Widening Access to Higher Education: Scotland in UK Comparative Perspective

Paper prepared for the Scottish Government Widening Access Commission

Sheila Riddell, Lucy Hunter Blackburn and Sarah Minty, Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity, University of Edinburgh.

Introduction

In this paper, we first provide a brief outline of the creation of a mass higher education system across the UK. This is followed by an overview of the impact of political devolution on higher education policy, as a previously unified system of higher education has become increasingly divergent, particularly in relation to tuition fees and student support. We then compare rates of participation across the UK, placing these in European context. This is followed by an exploration of approaches to student funding across the UK, and the relationship between student support and widening access. Subsequently, we examine cross border student flows across the UK, including the social characteristics of leavers and stayers, the institutions to which different groups of students are attracted and the subjects they study. The types of activities which have been used across the UK to promote widening access are outlined and we consider the extent to which there is evidence of their effectiveness. We also draw attention to areas where there may be scope for further development, including contextualised admissions, articulation between college and university, measures to promote retention and, most important of all, narrowing the school-level attainment gap between pupils from different backgrounds.

Widening access to higher education: an overview

Since the Second World War in western democracies, there has been a strong belief that achieving equality of educational opportunity is essential to the maintenance of social and political cohesion (David, 2008; Trench, 2009). More recently, the Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission (2014) has emphasised the role of universities in supporting social mobility. In the post-war years, a relatively low proportion of the age group (about 4 per cent) gained a university place. The Robbins Report, published in 1963, reflected the belief that all who are qualified by ability and attainment should be entitled to a place in higher education, supported by a national system of grants. The recommendations for university expansion were accepted by the UK Government and a wave of new universities was established, leading to an increased participation rate of about 12 per cent by 1980. The next spike in university participation took place in the 1990s following the abolition of the binary divide between the universities and polytechnics/central institutions. By the mid-1990s, about 32 per cent of 17–30 year olds across the UK had experienced some form of

higher education. By 2005, 42 per cent of 17–30 year olds across the UK were entering some form of higher education, although it should be noted that this figure includes those studying sub-degree programmes, only some of whom go on to complete a degree.

Higher education and devolution

Between 1919 and 1989, UK universities were funded directly by the University Grants Committee, which also allocated student numbers. Policy differences began to emerge in different parts of the UK following administrative devolution in 1992, when the funding councils established in each jurisdiction adopted responsibility for resource distribution. During the 1990s, despite emerging differences in the allocation of research funds and the use of colleges as higher education providers, there continued to be strong similarities across the systems, with the Dearing report of 1997 recommending that the rapid expansion of higher education should be funded in part by students themselves, with the state continuing to play a major role in university funding. These reports reflected a view of higher education as both a public and a private good, thus warranting a cost-sharing approach.

As argued by Riddell et al (2015 forthcoming) and Gallacher and Raffe (2012), following political devolution in the late 1990s, far greater differences in approaches to student funding have emerged between the four nations, summarised in Table 1. In Wales and Scotland, these have emerged as flagship policies of the devolved governments, signifying different beliefs about the role of the state in relation to higher education funding. Since 2012, the contrasting arrangements to student funding have been particularly marked. In 2012, variable fees of up to £9,000 with a dedicated income contingent loan were introduced in England following the publication of the Browne review. The devolved nations felt obliged to follow suit, offering different types of financial support to home students. In Wales, variable fees of £9,000 were introduced, but with a dedicated fee grant covering all fee costs over £3,465 for Welsh students studying in any part of the UK, effectively capping fees at that level. At the same time, the maximum grant was raised to £5,161. New loan rules were adopted, as in England. In Scotland, variable fees with no legal maximum were introduced for students from rest of the UK and tuition fee loan was increased to £9,000 for Scottish students studying in the rest of the UK. Free tuition was retained for Scots in Scotland. In Northern Ireland, fees were capped at £3,465 for Northern Irish students in Northern Ireland, and the maximum fee loan increased to £9,000 for Northern Irish students in the rest of UK. Variable fees of up to £9,000 were introduced for students from rest of the UK. Wales was thus unique in providing portable support for its young people, the implications of which are discussed below.

Despite marked divergence in the funding of higher education, all jurisdictions have expressed commitment to the principles of widening access for under-represented groups and each nation has claimed that its approach is designed to support this goal.

Table 1: Student support in the United Kingdom before and after devolution

1945–7	First national legislation empowering local authorities and Ministers to support students in higher education. Greater provision of national and local state scholarships ensured many students received grants and had full fees paid, but no absolute entitlement. Separate primary legislation for Scotland and Northern Ireland, both showing some variation in the detailed approach, including more emphasis in Scotland on studying locally.
1961–2	Following the Anderson Committee report, the introduction of full payment of fees (partially subject to means-testing until 1977) and means-tested grants, as an automatic entitlement on the award of a university place for the first time in any part of the UK. Separate primary legislation, regulations and administrative arrangements for Scotland and for Northern Ireland, but student entitlements essentially the same as for England and Wales.
1990	Introduction of student loans to supplement living cost grants across the UK. 'Mortgage-style' repayment with only link to earnings the ability to seek 12 months' suspension of repayments.
1998–9	Means-tested fee payment of up to £1,000 introduced across the UK. No liability below £23,000; full liability from £30,000. Grants reduced, loan entitlements increased and extended at higher incomes. Loans become 'income-contingent', payable at 9% of all earnings over a threshold, initially £10,000.
1999–00	Grants abolished completely across all of UK and replaced with higher loans.
2000–1	Fee payments abolished for Scottish students studying in Scotland. £1,000 fee continues for all other students in the UK.
2001–2	Introduction in Scotland of post-graduation payment (the 'graduate endowment') of £2,000, supported by income-contingent loan. National means-tested grants reintroduced for young Scottish students, up to £2,000. Institutionally-administered grants introduced for Scottish mature students.
2002–3	In Wales and Northern Ireland, means-tested grants re-introduced (for young and mature students) of up to £1,500.
2004–5	In England, means-tested grants re-introduced (for young and mature students) of up to £1,000.
2006–7	In England and Northern Ireland, variable fees of up to £3,000 introduced, with dedicated income-contingent fee loan. Grant maximum increased to £2,765. No change to fee arrangements in Wales. Income-contingent fee loan made available for Scottish and Welsh students studying in rest of UK. Annual fee payable by students from rest of UK in Scotland increased to £1,700 (£2,700 for medicine).
2007–8	Graduate endowment abolished in Scotland. In Wales, £3,000 fee introduced backed by income contingent loan, but with an additional non-means-tested grant towards fees of £1,845 to all Welsh students studying in Wales, reducing de facto fee liability. Grants increased to a maximum of £2,700.
2010–1	Fee grant abolished in Wales and means-tested maintenance grant increased to £5,000. National means tested grant re-introduced in Scotland for mature students, up to £1,000.
2012–3	In England, variable fees of up £9,000 introduced, as before with dedicated income-contingent loan. Loan repayment threshold increased to £21,000 and loan interest rates increased. Grants increased to £3,250. In Wales, variable fees of £9,000 also introduced, but with a dedicated fee grant covering all fee costs over £3,465 for Welsh students studying in any part of the UK, effectively capping fees at that level. Maximum grant raised to £5,161. New loan rules adopted, as for England. In Scotland, variable fees with no legal maximum introduced for students from rest of the UK; loan increased to £9,000 for Scottish students in rest of UK; free tuition retained for Scots in Scotland. In Northern Ireland, fees capped at £3,465 for Northern Irish students in Northern Ireland, maximum fee loan increased to £9,000 for NI students in rest of UK. Variable fees of up to £9,000 introduced for students from rest of the UK.
2013–4	Maximum grant for young students reduced from £2,640 to £1,750 in Scotland and mature student grant reduced to £750 and income threshold for grant reduced; tapered system replaced with steps. Minimum loan increased from £940 to £4,500.

