How Fair is Access to Scottish Higher Education – and how fair is it perceived to be?

Presentation to seminar on widening access to Scottish higher education
University of Edinburgh, 1st December 2015

Sheila Riddell,

Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity,

University of Edinburgh

Central question raises a large number of additional questions:

- **How is social justice or fairness understood in relation to Scottish higher education?**

- **What are the social characteristics of students in Scottish higher education and in different types of institution?**

- **How are financial resources distributed across different education sectors, and what can we learn from these priorities?**

- **Does 'free' undergraduate tuition automatically produce a 'fairer' system?**

- **What measures might be needed to promote fairer access?**

Research methods

ESRC project Higher Education in Scotland, the Devolution Settlement and the Referendum on Independence

- **Review of policy and administrative data**

- **Analysis of HESA data to investigate social characteristics of HE students across UK (social class, gender & ethnicity) and the nature of cross-border student flows**

- **Interviews with young people in schools to investigate HE ambitions, attitudes to student finance and widening access (c.100 interviews)**

- **Interviews with key informants in Scotland, England, rest of the UK and internationally (c. 50 Scottish interviews)**

- **Knowledge exchange activities, including seminar series, production of a film and teaching materials**

What is meant by social justice in the context of higher education? Scottish policy documents rarely define

- Social justice refers to beliefs about 'the way in which the good and bad things in life should be distributed among members of a society'.

- Recent writing on social justice identifies (at least) three inter-connected domains – (re)distribution (of economic and social resources), recognition (accordance of respect to different groups) and representation (participation in social institutions and governance regimes)

- All three domains important in HE – but what criteria should be used to judge degrees of fairness?

- Social democratic states often focus on **equal opportunities** – different outcomes are tolerated because everyone has (ostensibly) the same initial chance to succeed.

- **Equal outcomes** approaches more unusual. Phillips suggests that unequal group outcomes should be regarded as evidence of systemic injustice.
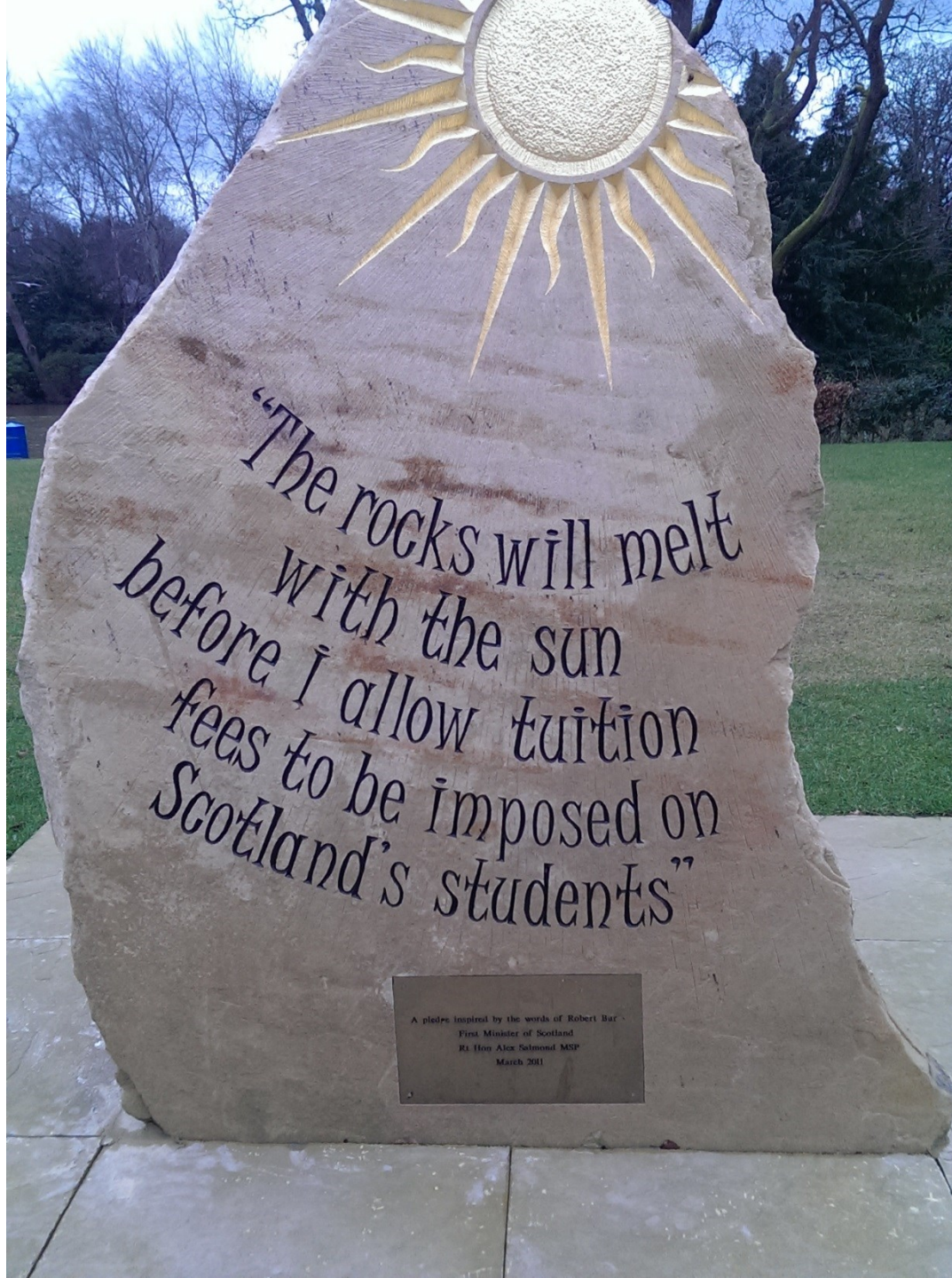
'Free' university tuition fee became flagship policy of SNP Government – particularly during referendum campaign of 2013/14.

