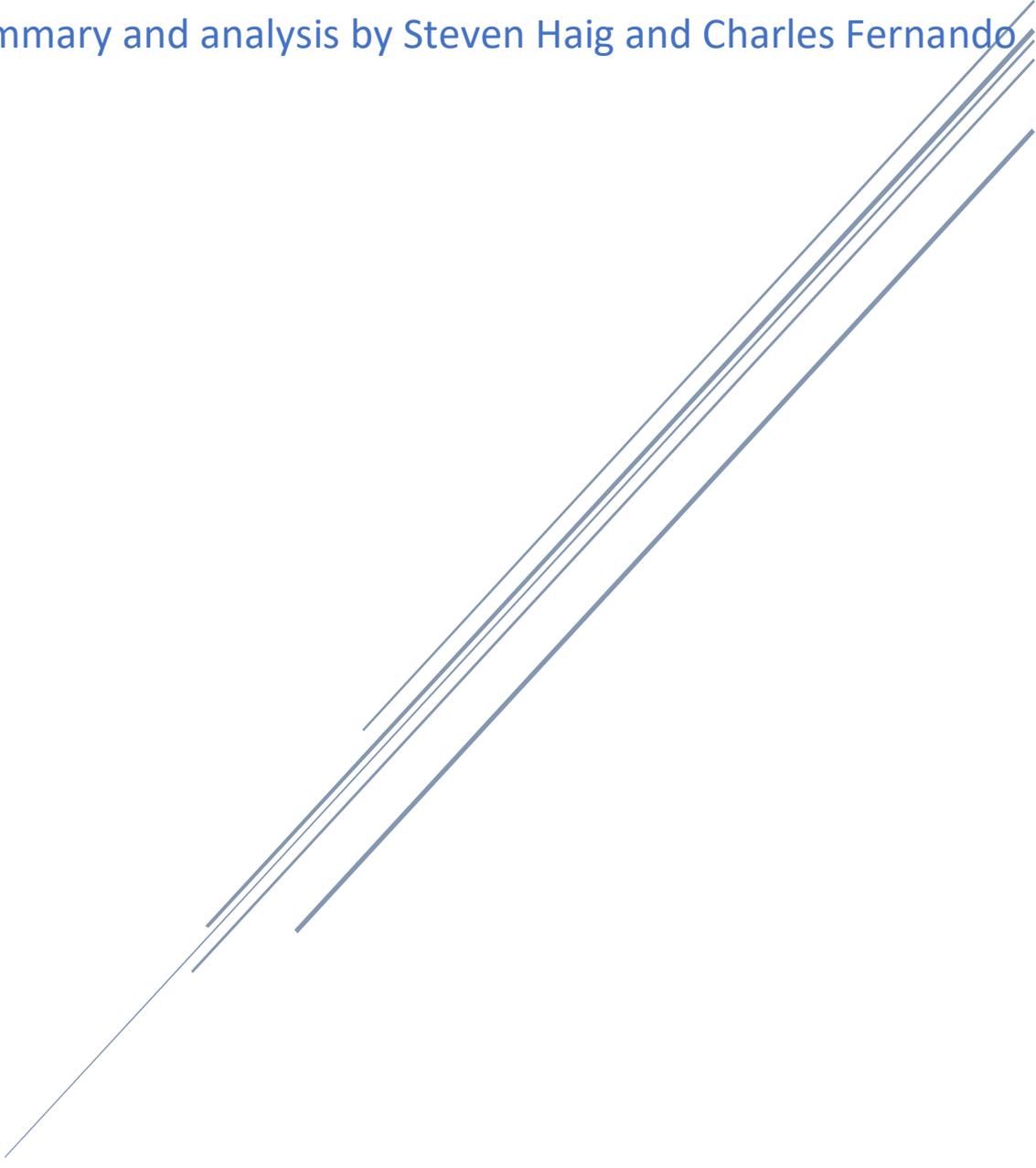


RE-COMMITTING TO FAIR
ACCESS: A PLAN FOR RECOVERY
(COMMISSIONER FOR WIDENING
ACCESS, ANNUAL REPORT 2021)

Summary and analysis by Steven Haig and Charles Fernando



Key Findings of the Report¹

General Trends

- Over the last decade, there has been significant and consistent improvement in terms of fair access to university for students from a range of challenging backgrounds, including those with care-experience (CE).
- Progress is slowing however regarding fair access generally, as has been the case even before the Covid-19 pandemic. This reflects the fact that further progress becomes incrementally more difficult, the more is achieved.
- Furthermore, Covid-19 poses a significant risk to fair access in the coming years as it has disproportionately disrupted the studies of those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Admissions and Care-Experience

- The percentage of full-time first degree entrants in university who are care experienced has more than doubled between 2012-2013 and 2019-2020. While remaining low, the participation rate for CE students jumped from 0.5% to 1.2% in this time.
- The report predicts that this percentage will increase in the future as all Scottish universities committed in 2019 to guarantee a place for care-experienced students who meet the minimum entry requirements. This potential further increase however is dependent on students meeting basic grade requirements in secondary school and thus support earlier in CE students' education is also crucial.

