

# SGSSS Widening Access Strategy

## 1. Introduction

The Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS) believes that all students that have the potential to progress to doctoral study should have equal opportunity to do so, and that all doctoral students should have equal opportunity to succeed in their studies.

Education in Scotland is not equal. Figures from UCAS show that 18 year-olds from Scotland's 20% least deprived communities are more than three times as likely to enter university at undergraduate level as those from the 20% most deprived communities.<sup>1</sup> This is actually a significant improvement from data reported in the Scottish Government's 2016 final report of the Commission on Widening Access,<sup>2</sup> however, it is clear there is still a long way to go.

The Commission for Fair Access in Scotland has recently shone a light on persistent inequalities for students from the most deprived areas of Scotland at all stages in their academic careers. Students from the least advantaged backgrounds are less likely to progress to higher education, postgraduate research study, or gain a professional job after completing a PhD.<sup>3</sup>

The SGSSS believes in the benefits that come from having a diverse population and is committed to facilitating the widest possible applicant pool into doctoral study; and, valuing the diversity of our population through minimising any barriers to participation throughout the PhD experience. This strategy document seeks to outline how we intend to do this.

## 2. Definitions

There are a number of differing terminologies related to this work. Equality and Diversity is a legal obligation. In the Equality Act 2010, it is stated that public sector organisations (including HEIs) must, when making decisions of a strategic nature about how to exercise their functions, have due regard to the desirability of exercising them in a way that is designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from a range of social disadvantages.

This legislation focuses on nine protected characteristics:

- Age;
- Disability;
- Gender reassignment;
- Marriage and civil partnership;
- Race;
- Religion or belief;
- Sex;
- Sexual orientation.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, the SGSSS collects information on these data as part of our requirements for reporting to ESRC. HEIs in our partnerships also collect and publish these data for both staff and students as part of their work around

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<sup>1</sup> UCAS End of Cycle Report 2019 <https://www.ucas.com/file/292716/download?token=Q9ctjA-F>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/>

<sup>3</sup> Access to Postgraduate Study – representation and destinations: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/commissioner-fair-access-discussion-paper-access-postgraduate-study-representation-destinations/>

<sup>4</sup> Equality Act 2010: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). EDI work within HEIs very much aligns with SGSSS' belief in valuing the diversity of our population and minimising barriers to participation.

Widening Participation (WP) focuses on creating equality in access to higher education. It is based on the premise that the main barrier to access is not ability: there are lots of talented people who have the potential to study at higher education level, but for various reasons do not do so. Currently, the majority of WP initiatives are targeted at undergraduate students. However, WP programmes use tools to assess the likelihood of progression to higher education that can be useful for the SGSSS to identify barriers to education and opportunities to champion equality and support a pipeline of talented under-represented students.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) helpfully brings these fields together under the terminology *Widening Access (WA)* to refer to accessibility of education (both into and within) to learners from all backgrounds and protected characteristics<sup>5</sup>. SGSSS will therefore use the terminology Widening Access when referring to our commitments to: facilitating the widest possible applicant pool into doctoral study; and, valuing the diversity of our population through minimising any potential barriers to participation throughout the PhD experience.

### 3. Importance

A number of recent reports and studies have provided a stark reality of some of the inequalities related to doctoral study.

The Advance HE Equality & Higher Education Report analyses the UK student population across undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research programmes to see how far the student population represents groups across these different characteristics.<sup>6</sup> Of note is that whilst 15.5% of the UG population disclose as disabled, this falls to 10% at PGR. Similarly, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) is reported as making up 25.5% of the UG population but only 18.1% of PGR.

The UK Council for Graduate Education (UKGCE) also notes BAME representation is a persistent problem at postgraduate research level stating that 8 out of the 10 minority ethnicities have a higher level of UG participation than PGR.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, The Leading Routes: The Broken Pipeline report<sup>8</sup> revealed that just 1.2% of UKRI PhD studentships were awarded to Black students and suggested that the criteria in use to select doctoral candidates were biased against applicants from certain demographics, and thus represented a major barrier.

Paul Wakeling has published extensively on PGR underrepresentation in terms of social class. One study found *'Those with working-class origins....are only about 28per cent as likely to obtain a postgraduate degree when compared with their peers from privileged origins'*<sup>9</sup> He also notes structural inequalities around PGR funding across HEIs in the UK resulting in *'a highly stratified doctoral experience'*.