Independence White Paper argued that Scottish HE based on 'ability to learn, rather than ability to pay' – in contrast with marketised English system.

November 2014 - former First Minister Alex Salmond placed stone at Heriot Watt University engraved with the following words:

'The rocks will melt with the sun before I allow tuition fees to be imposed on   Scotland's students'

"The rocks will melt
with the sun
before I allow tuition
fees to be imposed on
Scotland's students"

A pledge inspired by the words of Robert Bur
First Minister of Scotland
Rt Hon Alex Salmond MSP
March 2011

Has fairness been delivered?

Between 2010 and 2013, 18 year old university entry rate increased in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but fell in Scotland

	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%	

Scotland has lowest rate of university participation by students from poorest neighbourhoods – over-represented in sub-degree programmes in college sector. Diversion or inclusion?
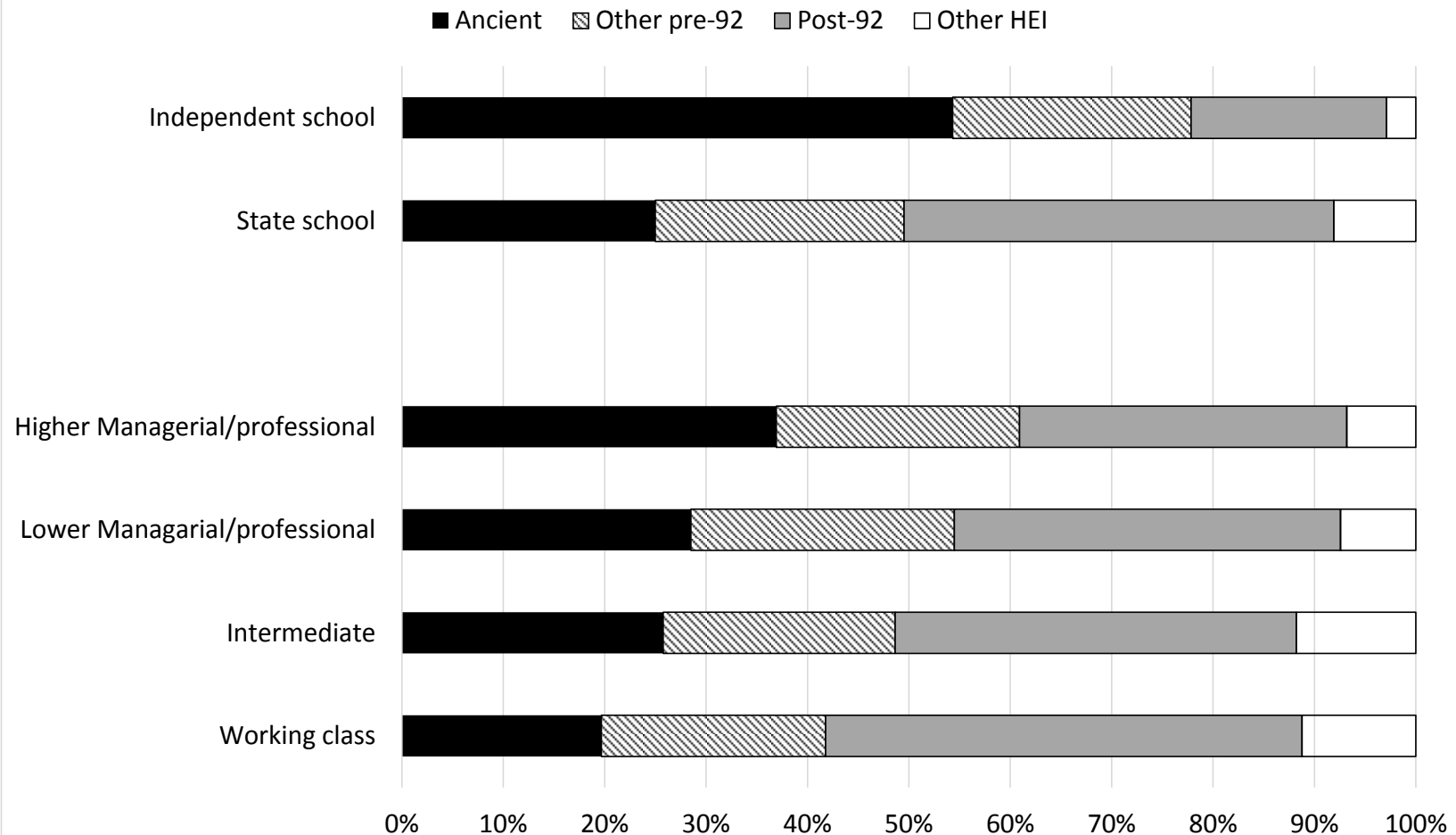

