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# Widening Access to Higher Education: Does Anyone Know What Works?

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## Introduction

This literature review was commissioned by Universities Scotland to provide an overview of the academic and policy literature relating to widening access interventions, with a view to assessing the types of programmes associated with positive outcomes. The review also examined the 2012/13 outcome agreements submitted to the Scottish Funding Council by the nineteen Scottish higher education institutions in order to identify the actions and initiatives proposed by different institutions. In addition to examining 'what works' in relation to widening access, the review also examined the indices which are used to measure socio-economic status, considering the pros and cons of different approaches.

## Background

There is a broad consensus that more needs to be done to achieve greater social equality in access to higher education but limited agreement on how this can be achieved. Although there was considerable expansion of higher education during the 1990s, this benefited students from the middle classes to a greater extent than those from low socio-economic backgrounds ([Ross, 2003](#)). However, as noted by Iannelli ([2011](#)), when saturation point has been reached in relation to the participation of middle class students, then any additional places are likely to be filled by students from low socio-economic backgrounds. This suggests that current low rates of expansion in Scotland may have a disproportionately negative effect in students from poorer backgrounds.

The questions addressed were:

- What types of interventions can be identified at institutional and cross-sectoral level in Scotland and the UK?
- Which categories of students are the recipients of particular interventions (e.g. those from low participation schools; those living in areas of multiple deprivation as identified by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD); first generation participants; care system leavers; mature learners)?
- What are the goals of specific interventions (e.g. are they geared towards school level interventions; or towards devising fairer admissions processes through the use of contextual data; or towards providing financial, social or learning support to improve retention; or towards helping students gain access to a profession or post-graduate study)?
- What evidence is there of the success of different interventions, with regard to process and outcomes?
- What metrics have been used to measure the outcomes achieved by particular interventions? Are these measures appropriate and have they been used to track progress over time?

## Methods

There were three strands to the literature search:

1. policy documents and the 'grey' literature;

2. the academic literature on widening access initiatives and their effectiveness, drawn mostly, but not exclusively, from journal articles;
3. analysis of the Scottish Universities' outcome agreements for 2012/13, supplemented by other material sent in by institutions in response to an email request for information about the process of producing the first round of widening access outcome agreements.

To provide a context for the literature an analysis of the most recent publicly available performance indicators from HESA and SFC on widening participation were included.

## **Key findings**

The main findings were:

- the range of under-represented groups was wide, wider than the current policy focus on young full-time undergraduates might suggest
- there was a broad consensus on the importance of widening access, and considerable evidence of enthusiastic action, particularly on outreach activities;
- there was evidence of success for a broad range of outreach activities, although not enough is known about reasons for not taking up places at university;
- mentoring by students already in higher education, campus visits and summer schools were widely seen as successful in widening participation;
- nevertheless, the multi-faceted nature of outreach programmes made it impossible to establish with certainty which elements work best in all contexts or for the widest range of potential students;
- there was widespread discontent in the institutions about the use of SIMD as a measure for assessing progress in widening access, given the uneven spread of postcodes throughout Scotland and the reluctance of some prospective students to move from their home area;
- contextual data was being used in admissions in many universities, but in a variety of ways, and many institutions were planning revisions to their admissions policies;
- measures to encourage retention were in use, although plans to improve monitoring of student attendance and performance and improve support for widening access students and others were also noted;
- pre-entry participation in Reach or Pathways to the Professions, mentoring, placement experience, emphasis on developing skills for employability, careers guidance and the availability of finance for postgraduate study were all seen as useful to help students succeed in their future careers. The limited evidence available suggests that graduates from under-represented groups were not disadvantaged when they enter the labour market, but more research is needed on career destinations.

## ***The policy background***

There have been a number of influential policy documents and reports published since the 1990s. This includes the Dearing Report, 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' ([1997](#)), which stressed the need for widening participation and gave rise to the performance indicators used to measure the performance of universities in a range of areas including

widening participation. The Schwartz report in 2004 ([Centre for Education and Inclusion Research and Institute for Access Studies, 2008](#)) recommended the adoption of five principles in relation to admission procedures which led to a revision of the QAA code of practice relating to admissions. Two reports chaired by Alan Milburn relating to social mobility ([Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009](#)) and one focusing specifically on university education ([University challenge: how higher education can advance social mobility, 2012](#)) have also been influential. The first report noted the need to ensure fairer access to the professions as earlier evidence had demonstrated that professions were becoming more socially exclusive. The second report identified four stages in the student life-cycle: getting ready; getting in; staying in; and getting on, and stressed the need for support for widening access students at all these stages.

There were also a number of political changes in Scotland during this period. The Scottish Parliament came into being and devolution transferred powers over education and training to the Scottish Parliament. These changes led to some differences between the countries in the UK, the most notable in relation to student fees. There was some expectation that there would be greater divergence; however, Gallacher and Raffe ([2012](#)) have argued the tendency to diverge has tended to be counterbalanced by pressures for convergence, for example from the global market of higher education. Additional changes were the creation of the Scottish Funding Council bringing the funding for further and higher education into one body, and the creation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Both played a role in promoting widening participation; the former through its Widening Participation Review Group and the publication of Learning for All; the latter for providing a mechanism for credit transfer between institutions. Wider Access Regional Forums were also set up to widen access and promote participation in post-compulsory education. Whilst measures stemming from these initiatives have had some success, there has been a reluctance to impose conditions on higher education in relation to widening access. However, the recently established outcome agreements between universities and the Scottish Funding Council include requirements in relation to widening participation. The Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 provides the statutory underpinning to the widening access agreements, so that promoting widening access to students from under-represented groups, particularly those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, is a condition of grant from the Scottish Funding Council. Theoretically, financial penalties could be imposed on institutions deemed to have made insufficient progress in this area. Some Scottish universities have argued that there is too much emphasis on socio-economic disadvantage, and greater emphasis should be placed on the inclusion of students from other groups, such as disabled students.