Rates of participation in Wales, the rest of the UK and Europe

In this section, we briefly summarise data on rates of university participation by jurisdiction. As noted by Iannelli (2011), rising higher education entry rates are likely to promote participation by students from poorer backgrounds, particularly when there is already very high participation by young people from middle class backgrounds.

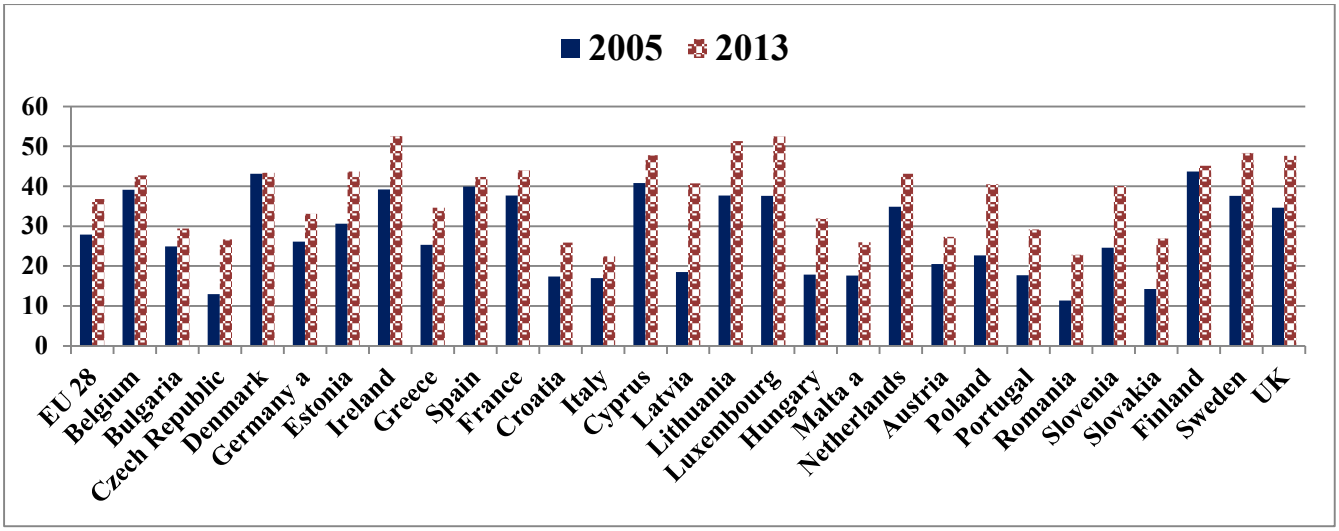
Northern Ireland has the highest 18 year old university entry rate (36.2%), followed by England (30.3%), Wales (26.6%) and Scotland (24.2%). It should be noted that a high proportion of Scottish young people from deprived areas undertake higher national courses in colleges before transferring to university for the final two years of a degree, so the relatively low university entry rate in this jurisdiction does not convey the full picture of higher education participation. Between 2010 and 2013, entry rates increased in all countries apart from Scotland, with a particularly marked growth in Northern Ireland. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland (but not Scotland), there was a slight fall in participation in 2012 following the introduction of higher fees, followed by an increase in 2013. The cap on student numbers in England will be lifted in 2016, and it will be interesting to see whether this further boosts participation in this jurisdiction.

Table 2: Number of acceptances and entry rates of 18 year olds to end of cycle, by country of domicile. (Source: Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2014.)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2013 v 2010
England					
Acceptances	359,005	367,150	342,755	367,900	2.48%
18 year-old entry rate	27.4%	29.4%	28.7%	30.3%	
Scotland					
Acceptances	32,250	30,800	30,900	31,495	-2.34%
18 year-old entry rate	24%	22.9%	23.8%	24.2%	
Wales					
Acceptances	18,670	18,325	19,305	19,665	5.33%
18 year-old entry rate	24.8%	24.9%	26.2%	26.6%	
Northern Ireland					
Acceptances	13,505	13,790	13,285	14,555	7.77%
18 year-old entry rate	33.7%	34.1%	33.7%	36.2%	

As part of the Bologna process, the EU is committed to harmonising higher education systems across Europe, ensuring that at least 40% of the population aged 30–34 in EU member states has tertiary level qualifications. The EU is also encouraging member states to promote widening access measures and student mobility. As shown in the figure below, the UK has already overtaken the 40% target. However, some countries like Germany appear to have low participation rates because only university degree courses are counted, whereas in other countries higher level vocational courses have tertiary status.

Figure 1: Changes in the proportion of 30–34 year olds with tertiary education in EU28 countries between 2005 and 2013. (Source: Eurostat 2014.)