This and similar research prompted UKRI to write to all their funded Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) reiterating the expected obligations to EDI, and tasking DTPs with guaranteeing 'open merit-based and

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/access-inclusion/widening-access.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2020>

<sup>7</sup> Access and Participation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicities in UK Postgraduate Research:

<http://www.ukgce.ac.uk/article/bame-pgr-access-participation-459.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> <https://leadingroutes.org/mdocs-posts/the-broken-pipeline-barriers-to-black-students-accessing-research-council-funding>

<sup>9</sup> Wakeling, Paul Brian James [orcid.org/0000-0001-7387-4145](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7387-4145) and Laurison, Daniel (2017) Are postgraduate qualifications the 'new frontier of social mobility'? *British Journal of Sociology*. pp. 1-23. ISSN 1468-4446 Adél Pásztor and Paul Wakeling, 'All PhDs are equal but ... Institutional and social stratification in access to the doctorate,' *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39, no. 7 (2018): 983.

transparent recruitment’, ‘collecting diversity monitoring data’ and ‘providing support and training to supervisors’. A series of workshops with Leading Routes also took place for Directors across the UKRI doctoral training network.

Recent research with prospective doctoral students in Scotland from SGSSS intern Hannah Gormley<sup>10</sup> supports the existing findings. She observed two significant challenges for those self-declared as first generation students: practical barriers, broadly time and finances; and, cultural barriers or lack of social capital. She also noted the highly intersectional nature of widening access and a broad set of issues that face individuals in a number of different groups including: access to information on the application process; low confidence to approach a potential supervisor; and, a reluctance to disclose contextual information for fear it would be viewed negatively. Finally, for those who do make it into doctoral study, focus group participants reflected on ‘*the homogeneity of class*’ within their cohorts.

#### 4. The Challenges

Any initiatives aimed at widening access to PGR are limited in that the pool of potential applicants must have already reached and progressed through higher education at undergraduate level. Research from the Office for Students (OfS) in England shows for undergraduate participation ‘*entrants from the most advantaged half of areas so dominate the student population that the majority of entrants with almost any characteristic...are from those advantaged areas*’.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, focussing on any single level of equality as a marker for positive action runs the risk of including some who are not in need and excluding some who are.

Furthermore, there are significant challenges in the markers most-commonly used for identifying particular groups and how the data are used. For example, there is no consensus on how best to measure social class. Possible markers include a combination of postcode from childhood residence, free school meals (FSM), or even parental occupation. This debate is more difficult to settle at the PGR level where some of the markers may not carry the same relevance. Furthermore, the most common model for profiling social class via postcode in Scotland is the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation SIMD<sup>12</sup>, whilst for the rest of the UK POLAR4<sup>13</sup> is most commonly used.

Whilst, postcode data is a great tool for measuring participation in a timely and detailed way (speaking to the structural and long-term nature of these inequalities and allowing for general monitoring of the socio-economic profile of incoming cohorts in comparison to previous ones), it is less useful for identifying individuals as widening participation students without being supplemented with additional qualitative information or other markers such as FSM.

There has also been much debate about the usefulness of terminology such as BAME. A guiding principle of the Advance HE Race Equality Charter notes<sup>14</sup>: ‘*Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff and students are not a homogenous group. People from different ethnic backgrounds have different experiences of and outcomes from/within higher education and that complexity needs to be considered in analysing data and developing actions.*’ There are also anecdotal concerns that institutional statistics are being skewed by specific subject areas or by international students.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.sgsss.ac.uk/news/sgsss-research-into-widening-access-and-valuing-diversity/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/bf84aeda-21c6-4b55-b9f8-3386b21b7b3b/insight-3-contextual-admissions.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter#principles>

## 5. Our Ambition

SGSSS is committed to facilitating the widest possible applicant pool into doctoral study; and, valuing the diversity of our population through minimising any potential barriers to participation throughout the PhD experience.

As a national graduate school we are well placed to drive best practice in this important area and seek to both draw on the expertise within the partnership and pilot new initiatives that can be shared across the sector. We acknowledge that there is a cultural shift that needs to happen in certain areas to make progress and whilst this will take time, our large network puts us in a good position to influence.

## 6. Our Achievements so far

Following the ESRC Mid-Term review, a focus on Widening Participation and EDI was a key priority for 2020. In September 2020, we commissioned Hannah Gormley, a PhD intern, to undertake research with key stakeholders in the social science doctoral community in Scotland with the aim of contributing to an evidence base that would support SGSSS to develop effective policies and interventions. Hannah's report, included a set of recommendations which has strongly fed into strategy development. Key features of her work included:

- Convening a short-life working group with student, staff (academic and WP practitioners) and external partner input.
- Survey on challenges/barriers to PGR participation completed by 285 UG/PGT students from all 16 partners.
- Webinar [Starting Your Journey Towards a PhD - First Steps in the Application Process](#) - which featured current students talking about their unconventional routes to a PhD - took place in November 2020 with over 100 participants.
- Focus groups with current PhD students as well as interviews with academic staff regarding their own experiences and viewpoints around EDI issues.
- Presenting progress and incorporating feedback from key governance groups: Deans, Pathway Convenors and Student reps.