### ***Empirical evidence***

The literature revealed continuing debates about the practice and evaluation of widening participation activities, and the complexity of issues which may deter those who have the potential to succeed in higher education from applying or accepting a place. The analysis of the range of groups discussed in the recent literature identified the diversity of needs and aspirations of those students. There was evidence to support Milburn's ([2012](#)) claim that widening access students may need, and will benefit from, support all through their relationship with higher education, from their first experience of outreach in school, through to graduation and employment.

An important recurring theme in the literature was the difficulty of disentangling the impacts of individual interventions, given that multiple factors and activities are influencing students' choices and success: for example, Sanders and Higham (2012) and Sinclair and McClements (2004) both drew attention to the difficulty of attributing success to one factor or intervention, although a combination of factors may be significant. The literature was rich, not only in case studies of successful practice both by individual universities and by partnerships, but also in compendia of ideas for practitioners, such as Andrews et al. (2012), Dent et al. (2012) and Thomas (2012).

### ***The outcome agreements***

The first round of outcome agreements produced by the universities provided a range of evidence of interventions aimed at encouraging widening participation especially in relation to disadvantaged school-leavers and those articulating from colleges. Two key themes were:

- the difficulty of establishing causality: since outreach programmes are multi-faceted, and prospective students' decisions are complex, we can never be entirely sure to which element of the programme success should be attributed, although summer schools, campus visits and mentoring by existing students seem particularly successful;
- the clear commitment expressed in outcome agreements to collaborative working with neighbouring universities, colleges and schools – co-operation which some suggested might be strained if penalties were introduced for universities which fail to meet their targets and institutions begin instead to compete for SIMD20 students.

In relation to entry to university, those who replied to our request for information on the production of outcome agreements suggested that there was some degree of institutional dissatisfaction with the use of SIMD as a measure, especially in areas with a low concentration of SIMD20 and SIMD40 postcodes. Some who were not overtly critical of SIMD made it clear that they used other measures in targeting potential widening participation entrants, such as schools with low progression rates, first generation entrants to HE and care-leavers. Despite this dissatisfaction, there was evidence of an increase in participation rates of students from under-represented groups. Moreover, several institutions declared their intention to update admissions policies, to take account of the growing use of contextual data in admissions, although the outcome agreements did not always make it clear exactly how, and by whom within the institution, the contextual data was to be used.

Measures identified as having successful impact on retention included: pre-entry summer schools, mentoring by HE students, tracking by tutors and policies of vigilance at the stages when students are most likely to decide to drop out. Many institutions also declared the need to develop or improve their systems for tracking the progression of widening participation entrants.

Targeted measures to help widening participation students to make a successful transition into their careers were harder to identify, although many mentioned developing employability skills within their courses and analysis of first destination data may shed further light on the topic.

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### ***The performance indicators***

Performance Indicators (PIs) for higher education were introduced following the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing committee) and cover a range of areas. The widening participation indicators, used to measure the extent to which universities are becoming more inclusive of students from under-represented groups in Scotland, are (i) the number of students from state schools, (ii) socio-economic status and (iii) Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).

The performance indicators demonstrated a degree of stratification with more elite institutions having a far smaller proportion of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. There were some differences between SIMD and NS-SEC when used as an indicator of widening participation. This was particularly noticeable for some institutions and seems to be linked to geographic location. This suggests that it might be valid to use a range of measures rather than just focusing on one.

### **Conclusion**

The main points that emerged from the research were:

- The range of under-represented groups is far wider than the current policy focus on young full-time undergraduates from disadvantaged neighbourhoods might suggest. It includes: pupils from schools identified as having a record of low progression of its pupils to higher education; students with lower socio-economic status (NS-SEC 4-7); residents in a postcode listed as SIMD20 or SIMD40; students in receipt of EMA; those entering from FE college; adult returners; care-leavers; people whose education has been disrupted by health problems or a disability; first generation entrants to HE; students with refugee or asylum seeker status.
- Policy reasons for promoting wider access have varied over the years, reflecting a desire for social justice, to meet the needs of employers and the UK economy for well-qualified, skilled graduates, and to promote social mobility. Within Scottish universities there is a broad consensus on the need to give everyone with the potential to succeed the opportunity to enter higher education.

### **Further research**

In order to track the development and effectiveness of widening participation initiatives and outcome agreements, work in the following areas would be useful:

- An examination of the use of contextual admissions data;
- An exploration of why offers of places at university are not accepted by some students from poorer backgrounds;
- The development of improved systems of evaluating outreach activities and tracking widening access students through their courses, in order to be able to demonstrate success in this area. This should include data gathering on part-time and mature students.

Our final conclusion was that, although more monitoring and evaluation are needed, much is being achieved: students from under-represented groups are entering higher education, institutions are collaborating and progress is being made. It is important to acknowledge the strengths of these initiatives and to monitor them in ways that help them to develop and do not undermine them.



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## Further information

Further information about the project is available from Dr. Elisabet Weedon, CREID, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ, [Elisabet.Weedon@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Elisabet.Weedon@ed.ac.uk). The main report and appendices are available at <http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/uploads/WideningAccessToHE-CREID.pdf>

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