University entry rates for the poorest fifth of 18-year-olds
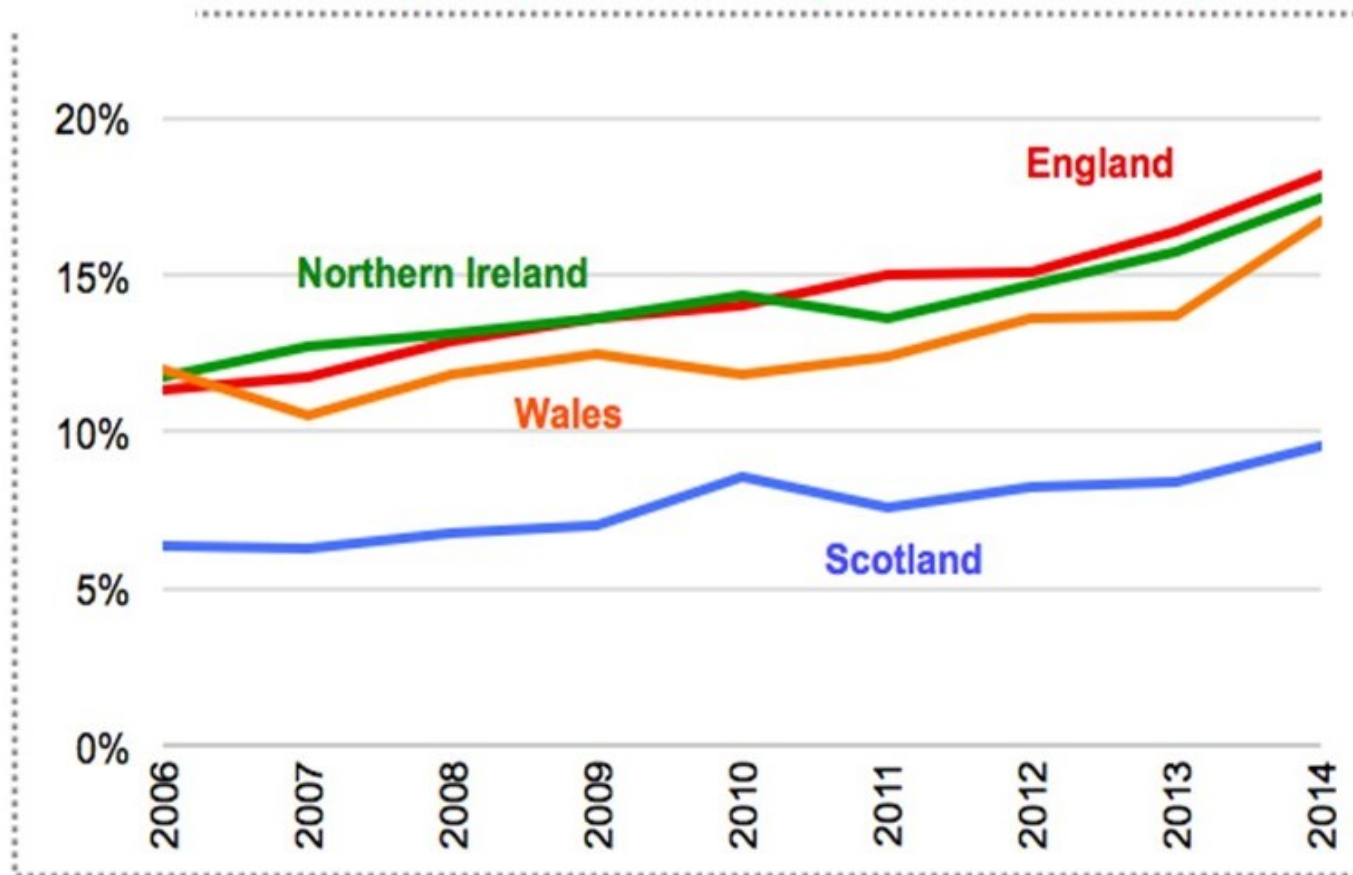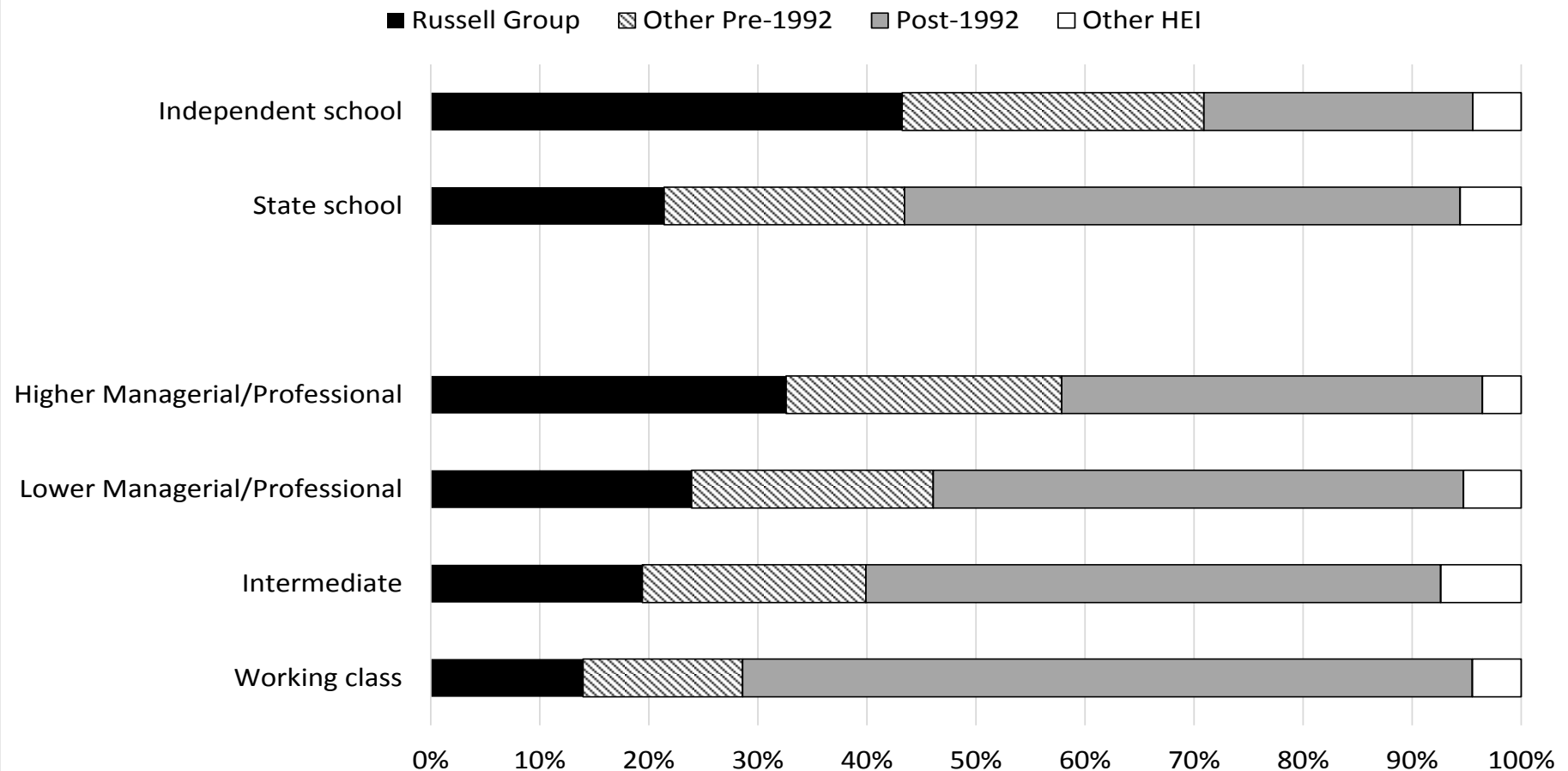
Source: UCAS

