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Scottish Higher Education and Social Justice: Tensions between Data and Discourse

**Presentation to Society for Research in Higher Education Network
London, 16th February 2016**

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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?**



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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**



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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.



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Ambiguity In Scottish Government's objectives?



'The Government's ambition is that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should, by the time he or she leaves school, **have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities'.**

-- Interim Report, Commission on Widening Access, 2015



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Tuition fees policy - central area of divergence between Scotland and England – belief that this policy would automatically deliver ‘fair’ participation in HE

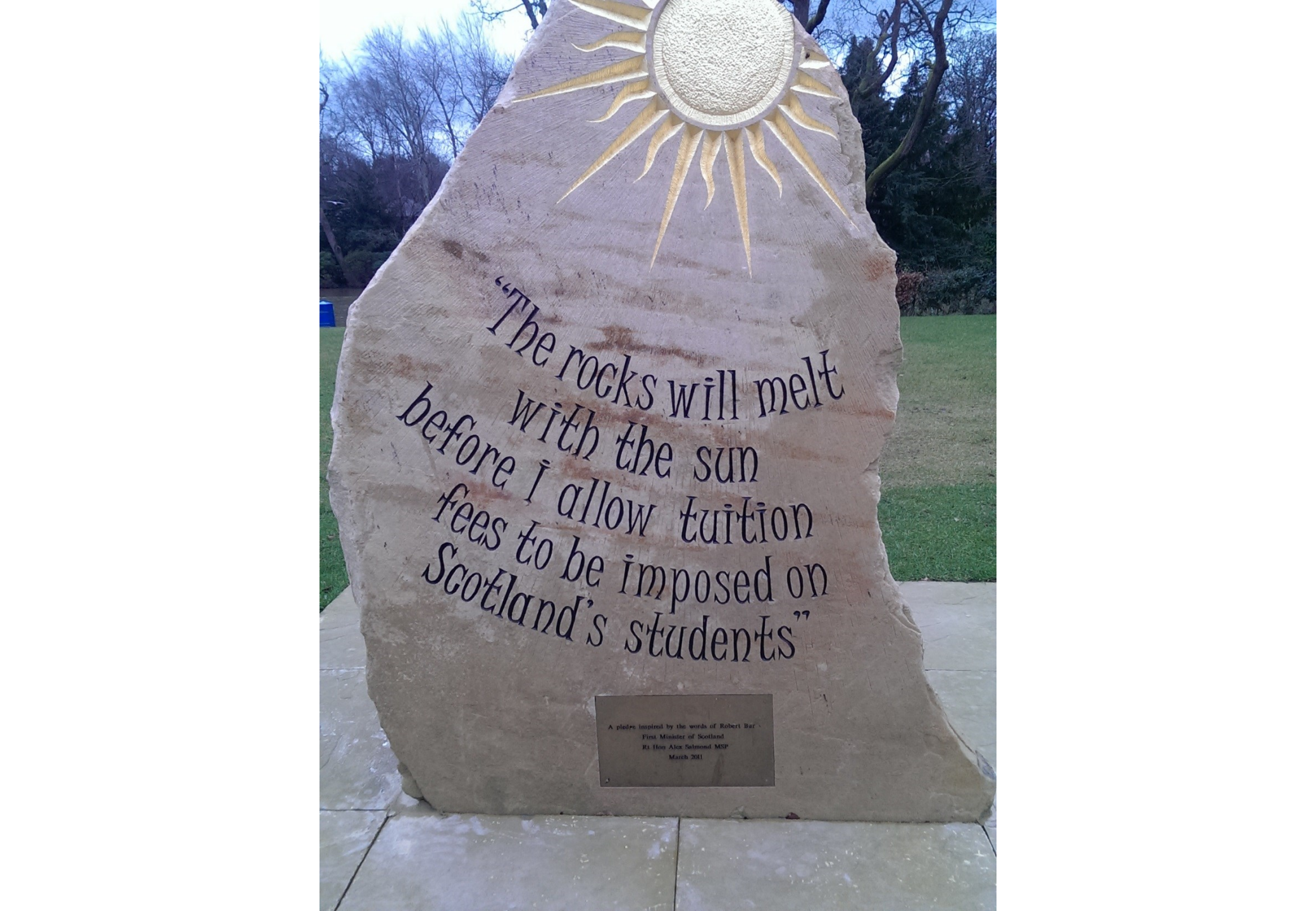


‘Free’ university tuition fee became flagship policy of SNP Government – particularly during referendum campaign of 2013/14.