Note: a) break in data series in 2005

University participation and social class background

Despite the creation of a mass higher education system, and an increase in the proportion of university students from disadvantaged backgrounds, there are still very marked differences in participation by different social groups. In Scotland, 55% of independent school entrants attend an ancient university, compared with 25% of state school entrants. By way of contrast, in Wales just over 40% of university entrants from the independent school sector attend a Russell Group university, compared with 15% of state school entrants. Differences in institution attended by social class background are illustrated below, with students educated in the independent sector much more likely to gain a place in a Russell Group University compared with state school students, who are more likely to attend a post-92 institution.

Figure 2: University attended by student background: Scotland

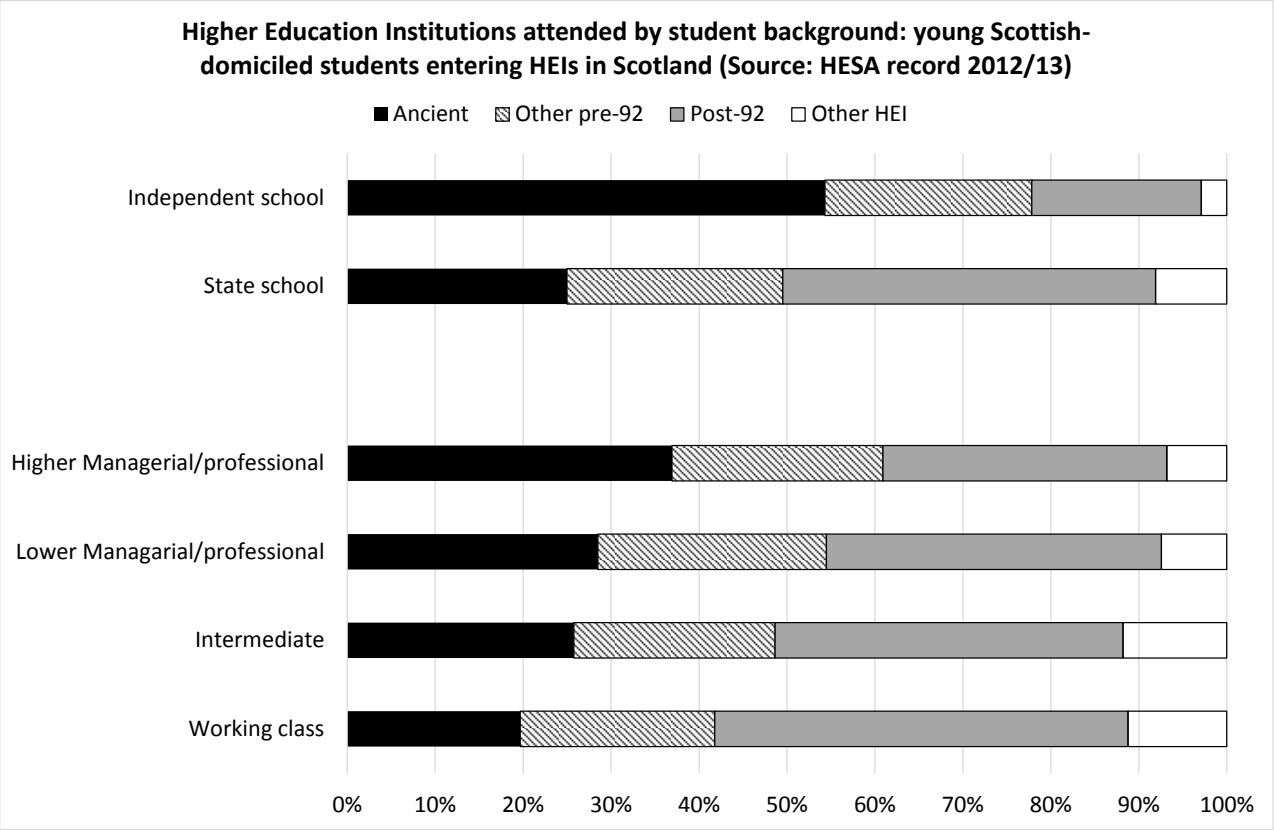


Figure 3: University attended by student background: Wales

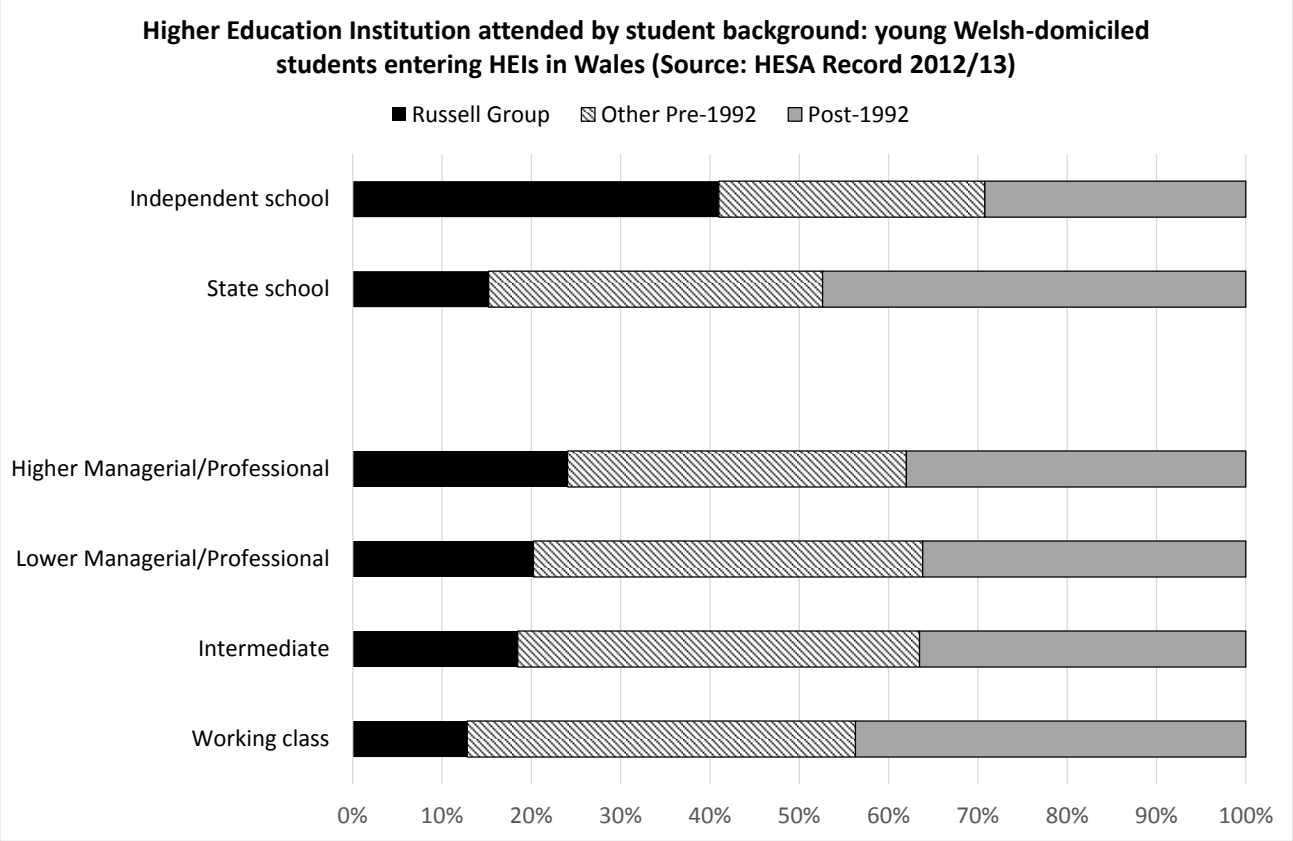
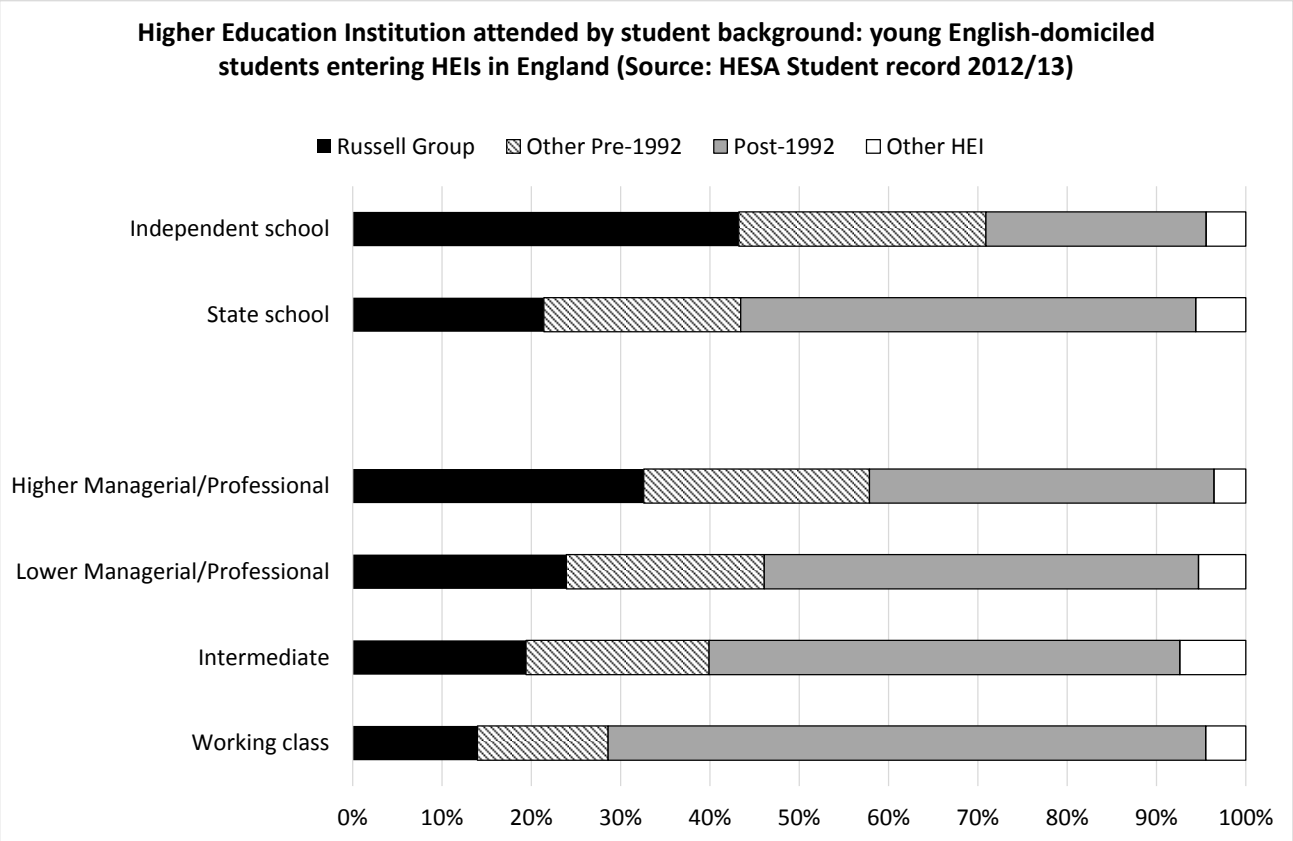


