



Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity

CREID BRIEFING 33

Access to higher education in Scotland Briefing

**Lucy Hunter Blackburn, Gitit Kadar-Satat,
Sheila Riddell and Elisabet Weedon**

Centre for Research in Education Inclusion & Diversity
Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh



July 2016

The participation gap

The Scottish Government frequently emphasises its commitment to the principles of social justice and recognises the need for firmer action to tackle the social class gap in higher education participation. This research, commissioned by the Sutton Trust <http://bit.ly/CREID-project-SuttonTrust-Access-HE> analysed the extent to which efforts to widen access to higher education have been successful, comparing Scotland with other parts of the UK. Main findings include the following:

- The gap in university participation between young people from the most and least advantaged areas is higher in Scotland than in the other home nations, although it has closed more quickly than elsewhere. However, Scottish 18 year olds from the most advantaged areas are still more than four times more likely to go straight to university than those from the least advantaged areas. In England, those from the most advantaged areas are 2.4 times as likely to go to university as those from the least, and three times as likely in Wales and Northern Ireland.
- In Scotland, university component of the higher education initial participation rate – the proportion of people entering any form of higher education before the age of 30 – was slightly lower in 2013–14 than in 2009–10. 34.1% of Scottish 18–30 year-olds now go direct to university, with a further 20.9% entering higher education through college. This compares with 47% entering higher education in England (this includes an estimated 6% who enter higher education in FE colleges and other non-university providers).
- Much – although not all – of the relationship between socio-economic background and HE participation is accounted for by previous educational attainment. So the messages that young people receive in school about higher education and subject choices, as well as the support they receive to do well in their Highers, are important.

Access through colleges

- Despite this, there has been improved access for disadvantaged students in Scotland as well as in the rest of the UK. However, detailed analysis of Scottish Funding Council (SFC) data reveals in Scotland this has been met almost entirely by the expansion of sub-degree programmes in Scottish colleges. Since 2006, 90 per cent of all the growth in entry into Scottish higher education by disadvantaged students has been through sub-degree courses in colleges. The funded places at the ancients are a notable exception, but there have been few other extra university places taken by disadvantaged students.

Social selection

- Academically selective Scottish universities are at least as socially selective as similar types of institution in other parts of the UK. Students from managerial and professional backgrounds (NS-SEC 1-3) are over-represented in highly selective universities in both Scotland and England, and this gap has not narrowed between 1996 and 2014.

- Analysis of students' higher education destinations shows that in Scotland there is a growing tendency for socially advantaged students (those from managerial and professional and independent school backgrounds) to opt for courses in more selective universities.
- In 1996, independent schools (catering for about 5% of the Scottish school population) accounted for 23% of young entrants to ancient universities compared to only 9% of entrants to other pre-92 universities and 5% of entrants to post-92 universities. By 2004, the average percentage of students from independent schools in ancient universities declined to 19%. However, since then the proportion has gradually increased, peaking at 26% in 2014/15. In other words, privately educated pupils make up an increasing proportion of entrants to leading universities in Scotland

Comparisons with England

- Analysis using HESA benchmarks shows that there are important differences between the overall characteristics of the Scottish and English university sectors, with Scotland having a greater proportion of higher tariff, or more academically selective, institutions, whilst England has a higher proportion of lower tariff, or less selective institutions. This reflects the fact that England has a relatively large number of post-92 universities, providing more places for students with lower academic qualifications. Given the well-established association between social class background and educational attainment, the profile of the Scottish university system is likely to militate against the inclusion of students from less advantaged backgrounds in comparison with other parts of the UK.

The policy landscape

- Interviews with Scottish policy-makers showed that there was strong support for the principles of widening access. Contextualised admissions approaches were particularly endorsed, but there was a lack of detail about their use and effectiveness. Where there is very strong competition for places, reserving a certain number for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds seems to be an effective way of increasing their representation.

Overview

- Overall, Scottish universities' efforts to widen access for students from poorer backgrounds have achieved only partial success. It is not evident from the data that divergence in fee policy has given Scotland any specific advantage compared to other parts of the UK, in relation to increasing overall levels of participation or participation by more disadvantaged groups. Improvements in participation have been largely driven by the growth of college Higher National provision in which students from poorer backgrounds are over-represented. This is because the supply of university places in Scotland has not kept pace with rising demand and increased competition for university places, particularly in the most selective universities, has had a disproportionately

Recommendations

1. The Scottish Government should ensure that additional places are available to meet rising demand.

We have demonstrated that there is a mismatch between supply of higher education places in Scotland and demand, with disproportionately detrimental consequences for those from less advantaged backgrounds. The funding of additional places at the Ancients earmarked for students from disadvantaged backgrounds seems to have been an effective way of improving the participation rates of this group, and it is important that such measures continue. However, this report shows that the growth in higher education provision in Scotland has been largely in the college sector, which caters disproportionately for those from poorer backgrounds. So, there is a need for a more nuanced analysis of the pros and cons of relying on the college sector to drive the expansion of higher education.

2. Bridging programmes to encourage successful higher education destinations should be expanded, alongside effective career and subject advice in schools.

There is some evidence that students from low-progression schools admitted with lower grades may perform better at university than their counterparts from high participation schools with higher grades, as shown in some contextual admissions programmes in Scotland.

Programmes aimed at raising awareness and aspirations for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds – such as those targeted at the highly able at a younger age and summer schools for students taking Highers - are crucial. Schools and colleges should also have free access to professionally qualified careers advisers including specialist advisers with knowledge of entry to elite universities.

3. A Commissioner for Fair Access should be appointed to oversee progress on widening access, independent of government and universities.

A central recommendation of the Scottish Government's Commission on Widening Access was that a Commissioner for Fair Access should be appointed by the end of 2016. The First Minister has recently accepted this recommendation. The evidence presented in this report illustrates the extent of social inequality within Scottish higher education and underlines the importance of this role. It will be important to ensure that the new commissioner is able to operate independently of both the Scottish Government and the university sector.

The Commission on Widening Access also suggested that, by 2030, students from the 20% most deprived areas should make up 20% of the higher education population in Scotland, with milestones to track progress. This is a demanding but reasonable goal, and it will be important to ensure that progress across all types of institution is monitored by an independent body. The Commissioner should also monitor the use of contextualised admissions, ensuring that processes are fair and transparent, and that minimum entry requirements are not pitched at an unnecessarily high level.

4. Both the Scottish Funding Council and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills should provide a breakdown of the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate by social class and type of institution attended.

Our analysis has highlighted significant gaps in the availability of administrative data to inform cross-border comparative analysis. The use of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as the principal measure of social disadvantage is problematic, since it does not capture data on young people from poorer backgrounds who are living in more advantaged areas. In addition to SIMD, data should be gathered on parental occupation and levels of education.

5. Widening participation initiatives need to be planned carefully to avoid duplication, and rigorous evaluation needs to run alongside implementation.

The Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Government should evaluate the effectiveness of widening access outcome agreements as a means of achieving social change.

In particular, further research into student retention strategies for disadvantaged students and in how best to support higher education students at FE colleges, is needed.

Further information

Further information about the project is available from Professor Sheila Riddell, CREID, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ, Sheila.Riddell@ed.ac.uk. All publications and information about this project are available at <http://bit.ly/CREID-project-SuttonTrust-Access-HE>

All briefings are available in hard copies, or as an email, or to download on www.creid.ed.ac.uk.

If you would like to receive briefing, or to be added to or removed from the distribution list, please contact Grace Kong (creid-education@ed.ac.uk).