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 Bar
First Minister of Scotland
 Rt Hon Alex Salmond MSP
 March 2011



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Has fairness been delivered? University application & entry rates by country and neighbourhood deprivation



Scotland has lower rate of university participation compared with other jurisdictions – higher HEIPR in Scotland explained by greater use of colleges. 17% of all Scottish HE takes place in colleges, compared with 6% in England. Policy has both pros and cons.

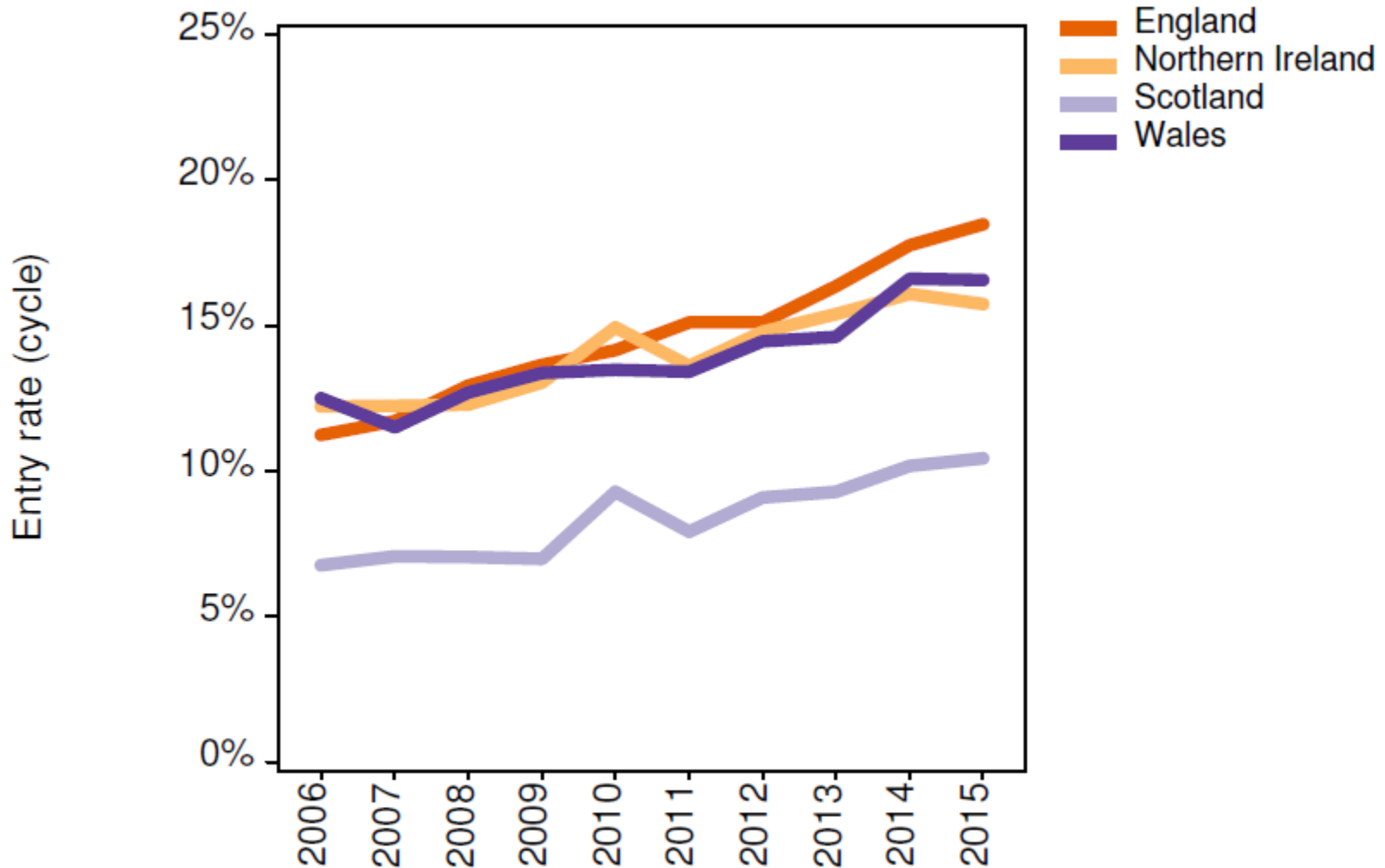
Major social class differences persist - 18 year olds from more advantaged areas are five times more likely to apply and four times more likely to enter than those from poorer areas.