Figure 4: University attended by student background: England



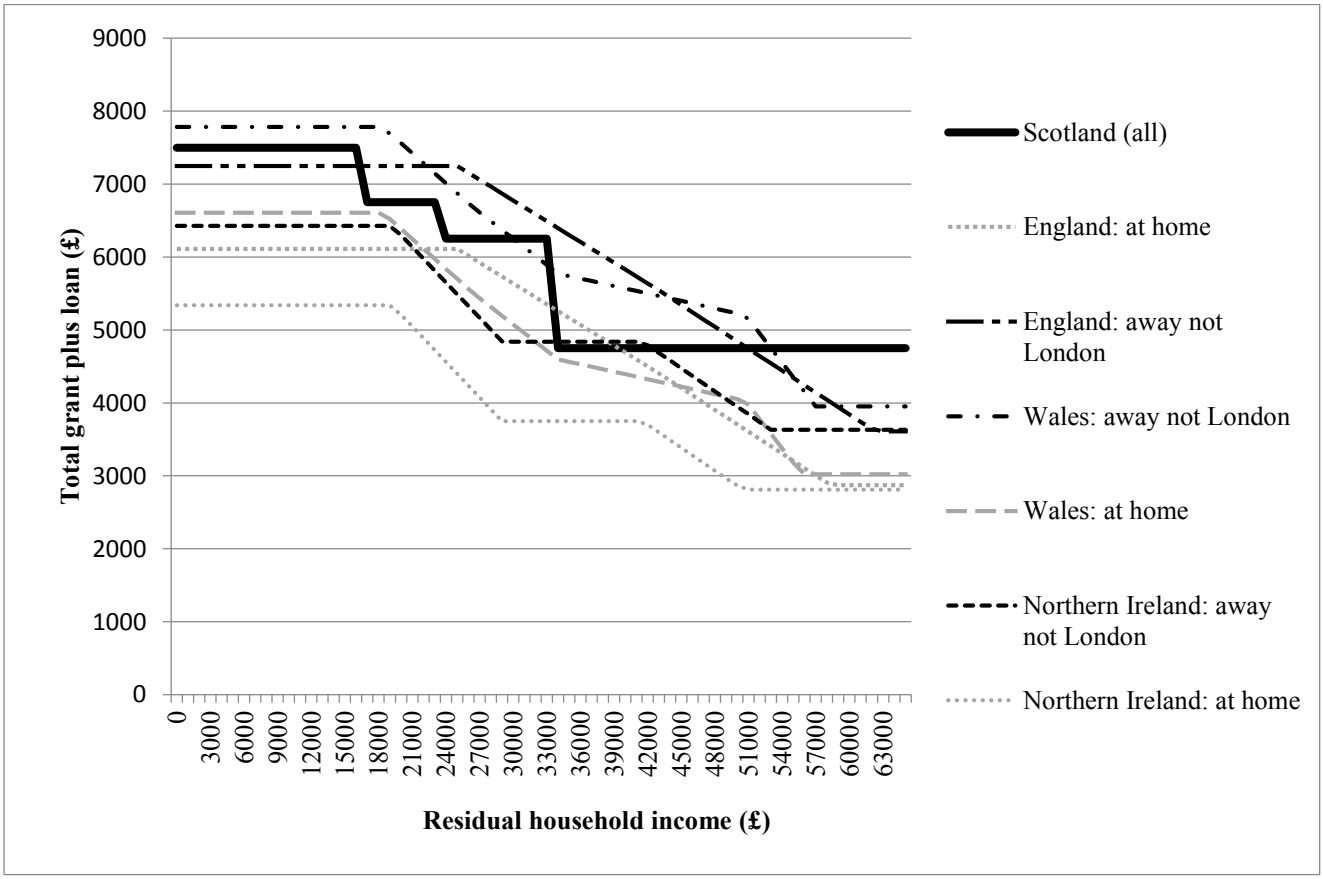
Student funding in Scotland and the rest of the UK: links with widening access

The perceived and actual cost of higher education is likely to have an impact on higher education participation rates, particularly in relation to students from less advantaged social backgrounds. However, as shown in table 2, the negative impact of the trebling of tuition fees for English students in 2012 was offset by the availability of income contingent low interest loans and non-repayable grants. Of the four home nations, despite the absence of tuition fees, only Scotland experienced a drop in the number of university entrants between 2010 and 2013, due to a number of factors including the decline in the 18 year old population, the tight control of university numbers by the Scottish Government and encouragement of students from non-traditional backgrounds to undertake higher education at college rather than university. Based on interviews with young people in Scotland and the north of England, Minty (2015, forthcoming) found that young people in England were resigned to incurring debt, whilst young people in Scotland were highly debt averse. In both jurisdictions, young people from less advantaged backgrounds were more likely to apply to a university close to home in order to avoid debt. Those from more affluent backgrounds were more likely to apply academic criteria to their choice of institution and subject, regarding this an investment in their future even if it resulted in higher debt.

Irrespective of students' perceptions, Lucy Hunter Blackburn (2014) argues that there are important social justice issues embedded in the social distribution of debt which students will carry forward into later life. She has analysed the distribution of tuition fee and living cost debt by jurisdiction and income group http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Projects/34ii_d_ESRCF_WP3.pdf. Whilst there has been a major focus on tuition fees, far less attention has been paid to debt incurred to cover living

costs. The figure below compares spending power for students across the UK, excluding London. In all parts of the UK, the majority of full-time undergraduate students live away from the parental home. For this group, which faces the highest living costs, the greatest spending power is provided by the English or the Welsh systems. Of the UK countries, Scotland offers the most generous support for those with household income above £54,000. Scotland is also unique in offering the same level of support to those living at home or away.

Figure 5: State support for student spending power across the UK 2014–5 (Source: Relevant government student finance calculators. Detailed calculations by Lucy Hunter Blackburn.)



The table below shows the level of non-repayable student grant in the four nations, which is most generous for students from low income households in Wales.

Table 3: Student grant in the UK in 2014–15. (Source: Relevant government student finance calculators)

Non-repayable means-tested grant for full-time undergraduate students in the UK: 2014-15		**Maximum grant**	**Available up to residual household income**	**Thereafter**
Domicile	***Category***	***£***	***£***	
England	All	3,387	25,000	Tapers to £0 at £42,621
Northern Ireland	All	3,475	19,203	Tapers to £0 at £41,065
Scotland	Young	1,750	16,999	£1,000 at incomes up to £23,999; £500 at incomes

Non-repayable means-tested grant for full-time undergraduate students in the UK: 2014-15		Maximum grant	Available up to residual household income	Thereafter
Domicile	***Category***	***£***	***£***	
				up to £33,999; £0 at higher incomes
	Independent (mature)	750	16,999	£0 at incomes over £16,999
Wales	All	5,161	18,370	Tapers to £0 at £50,020

Hunter Blackburn (2015b) also estimated the expected final debt for the commonest length degree, by country of residence and place of study in the UK, using 2014–15 figures. The comparison takes into account that a lower interest rate applies in Scotland and Northern Ireland than in England and Wales while students study. Fee loans for English students and Scottish and Northern Irish border crossers are assumed to be £9,000, which will tend to produce slight over-estimates: the provisional average fee loan reported by the Student Loans Company for English-domiciled students under the new arrangements in 2014–15 was £8,100 (Student Loan Company, 2014: Table 4(c)(i)). A flat-rate write-off of £1,500 of debt available to most Welsh-domiciled students on commencing repayment is taken into account.

In 2014–15, the comparison shows that for those studying the commonest form of honours degree in their home nation there is a division between:

1 a lower debt group covering students from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, where expected debt falls roughly in a range from £20,000 to £30,000. The figures fall within near-identical upper and lower limits. The only difference is that in Scotland debt goes from high to low as income rises, while in the other two nations the opposite happens. Scotland as a result has relatively high figures among the devolved nations for low-income degree students, particularly mature students; and
2 a higher debt group covering English students, where debt falls roughly within a range from £40,000 to £50,000.

