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

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Scotland slower than England to develop statutory framework around widening access

- Office for Fair Access established under terms of the Higher Education Act 2004 to regulate widening access in England. Original aims were to ensure that:
  The introduction of higher tuition fees in 2006-07 did not deter people from entering higher education for financial reasons
  Universities and colleges were explicitly committed to increasing participation in higher education among under-represented groups.

- Scotland slower to introduce widening access measures – possibly because of belief that absence of tuition fees would automatically lead to greater participation by under-represented groups.

- From 2012 – 2013, Scottish universities produced widening access agreements for approval by the Scottish Funding Council.

- The Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013provided statutory regulatory framework– institutions could be financially penalised for failing to meet widening access outcome agreement targets.

Government involvement in widening access: ongoing issues

- Universities support principles of widening access, but question detail of government policy in two broad areas :

(1) Statutory enforcement of widening access seen as erosion of university autonomy -
http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Projects/34ii_f_ESRCF_WP5.pdf

(2) Ongoing controversy over how social disadvantage should be measured.
  Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation seen as flawed - relates to the neighbourhood rather than individual – not all individuals living in deprived areas are themselves disadvantaged and many disadvantaged individuals live in more advantaged neighbourhoods.
  SIMD does not capture rural poverty.
  May lead to universities competing with each other for limited group of qualified students from socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

- Government argues that universities must be accountable for public funds.
- Common measure (SIMD) allows comparisons between different universities and over time. Universities may use other measures too – e.g. based on household income, occupation, ethnicity, care status etc.

- Greatest focus on **getting ready** – outreach activity which universities undertake to improve attainment and aspiration, and to help potential students make the 'right' choices.
  Interventions with school pupils multi-faceted & focused on low progression schools.
  Activities targeted at younger pupils aim to raise aspiration and provide information on subject choice in early years of secondary school.
  Activities targeted at older pupils include campus visits, advice on Highers/Advanced Highers.

- Limitations
  Interventions tend to ignore the social structuring of choice –decision-making seen as individualised process
  Initiatives small-scale and lack rigorous evaluation
  Little is known about why pupils with appropriate qualifications choose not to go to university.

Getting in – admission processes & criteria

- Admissions processes & criteria controlled by individual universities.

- Contextualised admissions policies recognise that pupils from low participation schools may obtain better degree outcomes than similarly qualified pupils from high participation schools (Lasselle et al, 2014, 'School grades, school context and university performance' *Oxford Review of Education*).

- All Scottish universities say they use contextualised admissions – but some universities more flexible than others.

- Example – Edinburgh University stipulates that all students must obtain minimum entrance requirements for specific degrees, but typical entry requirements are higher.

- MA Primary Education with Scottish Studies: Minimum entry requirements – SQA Highers ABBB by end of S5 or ABBBB/AABB from S4 – S6. Typical entry requirements – SQA Highers AABB

- Retention measures less developed than recruitment measures. Institutional strategies may include mentoring, regular contact with staff, monitoring of progress through academic tutor scheme, extension of counselling/mental health services, effective learning services etc.

- Should such strategies be targeted at 'widening access student' or available to all students? Danger of stigmatising.

- Little research on staff attitudes, institutional ethos and impact of bursaries & other forms of financial support.

- Initiatives include mentoring, placement opportunities, developing employability skills, careers advice & availability of finance for postgraduate study.

- No major social class differences in chances of obtaining graduate level employment.

- But little is known about labour market implications of specific degrees from different universities and for different groups of students.

- Universities need better systems for tracking career outcomes of widening access students.

Conclusion

- Social class differences in school attainment most salient factor influencing social class differences in university participation.
- However, widening access initiatives are important and we need to know more about their effectiveness.
- Universities focus on recruitment – but admissions and retention measures equally important.
- Ongoing debates: appropriate indicators, government/SFC involvement in regulation and role of colleges.
- Challenges for future: investment priorities across all education sectors; implications of government cap on student numbers for widening access; increase of cross-border student flows on social profiles of most selective institutions.