Scotland has lowest difference in entry rates between most and least deprived areas compared with other jurisdictions – this is partly driven by SG's decision to allocate 720 'widening access' places to higher tariff institutions- whilst numbers from advantaged remained the same.



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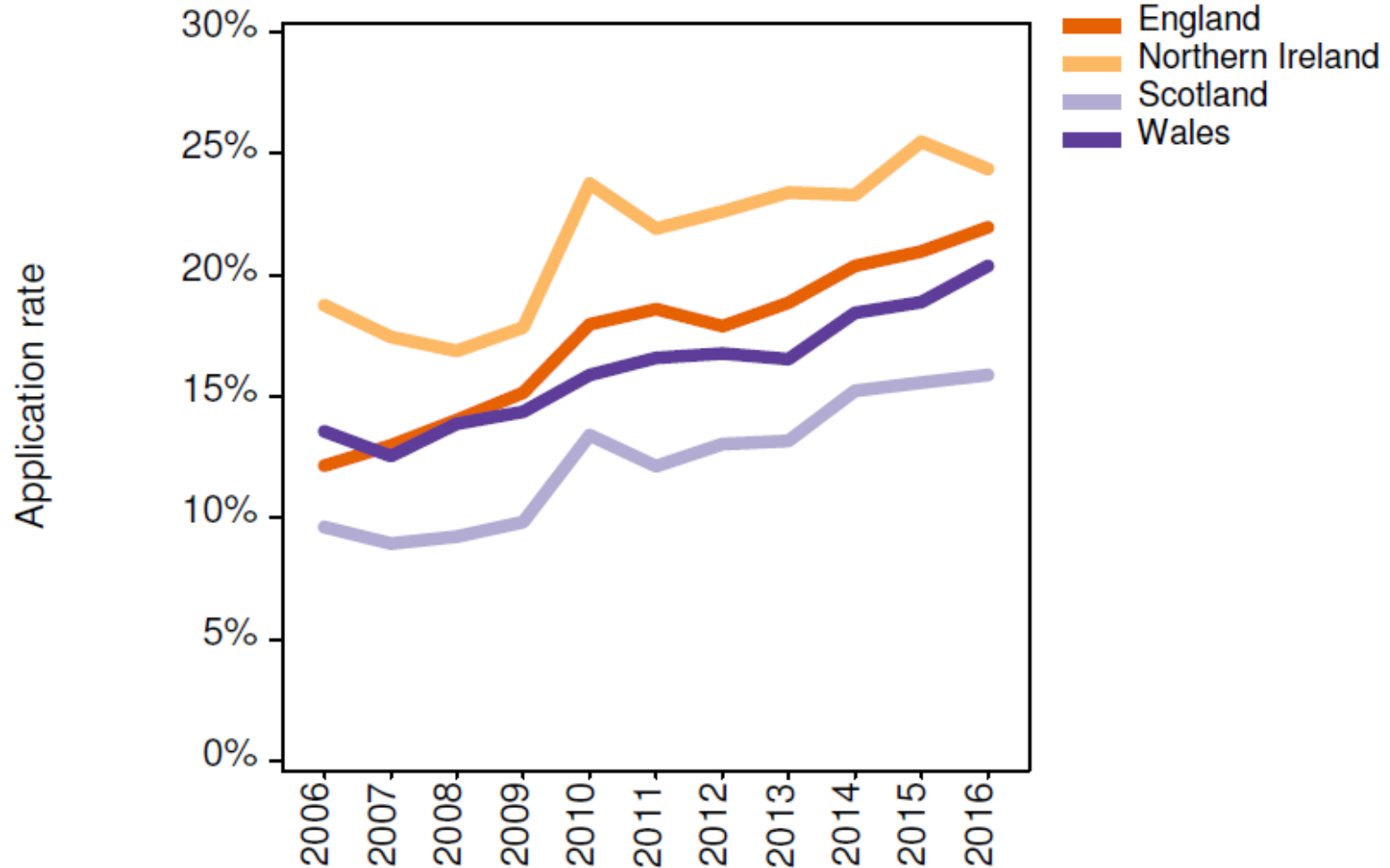
18 year old entry rates for disadvantaged areas (POLAR3 Q1) by country of domicile, 2015