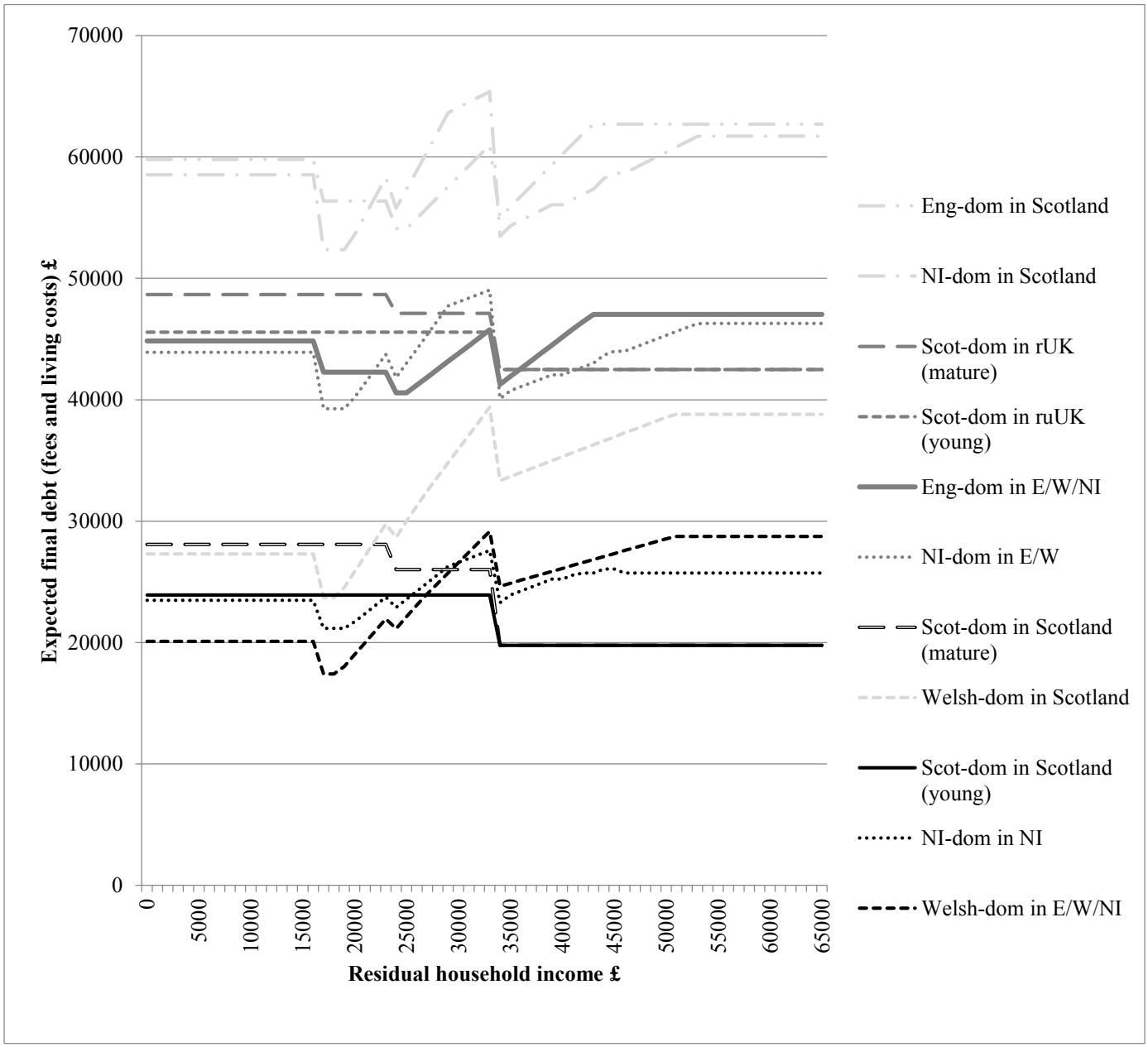
Cross-border Welsh students also fall into the low debt group, except for those from middle-to-high incomes who study for an additional year in Scotland: those students fall somewhere in between the two. Scottish and Northern Irish border crossers fall into the higher debt group. Scottish students in the rest of the UK, particularly mature students, are expected to have the highest annual borrowing of any group, but gain from studying for three years rather than four. English and Northern Irish students in Scotland face the highest final debt of all, as they are liable for full fees for four years. The comparison with Wales brings out that the higher debt for cross-border students from Scotland and Northern Ireland results from policy choice.

It would appear that no-fee systems do not automatically generate the least debt for all students. For Welsh students, and Northern Irish students who study in Northern Ireland, higher debt for fees than in Scotland can be compensated for by lower borrowing for living costs. At the lowest incomes, standard honours degree students from Wales are expected to emerge with the least debt. Shorter degrees help, but high grant, combined with debt write-off, is the more critical

difference. Even on courses of equal length many low-income students from Wales are still expected to have less debt (Hunter Blackburn, 2015 forthcoming).

Moreover, Wales stands out as the only country which seeks to limit debt for all its students, at all incomes, wherever they study. England is the only one which offers its students no possibility of lower debt, beyond what can be achieved through lower-fee courses, fee waivers or institutional bursaries. **Higher-income Scots studying in Scotland emerge as the group expected to borrow least, relative to all other UK students, underlining the non-redistributive nature of the Scottish system.**

Figure 6: Expected final debt for commonest length degree, by domicile and place of study in the UK estimated assuming Scottish spending levels, using 2014–15 figures (Source: Relevant government student finance calculators. Detailed calculations by Lucy Hunter Blackburn.)



Border crossers: social characteristics, institutions attended and subjects studied

It is important to examine the impact of fees regimes on border-crossing, since, as explained below, particularly in Scotland and England, border crossers are significantly more socially advantaged than those who remain in their home country to study. Border crossers are also concentrated in institutions which are already relatively socially selective, although they do not appear in Scottish Funding Council statistics which focus on Scottish-domiciled students. Table 4, drawing on analysis by Croxford and Raffe (2014), shows a small decline in cross-border flows across the UK between 1996 and 2012 http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Projects/34ii_d_ESRCF_WP3.pdf.