Impact of Covid-19 and Care-Experienced Students

- The report does not cover the specific impacts of Covid-19 on CE students. Instead, it delves into Covid-19's impact on disadvantaged students in general, with a focus on SIMD20 students.
- With the move to online teaching in schools and universities (which will continue into the future to some extent) the report identifies several challenges which disproportionately

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all data summarised refers to Commissioner for Fair Access, *Re-Committing to Fair Access: A Plan for Recovery*, Annual Report 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/re-committing-fair-access-plan-recovery-annual-report-2021/>.

affect disadvantaged students. Issues include: digital poverty, school disruptions and ‘diluted engagement’ from tertiary education providers.

- The long term-impacts on employment, student retention and attainment will have to be assessed over the next couple years, but it is likely to be a setback for fair access.
- The report emphasises that any plans to return to something close to normality following Covid-19 will need to be fair access proof. One approach suggested is to include socioeconomic disadvantage or care-experience in equality impact statements.
- The report also emphasises that university outreach and bridging activities such as summer schools have been hindered by Covid-19, and that extra reinvestment will be needed to get back on track. This is especially important for supporting CE students.

Financial Support

- Financial support has improved significantly for CE university students. In 2018-19, the Scottish government granted an additional £5 million in funding to increase the CESB from £7,625 a year to £8,100 a year. The previous age restriction of recipients being under 26 years of age was then removed in 2019-20.

Retention Rates

- In most years, the retention rate of CE students is lower than both the general student population and SIMD20 students. One exception was 2018-19, where the retention rate of those who had started in 2017-18 was 92.8%, compared with 91.1% overall and 86.8% of SIMD20 students². However, with such small numbers of CE students the data is fairly volatile and thus the report suggests this could be interpreted as an anomaly. Note however that recent data from Scottish Funding Council shows a generally consistent increase in CE student retention rates since the introduction of the Care Experienced Student Bursary.

Possibility of Post-Qualification Admissions Process

² See http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/statisticalpublications_sfcst062020/ROWA_2018-19.pdf (p.13) for more detail.

- A proposal in England to move to a post-qualification admission process may hinder fair access by reducing engagement time between the university and the applicant (which in turn leads to higher dropout rates) and undermining contextual admissions by creating an overemphasis on grades. While this proposal is not currently being discussed in Scotland, there is a risk of spill-over effects due to close linkages between Scottish and English universities.

Further Relevant Issues to be Addressed

Pastoral Care for Care Experienced Students

- The transitional period from secondary to tertiary education is difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and there should be particular focus on care-experienced students. This is crucial to ensure that Fair Access can be translated into equitable achievement in education. **This pastoral care should be consistent throughout the application process as well as throughout enrolment, and such support may help address the slightly lower retention rates for care-experience students.**
- Recommendation 15 of the COWA report advises increasing support for younger disadvantaged children and their families, and the current report notes that universities have made progress in this area. There is no specific mention of support for CE students however. **This should be an area of focus going forward as CE students are the most difficult to reach later in secondary education due to early secondary school drop-out rates, and thus early intervention for this group is crucial.**

Intersectionality

- The report may benefit from more information on students from multiple protected characteristics and other minority groups such as BME, disabled, LGBTQI etc.. **This is important as students from different protected characteristics and minority groups face different barriers to education and more nuanced approaches to fair access may be required in these cases.**

- This is particularly important for understanding barriers to CE students. For example, CE students are more likely to self-declare a disability than their non-CE counterparts, and they are disproportionately domiciled in SIMD20 areas.

Care-Experienced Students' Success Rates

- **The inclusion of qualification rates for CE students compared to their non-CE peers may be useful in assessing how well universities support CE students after admission.**
- Differentiated data on retention and qualification rates for CE students at different universities would also be useful to assess which universities support CE students most (or least) effectively.