Inequality in participation by different social groups in Scotland

Higher Education Institutions attended by student background: young Scottish-domiciled students entering HEIs in Scotland (Source: HESA record 2012/13)

Legend: ■ Ancient ▨ Other pre-92 ▤ Post-92 □ Other HEI
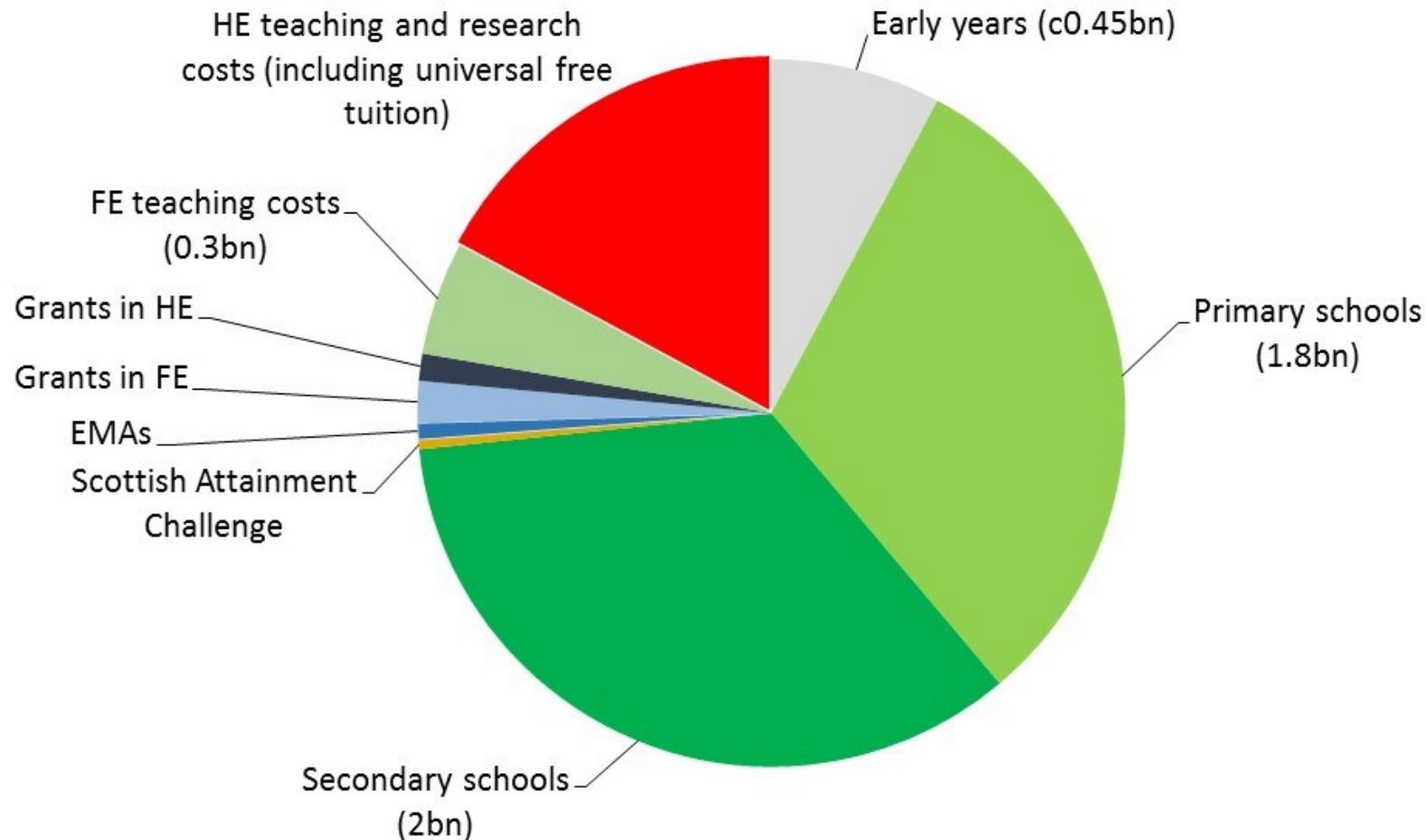
....and in England

Higher Education Institution attended by student background: young English-domiciled students entering HEIs in England (Source: HESA Student record 2012/13)

Legend: ■ Russell Group ▨ Other Pre-1992 ▧ Post-1992 □ Other HEI

Categories (top to bottom): Independent school, State school, Higher Managerial/Professional, Lower Managerial/Professional, Intermediate, Working class

X-axis: 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Distribution of Scottish Government education budget 2012-13