Between 2010 and 2012, there was a very small decrease in Scottish border crossers (from 6% to 5% of all Scottish students), whilst in 1996 the figure was 8%. By comparison, over the same period, the proportion of Welsh students studying in England increased from 34 to 42%, a change attributed to the portable tuition fee grant. However, in 1996 an even higher proportion of Welsh students left their home country. There were also small changes in the proportion of 'movers in' to each country over the same period. Croxford and Raffe suggest that whilst the numbers were not static, the general pattern remained similar, albeit with less outward movement from every part of the UK. They conclude that 'any impacts of the 2012 fee changes we have been able to detect have been modest and often uncertain'.

Table 4: Movers-out as percentage of young full-time entrants by home country of domicile, and movers-in as percentage of young full-time entrants by home country of institution, by year of entry (Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency Student Record 2012/13. Copyright Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited 2013.)

	1996	2004	2010	2011	2012
Movers-out, by country of domicile					
England	6	5	4	4	5
Scotland	8	7	6	6	5
Wales	48	39	34	36	42
Northern Ireland	42	29	32	35	31
Movers-in, by location of higher education institution					
England	5	4	3	3	4
Scotland	21	17	14	14	17
Wales	55	46	47	51	49
Northern Ireland	2	1	2	3	3

Susan Whittaker (2014) conducted a literature review of the factors affecting young people's decision to study within or outside their home country http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Projects/34ii_c_ESRCF_WP2.pdf. She found that the cost of studying was only one of a range of factors influencing student choice, particularly in the UK where university is free at the point of delivery. Equally important factors were family traditions (first generation university students were more likely to study in their home country and live at home) and geographical proximity to different institutions.

Analysis by Croxford and Raffe (2014) and Whittaker et al. (2015 forthcoming) shows that young people from professional/managerial backgrounds and those from independent schools are more

likely to study outside their home country and attend a Russell Group university than others. However, almost half of students (49%) of students moving out of Wales attended a post-92 university (see table 5)

Table 5: Institution type of young full-time stayers and movers by country of domicile. (Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency Student Record 2012/13).

Domicile	Stayer/mover	Russell Group	Other Pre-1992	Post 1992	Other higher education institution	n=100%
England	Stayed in England	20	20	54	6	231292
	Stayed within region	12	17	65	7	103437
	Moved between regions	27	22	46	6	127544
	Moved out of England	39	42	18	1	11678
	to Wales	*32*	*46*	*22*	*0*	*8098*
	to Scotland	*52 (see note)*	*36*	*8*	*4*	*3396*
Scotland	Stayed in Scotland	19	34	40	8	21323
	Moved out of Scotland	38	21	32	9	1082
Wales	Stayed in Wales	17	41	42	0	8484
	Moved out of Wales	24	22	49	6	6099
Northern Ireland	Stayed in N I	45	49	0	6	7260
	Moved out of N I	25	22	49	4	3293
	to England	*26*	*12*	*57*	*5*	*2392*
	to Scotland	*22 (see note)*	*50*	*27*	*1*	*782*

Note: The four 'ancient' (pre-1600) Scottish universities accounted for 72% of English movers and 31% of Northern Irish movers.

In the following section, we summarise evidence on the effectiveness of widening access initiatives.

Approaches to and effectiveness of widening access initiatives

Riddell et al. (2013) were commissioned by Universities Scotland to review the UK literature on the effectiveness of widening access initiatives and analyse the first round of Scottish widening outcome agreements. This section draws on this review in which three central points were highlighted:

- The range of under-represented groups is wider than the current focus on 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 deprived postcode (not only the most deprived); students in receipt of EMA (Scotland only); 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. The inter-section of variables is also important – for example, boys from working class backgrounds and boys

of Afro-Caribbean heritage are particularly under-represented in higher education (Hills et al., 2010).

- Across the UK the widening access activities and the performance indicators used in fee plans, outcome agreement and widening access strategies have focused on measures of neighbourhood deprivation. Whilst there is a strong association between neighbourhood derivation and low rates of university participation, not everyone who lives in a deprived area is socially and economically disadvantaged, and many of those who lack social and economic resources live in less deprived neighbourhoods. This point is reinforced by Evans (2014) and Croxford (2014).
- Policy reasons for promoting wider access have varied over the years, but whether those reasons are based on the desire for social justice, or on the desire to meet the needs of employers and the UK economy for well-qualified, skilled graduates, or on the desire to promote social mobility, there is a broad consensus on the need to give everyone with the potential to succeed the opportunity to enter higher education.

Milburn (2012) divided widening access measures into three categories: helping students get in to university (getting ready); helping students navigate the admissions process (getting in); and helping students in the early stages of their career (getting on). These are used in the following summary.

Getting ready

Milburn describes 'getting ready' as '*the outreach activity which universities undertake to improve attainment and aspiration, and to help potential students make the right choices*' (Milburn, 2012, p.3). Table 6 presents an outline summary of the types of interventions for which claims of success in raising prospective undergraduates' aspirations, awareness of the opportunities open to them, and/or attainment have been made.

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 give 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.

Table 6: Successful interventions: 'Getting ready'

Type of intervention	Target group
Talks in low progression schools to raise awareness and aspirations; Involvement of students as mentors and role models in community activities	Pupils in early years of secondary school, or even in primary schools

Type of intervention	Target group
Talks about subject choices, in school or on campus; Campus visits, involving current students	Pupils making subject choices
Campus visits; Discussion of options; taught subject sessions & lectures; Talks on budgeting and availability of bursaries; Guidance on applications and interviews; Mentoring from current students; Summer schools	Pupils about to make progression decisions
Talks and discussion groups with parents/carers	Parents/ carers, especially those with no prior HE experience
Talks in colleges, and on university campus; Summer schools; Opportunities for articulating students to form networks and use the university facilities before formal entry	Students moving from college to HE
Pre-entry summer schools	Mature entrants from Access courses; pupils from under-represented groups about to start university courses

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 (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.

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, although this did not save the *Aimhigher* programme in England from being closed down. 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.

During the course of interviews with policy makers by Riddell et al. (2013), concerns emerged about the impact of setting targets, with possible penalties on institutions for failure to meet them. Universities were enthusiastic about collaborative ventures with schools, colleges and partner HEIs to encourage disadvantaged pupils to consider moving into higher education. There were concerns that targets in outcome agreements risked leading universities to compete for the same students.

Getting in

Milburn's definition of 'getting in' is *'the admission processes and criteria which universities use'* (Milburn, 2012, p.3).

The need for 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.