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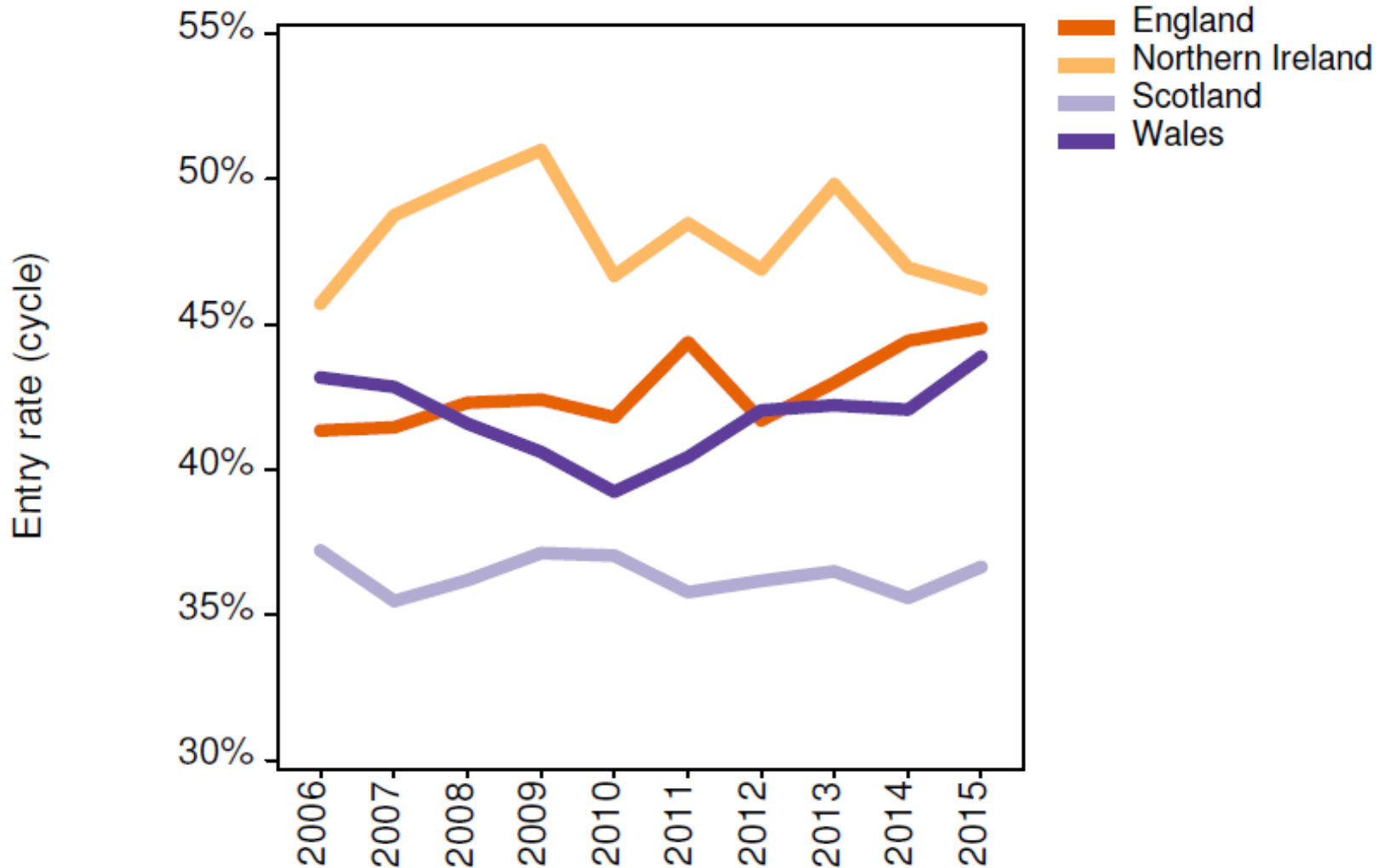
January deadline **application** rates by country for 18 year olds (**most disadvantaged areas,** **POLAR3 quintile 1) 2016**





