Scottish Government Commission on Widening Access: Call for Evidence

Response from the Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity, University of Edinburgh

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1 The identification and removal of barriers to access and retention

Across Europe and the developed world, countries with lower levels of HE participation generally have higher levels of social inequality across the various stages of the education system. Iannelli (2011) has demonstrated that students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to participate in higher education when the system is expanding. Currently the Scottish Government controls student numbers, and over coming years it will be important to ensure that sufficient places are available for qualified students.

Barriers to higher education participation to students from poorer backgrounds are summarised in Riddell et al (2013) *Widening Access to Higher Education: Does Anyone Know What Works?* Edinburgh: Universities Scotland
http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Briefings/Briefing31.pdf

Both the academic literature and the authors' analysis of Scottish universities' widening access outcome agreements suggest that there has been a focus on **outreach activities** with school pupils. Interventions with school pupils are generally multi-faceted, with lectures, visits, seminars, mentoring, and sometimes parental involvement and assistance with applications and interview techniques. Activities targeted at younger pupils (and their parents / carers) aim both to raise aspirations and to provide information which may influence subject choices, to give them the best chance of being appropriately qualified for the course or profession they may want to enter in a few years. Interventions with senior secondary pupils include campus visits; mentoring to keep aspirations high; practical advice on choosing a course and making applications; subject sessions designed to help attainment in 'A' levels/Advanced Highers or to provide a taste of studying for the degree of their choice at university. Pre-entry summer schools are also highly valued, both by pupils from schools and by mature entrants. For mature entrants from HN courses in colleges or Access courses, campus visits and lectures which help students assess how learning at university may differ from their previous experience are seen as highly useful.

Decision-making is, however, a personal process and some **situational or dispositional barriers** (Gorard et al., 2006) may prove insuperable, for example, for individuals whose family commitments limit their available time or geographic mobility, or those who lack the confidence to go straight from school to university.

The possibility of choosing a **college course** and subsequently articulating into university is a strength of the Scottish system. However, as noted by Gallacher (2009; 2014) college courses may also have drawbacks in terms of diverting socially disadvantaged students away from more selective institutions, thus limiting their future choices. Little is known about the reasons why some students with appropriate qualifications choose not to progress to higher education. There is also a need for longer term tracking of pupils who have been engaged in outreach in order to understand fully the impact of those programmes.

As noted by Rees and Taylor (2014), much – although not all – of the relationship between socio-economic background and HE participation is accounted for by **previous educational attainment**, which is the most important factor when all others are taken into account. Widening access measures adopted by universities can make only a marginal difference in terms of equalising rates of HE participation by different social groups. Wyness (2013) places Scotland within an international comparative perspective http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Projects/34ivc_ESRCF_Seminar_Briefing.pdf. Like the rest of the UK, Scotland lies within the middle range of OECD countries in relation to educational inequality. A programme of major investment in early years and school level education, with a particular focus on improving the attainment of lower achieving groups, along with much tighter monitoring, would appear to be the most effective way of increasing HE participation by young people from less advantaged backgrounds.

Reflecting these social inequalities in educational outcomes, the use of **contextual data** in admissions is widely accepted, and there is much useful guidance on using contextual data fairly and transparently (Bridger et al., 2012). There are examples of the use of contextual data to make lower offers to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and some institutions interview students from disadvantaged backgrounds rather than relying solely on their written applications. Summer schools may be used to help students strengthen their applications. The evidence suggests that there is considerable variation in the ways that contextual data are used, and that many higher education institutions are in the process of updating their admissions and tracking procedures.

Universities, particularly pre-92 institutions, appear to have paid less to implementing measures to improve **retention**. Sarah Minty has recently undertaken research at the University of Edinburgh (funded by REACH and the university's Widening Participation team) looking at students' perceptions of the academic and social factors which can contribute to successful outcomes. This qualitative study explores 1st and 3rd year students' experiences of the transition from school to university, and into Honours. In total, 63 students took part in 22 focus groups, which included Scottish and RUK students from both widening participation and traditional backgrounds.