There was evidence that universities were unhappy about the use of neighbourhood deprivation as the central means of assessing progress in widening participation, given the uneven spread of high deprivation postcodes throughout the UK and the fact that many disadvantaged pupils do not live in the most deprived areas. It was suggested that measures of neighbourhood deprivation should be used in conjunction with other indicators such as NS-SEC and low progression schools. The intersection of socio-economic status with other variables, such as gender, disability and ethnicity should also be monitored over time. Further research is needed into the reasons why some offers, both for entry into first year of undergraduate courses and for articulation from HN courses in colleges, are not taken up. Tracking the numbers and progress of those who enter higher education is important, but so too is understanding why some prospective students who have been offered places decide not to proceed.

Staying in

Milburn defines 'staying in' as '*the work of student services and bursaries in improving rates of retention at university*' (Milburn, 2012, p.3).

Consideration of research on retention suggests that actions need to be embedded in the students' experience, in the content and assessment of their coursework and in the attitudes and behaviour of the teaching staff as well as student support staff. Table 7 gives examples of some of the institutional strategies noted in the literature.

Table 7: Measures to encourage retention

Interventions with disadvantaged groups (in some cases, with all students)
Pre-entry courses Induction programmes, opportunities for students to build networks Mentoring Regular contact with staff First assignment support scheme Curriculum development, active learning and teaching strategies, formative assessment, flexible learning Monitoring of progress through academic tutor system Intensifying support at key points - first assignment, transition from year 1 to year 2 Academic advisor posts in faculties Extension of counselling services, mental health services Availability of bursaries and other financial support
Other organisational measures
Monitoring of student attendance and performance Analysis of patterns of retention Analysis of early leavers reasons for leaving Staff development on good practice to encourage retention

All of these have been shown to have a positive impact on retention, and the literature contains many ideas and case studies. There are questions about whether interventions to improve retention should be targeted specifically at those identified at the start of their course as coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, or at the whole student body, on the grounds that overtly special treatment of the disadvantaged group may hinder their social and academic integration into the full cohort. Universities appear to have devoted greater resources to initiatives aimed at recruitment than retention.

Getting on

Milburn defines the final stage in the student life-cycle as 'getting on': '*the steps which universities take to help students succeed in their chosen career after graduation*' (Milburn, 2012, p.3).

For some students who have a clear professional destination, such as those wishing to study Medicine or Law, support may start in outreach activities while they are still at school, for example, through the *Pathways to the Professions* initiative. Mentoring, placement opportunities, emphasis throughout courses on developing employability skills, careers advice and availability of finance for postgraduate study are all important in this context, although the literature suggests that such help is not specifically targeted at students who have begun their courses as members of under-represented groups. Where research tracking such graduates into the workplace is available, the findings suggest that there are no dramatic differences between outcomes for the under-represented groups and for other graduates. However, universities need to develop better systems for tracking the career destinations of widening access students, and whether they achieve the career roles to which they were encouraged to aspire.

The role of colleges in widening access

Whilst there are many similarities in approaches to widening access across the UK, a central difference between Scotland and Northern Ireland on the one hand and Wales and England on the other is the greater role assigned to colleges. In 2009–10, just over 18 per cent of higher education students in Scotland and Northern Ireland were studying sub-degree programmes at a college, compared with 5 per cent in England and 1 per cent in Wales (Bruce, 2012). It is worth noting that the Welsh Government is attempting to promote the role of colleges in widening access (Higher Education Funding Council Wales, 2014). Colleges have traditionally been effective in recruiting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and offering more flexible routes, including articulation into the last two years of a university degree programme (Gallacher, 2009). Following the allocation of additional funds by the Scottish Government, there has been an increase in the number of students moving from college into the last two years of a university programme, increasing from 3,019 in 2011–12 to 3,469 in 2012–13 (Universities Scotland, 2014).

Although colleges have succeeded in recruiting young people from low-income backgrounds, Gallacher (2014) has drawn attention to the downsides of such provision. As is the case in the US community college system, there is a danger that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are diverted into low-status programmes which disadvantage them in the labour market. Articulation routes are typically from college to post-92 institutions, limiting access to high-status courses and routes into certain professions such as law and medicine. In addition, the type of teaching and learning which takes place in some college sub-degree programmes is based on demonstrating practical skills, and students may be ill-equipped to complete the last two years of a university degree. In Scotland, higher education statistics often include students on degree and sub-degree programmes and there is a hidden assumption of parity between such programmes. Whilst different types of higher education may be of value to participants, programmes do not provide equal labour market returns and there is a danger that these differences are glossed over.

School attainment

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. Whilst the existence of different education systems across the UK makes comparison difficult, Wyness (2013) has attempted to draw some contrasts.
http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Projects/34ivc_ESRCF_Seminar_Briefing.pdf - see table 8 below. Widening access measures adopted by universities can make only a marginal difference in terms of equalising rates of HE participation by different social groups. A programme of major investment in early years and school level education, with a particular focus on improving the attainment of lower achieving groups, would appear to be the most effective way of increasing HE participation by young people from less advantaged backgrounds.

Table 8: Indicators of educational attainment in the home nations

Measure	Source	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Five or more GCSEs A*-C or equivalent	GCSE exams or equivalent, 2010/11	80.5	67.3	78.8	75.3
A*-C GCSE in Maths	GCSE exams or equivalent, 2006/07	54.6	50.0	48.3	54.7
A*-C GCSE in English	GCSE exams or equivalent, 2006/07	60.2	58.9	69.8	62.9
Percentage of 17-18 year olds at school or in further and higher education	Labour Force Survey	72		60	
Percentage of 17-24 year olds with no qualifications	Labour Force Survey, 2009	7.0	7.8	7.4	12.7
Percentage of 18 year olds with two or more A-levels	A-level results, 2011/12; Higher results 2011/12	51.8	27.1	36.8	50.2

Conclusion

This paper has argued that social inequalities in access to university are entrenched across Scotland and the rest of the UK. Scotland's policy of abolishing tuition fees has not made a perceptible difference to widening access – indeed, the latest HESA statistics show that Scottish universities have a lower proportion of students from social classes 4, 5, 6 and 7 than their English counterparts. In assessing the most effective means of widening access, it is necessary to pay attention not only to the role of universities, but also to that of schools and colleges. The Scottish Government has committed itself to eliminating the association between social class background and both school attainment and university participation. This is an extremely ambitious goal and will probably require redistribution of funding across different education sectors, with a higher proportion of overall spend being directed at schools and colleges.

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