Percentage of school leavers by attainment at SCQF level 4 to 6 or better, by SIMD, 2013/14
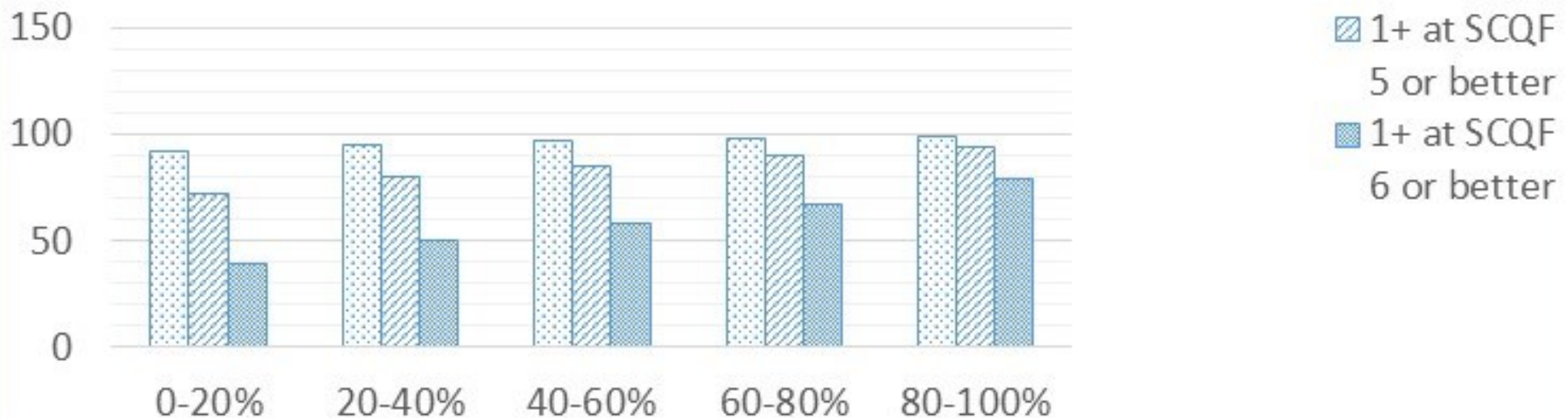
Legend:
- 1+ at SCQF 4 or better
- 1+ at SCQF 5 or better
- 1+ at SCQF 6 or better

Categories: 0-20%, 20-40%, 40-60%, 60-80%, 80-100%

'[The policy of free undergraduate tuition] is sustainable so long as the Government is prepared to make difficult decisions. And at the end of the day this is very simply just an allocation of resource. And the Scottish Government at the moment is prepared to say that it wishes to fund higher education as a free good. And therefore not to fund other things. This is entirely sustainable as long as the Scottish Government maintains a commitment that it wishes to prioritise higher education for the benefit of the Scottish economy'.

'I think in the long term [free tuition] will promote access. It will promote more inclusivity and fairness. …. I think in the long run what we're doing in Scotland is sustainable and what they're doing in England isn't'.

Also the view of the UCU, Unison and the NUS

We largely support the, inverted commas, "free" tuition at the higher education level. We think that that is the right approach although we do recognise it hasn't achieved what we'd like to achieve which is better access for those from disadvantaged communities to university. So we don't think it's a panacea or a silver bullet to that issue. We think we have to do much more in that area, but it is nonetheless right in our view that access to education is free at the point of use. (Unison Scotland official)

[The rhetoric was that] the stones would melt in the sun in Sauchiehall Street before they would impose fees. And that was a bit of rhetoric which I think was designed for public consumption which is, 'We are Scottish, we value education. Those philistines in England don't' Sorry, that's my gloss on it! But that was making a policy distinction for public consumption very clear.

Also scepticism about university commitment to widening access

…in further education colleges, it's about transformative education, transformative experiences. I don't think FE can be beaten on that. And it has struck me that historically there's been a tendency for universities to suit themselves and they tend to, when it comes to things like articulation and credit transfer …When you look at the evidence it seems to suggest that, by and large, they are for people from a particular background ….I don't think it's really changed that much and I know they'll say, 'Oh it's nothing to do with us Guv. It's all to do schools are not producing enough kids from these areas with the right profiles', blah de blah de blah. So yeah I think the [university] sector's got a bit of a swagger about it, a bit of a conceit even. (College manager)

Conclusion: How fair is access to Scottish higher education?
Major problems with distributional justice

- Scotland prides itself on providing 'free' university tuition on the grounds that education is a universal service which benefits all and should be free to all

- Consequences of free tuition include capped numbers and reduced spending in schools and colleges

- However, the greatest beneficiaries are those from socially advantaged backgrounds – not redistributive

- Free tuition in Scotland has not achieved higher rates of participation or greater student diversity compared with England

- Key informant interviews suggest divided views – free tuition strongly defended by ancient universities, trades unions and the NUS – but criticised by colleges

- More informed public debate needed on intended and unintended outcomes of current system, what might count as a fair system and measures likely to promote change

Thank you for listening!