One of the key challenges raised by 1st year students was getting used to independent study. For WP-indicated students, **Advanced Highers** were seen as highly beneficial in helping them adjust to the volume of university-level study, referencing, independent learning, debating and considering the broader conceptual issues relating to their subjects. WP-indicated students without Advanced Highers found the level of independent learning required much more difficult. Many schools and indeed widening participation programmes advise WP-indicated students to obtain more Highers in 6th year rather than study Advanced Highers, because they believe this is what universities are looking for. While this strategy may assist WP students in gaining admission to the university it may be that these students are being disadvantaged once they arrive without Advanced Highers and the skills that these courses encourage.

2. The identification and scaling up of best practice

Research conducted to date has not clearly demonstrated what works in outreach. The multi-faceted nature of most programmes means that it is impossible to establish with certainty which element works best, in terms of influencing positively the behaviour and decision-making of participants. Published evaluations of outreach interventions with school pupils, raising their aspirations and awareness of HE opportunities, are generally positive. The evidence suggests that summer schools, campus visits and contact, including mentoring, with current students are particularly highly valued, and statistics of progression to HE demonstrate that participation in outreach will generally have a positive impact on a school's progression rate.

In order to assess more reliably the effectiveness of widening participation initiatives and outcome agreements, it would be necessary to:

• examine the use of contextual admissions data in a range of institutions and track students who have been admitted on the basis of lower offers;

• explore why offers of places at university are not accepted by some students from poorer backgrounds;

• develop improved systems of evaluating outreach activities and tracking widening access students through their courses. This should include data gathering on part-time and mature students and include inter-sectional analysis (e.g. the progress of boys from working class backgrounds).

3. The data and measures needed to support access and retention

National level data requirements

1. The creation of a pupil level dataset for all pupils (to include pre-school) would allow tracking of pupils from school and to further destinations including college and higher education. Such a measure should capture all 'young' Scottish domiciled students. It would not necessarily capture all mature students immediately but over time should do so.

2. Longitudinal datasets are required based on the national level dataset for analyses of access, retention and labour market outcomes

3. Intersectional analysis is required linking WP measures with the protected characteristics to ensure that no particular groups are doubly disadvantaged; e.g. access for disabled pupils from less advantaged backgrounds. School level data (supplied by Scottish Government from 2013 Pupil data) for pupils with dyslexia show an even representation across SIMD quintiles but 75% of Scottish domiciled first year students with SpLD (dyslexia) come from the 3 most advantaged quintiles (analysis of HESA dataset 2013-14).

4. There is a need for data on access, retention and outcomes for disabled students by type of impairment and widening access measures. Research on deaf students (Fordyce et al., 2014) show a strong association between social class and access for deaf pupils. www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Reports/30ii_NDCS_PostSchTransit_FinalRpt_Summary.pdf.

5. More fine-grained analysis in relation to socioeconomic indicators is required. Currently SIMD and NS-SEC are widely used. These could be used in combination with a measure of parental level of education. Whilst there is a strong association between neighbourhood deprivation and the chances of a young person attending university, some of those living in deprived postcodes are not themselves socially disadvantaged, and many pupils from low income households live in less deprived postcodes. Areas of multiple disadvantage are spread unevenly across Scotland, and do not capture rural poverty very effectively. The use of an additional indicator as suggested above would address some of these problems.

6. Scottish statistics on WA students generally exclude those who normally reside in the rest of the UK. Analysis of border-crossers' social characteristics would provide a more accurate picture of the social profile of some institutions, particularly those with a high level of non-Scottish undergraduate students.

Institutional level data requirements

1. Institutions need to conduct intersectional analysis of the links between recruitment, admissions and equality and diversity monitoring mechanisms. Institutions collect considerably more data than is reported to HESA, but there is a great deal of variation in the internal use of these data. This means that there is little opportunity for cross-

institutional comparison. There is a need for a set of Scottish benchmarks for Scottish institutions.

2. Data should be analysed intersectionally and also in relation to disability by type of impairment.

References

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