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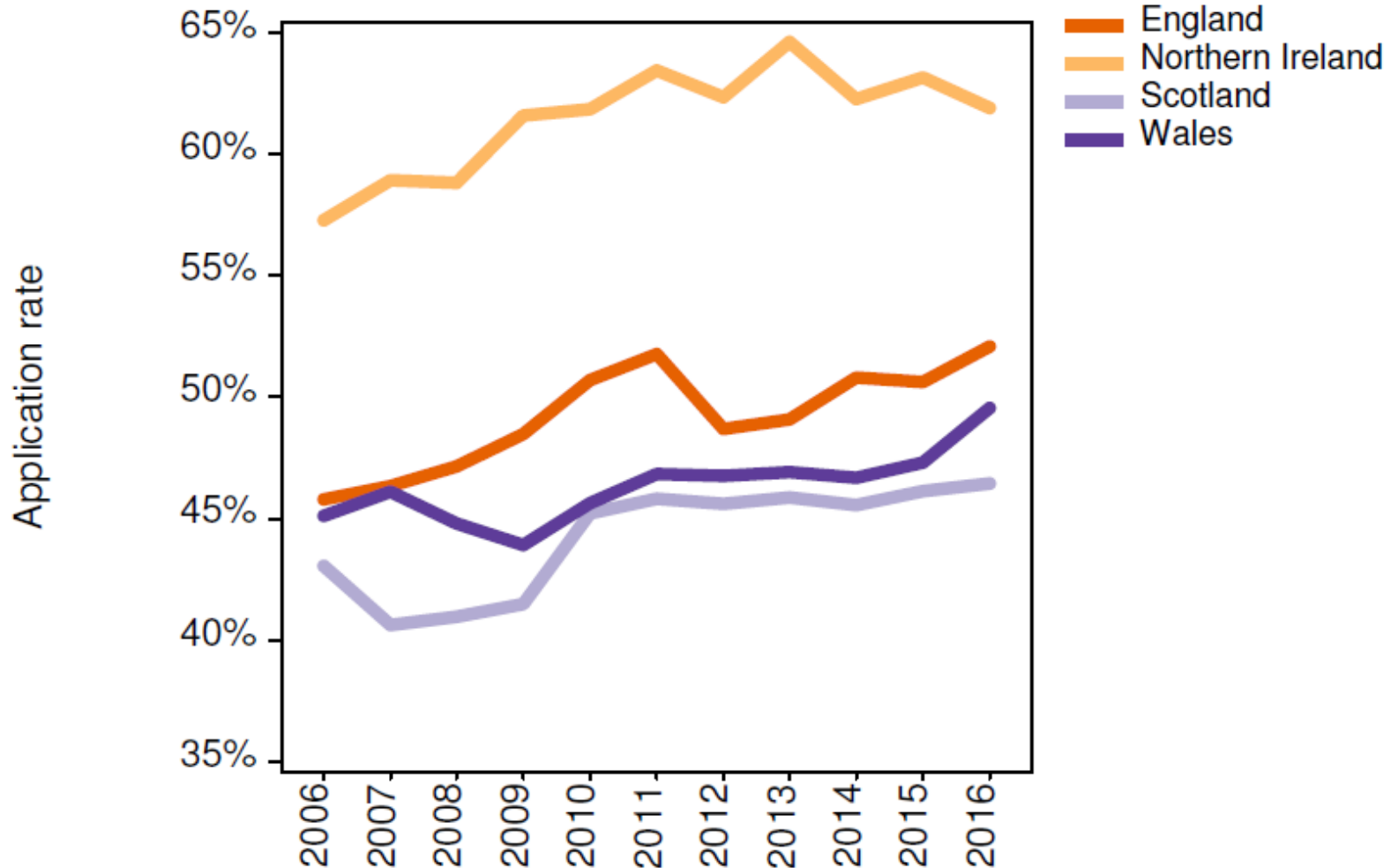
18 year old **entry** rates for **advantaged** areas (POLAR3 Q5) by country of domicile 2015