In addition, we continue to financially support those with caring responsibilities or who are traveling more than 30 miles to attend any of our events. The move to online training and communication has also increased opportunities for participation from those in geographically remote areas. Last year also saw our first part-time internships.

Finally, we've developed a number of initiatives in response to specific issues. We ran a successful series of lunchtime talks for Black History Month with the AHRC-DTP SGSAH in October hearing from a variety of insightful speakers and had close to 400 attendees tuning in including members of the general public. We commissioned a [blog](#) as part of solidarity on the issue of women's safety and student engagement following this is resulting in joint work developing a special leave policy, to support those who find themselves in challenging and potentially vulnerable situations.

## 7. Achieving Our Ambition

In order to move closer to our ambition of facilitating the widest possible applicant pool into doctoral study and minimising any barriers to participation throughout the PhD experience, this strategy sets out an action plan working towards the following six objectives.

- Democratisation of information: Ensuring there is accessible information that allows potential applicants to decide whether they wish to pursue a PhD application. Having a transparent assessment process for applicants, assessors and potential supervisors.

- Adopting a whole person approach to admissions: Evaluating current competition assessment practices and guidance and implementing any changes that further support the widening access agenda. Current proposals in this area were discussed with Deans earlier in May 2021 and at the open competition review meeting - an update will follow shortly.
- Considering positive action: Using evidence driven decisions to pilot initiatives that support the PhD application process for identified groups.
- Monitoring progress: Using standardised data to develop an evaluation framework that assesses the success of initiatives and monitors key widening access markers over time.
- Celebrating and supporting the diversity of our PhD population through online content, specific initiatives and policies.
- Supporting key stakeholders in understanding and implementing practices and initiatives that support the widening access agenda.

The following action plan provides more detail on the strands of activity that will enable us to achieve these objectives and how we will monitor progress. One key point to highlight is that this work requires a collegiate effort across the SGSSS partnership at discipline, institutional and governance levels.

Diane Gill

Head of Strategy and Operations

May 2021

## Action Plan

Action Plan Headline and Key Recommendation	Task/Action	Progress
<b>Accessible Information</b>		
Applicant Pool	Ensure HEI websites (admissions and departmental where appropriate) link through to SGSSS – develop basic checklist of key info to contain and simple factsheets that can be shared on open days. Include key messages on our position around diversity and Widening Access (WA) When feasible, have presence at open days	Planned summer 2021
	Review Studentship webpages, get feedback on accessibility and implement changes. Include work on Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) – SGSSS currently appears on page two when you google PhD funding.	Planned summer 2021 in time for competition launches in autumn.
	Create bitesize web videos of the PhD basics using ‘First Steps’ webinar to be finished with captions	Planned July 2021
	Develop material aimed at pre-honours (3 <sup>rd</sup> year) that can be shared in lectures across the SGSSS network and shown at PG open days. In particular, promote the +1 option.	Develop in conjunction with the bitesize videos By Sept 21
	Include student reps in hub panel meetings to help demystify information	Planned April 22
	As part of recommissioning, explore with partners the options for more consistency of timings of when students apply to an HEI in relation to an SGSSS application. Currently this is not consistent across the network – e.g. Edinburgh need UoE offer first, Glasgow need SGSSS offer first.	Noted as part of recommissioning preparation

Whole Person Approach to admissions		
Applicant Pool	<p>For whole person approach, look at options such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Removing references</li> <li>- Additional WA candidate as part of nomination process</li> <li>- Scoring criteria: loosening up the descriptors – being clear on relevance of degree classification/professional experience/academic distinctions (subject/academic knowledge/skills) AND experience that demonstrates potential and preparedness for a PhD (personal challenges, volunteering, extra-curricular achievements).</li> <li>- Additional point for WA candidates</li> <li>- Training for PRs</li> <li>- Additional diversity question</li> </ul>	<p>Discussed with Deans and PCG – changes for 2021/22 competition approved.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Development of the Assessment Framework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. An explicit description of the evidence to be considered in assessing candidate capabilities;</li> <li>B. A set of descriptors across the scale that are explicit in the whole person nature of the required assessment;</li> <li>C. A set of vignettes to highlight how the candidate capabilities scoring might operate;</li> <li>D. Changes to the application form (related to preparedness, potential to flourish and contribution to a diverse community);</li> <li>E. A merging of the 1+3/+3 frameworks.</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Amendment of the Reference Template to make it more appropriate for non-academic referees and is explicit how the reference will feed into the overall assessment of the application</li> <li>3. Training for reviewers at all stages of the assessment process planned</li> </ol>
	Include student reps in competition review meetings to build knowledge, ensure transparency and make sure an important voice is heard	Two student reps attended the open comp review meeting

