



The University of Edinburgh will be unable to recruit more young people from poor backgrounds unless a new way of measuring deprivation is found, the institution's rector has claimed.

And Peter McColl warned that continuing to rely exclusively on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) could lead universities into a "bidding war" for a limited number of qualified candidates from deprived areas.

In an interview with *Holyrood* magazine, Peter McColl said the university "found everyone who would be eligible" within its geographical area who fell into the bottom 40 per cent of SIMD zones, the primary measurement used in efforts to make university admissions fairer.

Universities have come under pressure in recent years to ensure their student intake reflects society, with ancient universities like Edinburgh in particular being criticised for being dominated by students from middle class and wealthy backgrounds.

Last month Universities Scotland published a list of recommendations for improving widening participation, which included a call to diversify the range of criteria rather than relying on SIMD.

Critics have claimed SIMD, which divides Scotland into a ranked list of 6505 datazones, is an inaccurate measurement of the deprivation of individuals. Universities Scotland's report cited Scottish Government analysis showing just 31.3 per cent of income deprived individuals lived in the bottom 15 per cent of SIMD zones.

McColl told *Holyrood*: "SIMD is a part of what deprivation is, but it's not all of what deprivation is, therefore it has to play a part, but they have to find other measures.

"What we have to make sure is that students go to the institutions that are right for them. If you end up with a measure that is too prescriptive, and is actually limiting the number of people going to the right institution for them, then that's a problem and we need to look at it again."

Asked if the University of Edinburgh had effectively 'maxed out' its capacity for widening participation, McColl said: "The university struggled because they think that they've found everyone who would be eligible in the SIMD categories in the Lothians, and in the area that Edinburgh university could reasonably attract people from – therefore you have to go beyond that. What you don't want is a bidding war between universities for students."

However, McColl added: "I think area deprivation is an important form of poverty, therefore we can't move away entirely from SIMD."

Responding to his comments, a spokesperson for the University of Edinburgh told *Holyrood*: "The University of Edinburgh is committed to admitting the very best students from the widest range of backgrounds.

"The University of Edinburgh understands the importance of the SIMD40 measure as an indicator of national progress on widening participation. As part of our much wider efforts to widen participation, we have more than filled the 50 additional places provided in 2013/14 for students from SIMD40."



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### [Paris Gourtsoyannis](#)

Paris joined Holyrood in September 2011, and became education correspondent in May 2012. Born in Canada into a Greek family, and raised in Belgium, he came to Scotland in 2005 to study at the University of Edinburgh, where he was involved with award-winning student publication The Journal. Before working at Holyrood, Paris contributed to the Edinburgh Evening News, the Guardian and Guardian Local, and interned at think-tank Demos. His beat takes in all areas of Scotland's education and skills sector, including early years, adult learning, and employability...

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