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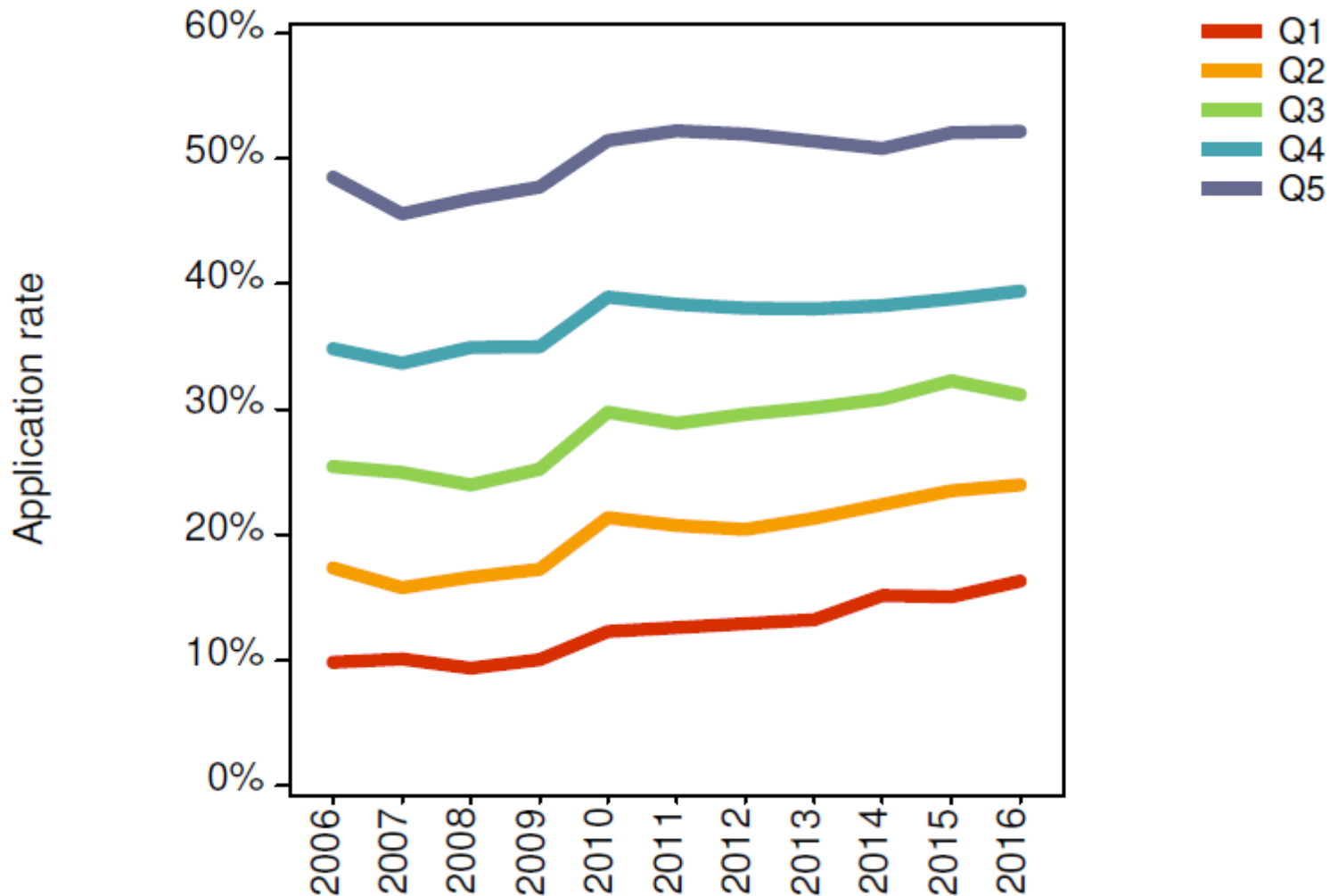
January deadline **application** rates by country for 18 year olds (**most advantaged areas,** **POLAR3 quintile 5) 2016**