Positive Action		
Applicant Pool	Clarify what is permissible in terms of positive action – refer to other DTPs and <a href="#">Advance HE guidance</a>	Concerns regarding a lack robust data for all under-represented groups. Decision to proceed with application changes via whole person approach, update data collection and continue to monitor.
Both	Develop mentorship scheme where current students are trained to act as mentors to potential applicants. Pilot with certain groups e.g. BAME, students applying from post-92 to RG, First Gen, disabled or encourage HEIs/pathways to develop subject-level pilots	Investigate pilot for 2022/23 competitions. Will need data to justify targeting specific groups. Look at <a href="#">EUI</a> scheme for first gen researchers
	Develop a proposal for a co-developed award and seek approval from ESRC to run this as part of our EDI strategy	Ongoing discussions related to potential new MRes from PhD review – incorporate into recommissioning.
	Discuss common approaches with SGSAH regarding markets for positive action e.g. first gen and approaches to ringfencing.	Piloting different approaches and sharing progress
	Explore possibilities for pilot positive action initiative with external partners such as Skills Development Scotland.	Conversations ongoing
Standardised data for monitoring and evaluation		
Applicant Pool	Update Equal Opportunities (EO) form for this year’s competition to include information on socio-economic status and other relevant info, in collaboration with SGSAH and NEON pilot. Also include nationality as part of monitoring effects of international cap	Planned July 2021
Current Population	Develop a monitoring framework for EO data beyond what is required for annual reporting. Analysis by pathway, institution and competition.	Planned for Summer 22
Current Population	Publish key EDI stats on website	Planned as part of EDI content section



Applicant Pool	Map postcode data for last two cohorts against POLAR4 and SIMD quintiles: compare changes over time, application stage and differences across competitions	Planned for Summer 21
Applicant Pool	Analysis of 2020/21 EDI data using the new framework	Planned for Autumn 21
<b>Celebrating and supporting the diversity of our PhD population</b>		
Applicant Pool	Mentoring scheme – see other section	
Current Population	Work with student reps to support under-represented groups in the student body	Ongoing as part of student rep development with new Associate Director Student Engagement
Current Population	Review key policies and uptake e.g. Carer’s policy, compassionate leave policy, internships policy, DSA	Planned for Summer 21
Current Population	Develop a ‘profile’ for the incoming cohort by collecting information in advance of induction that can be used to celebrate the diversity of SGSSS funded students. E.g percentage of 2:1s, part-time, disabled, first gen, mature, LGBTQ etc.	Profile to be shared at student induction and included in EDI webpages
Current Population	Pilot activities and content related to celebrating the diversity of our population.	Black History Month programme planned for Oct. 2021. Other ideas to be planned as part of ten year celebrations
Current Population	Make supporting under-represented groups an integral part of cohort development and employability strategies. Identify relevant interventions across the PhD journey	Ongoing as part of student rep development with new Associate Director Student Engagement and Employability vision.
Both	Develop EDI section of website that outlines principles both in recruitment and in valuing the diversity of our population. Refers to our values and showcases the diversity of our population. Includes talking heads with current students and Directorate members with info on the application process and life as a PhD student	Planned for Autumn 21

**Supporting key stakeholders**

Supervisors	Build out guidance/develop vignettes for the Whole Person assessment framework (See Whole Person Approach Section)	Planned for Summer 21
	Supervisor of the year competition that celebrates an individual who goes above and beyond to support diversity and inclusion in PGR	Consider for summer 2022
	Consult supervisors on what they need to promote the WA agenda – review documents such as this guide from <a href="#">Nottingham</a>	Timeline TBC
Pathway Reps and Convenors	Publish EDI data to show diversities across HEIs and pathways	Use framework developed in spring 2022 and share during May/June 2022 governance meetings
	Develop briefing note for PRs and PCs regarding our EDI policy and how to support widening access. Introduce during PC induction (September) and PR induction (October)	Summer 21
	Embed supporting diversity within PC/PR role descriptions and require as part of pathway vision statements	Began in April 2021 as part of new pathway visions.
	Explore incentives as a form of positive action e.g. pathways doing well on diversity can put forward an extra student	Discuss as part of data discussion at May/June 2022 governance meetings.
Wider population	Promote Hannah’s internship findings across the sector and at selected conferences (NEON, UKGCE). In particular with SGSAH so their intern can build on our work	In progress. Presentations at NEON and UKGCE, June 2021. Report on SGSSS website.