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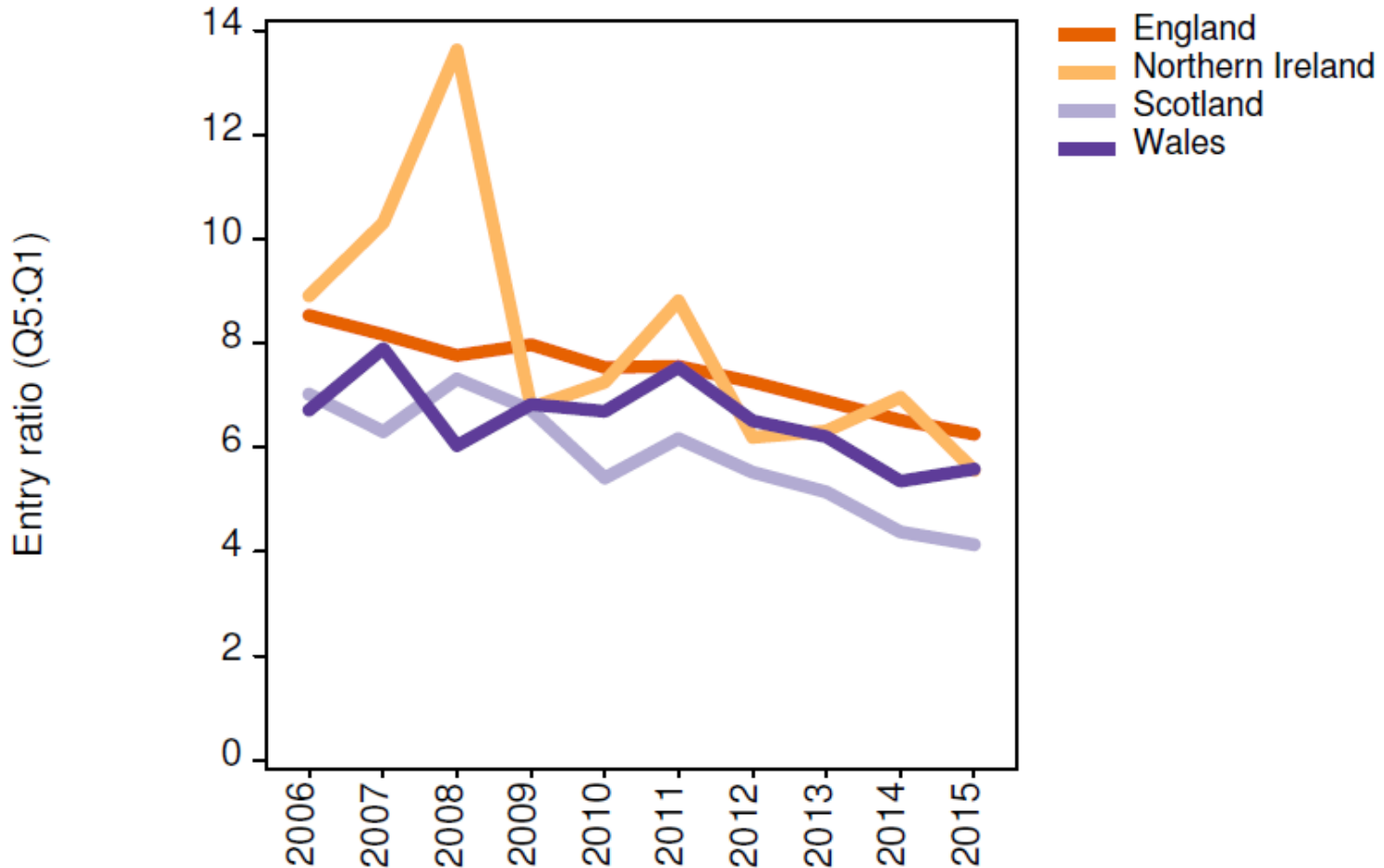
January deadline application rates by SIMD quintile for Scottish 18 year olds (SIMD quintile 5 are the most advantaged areas)





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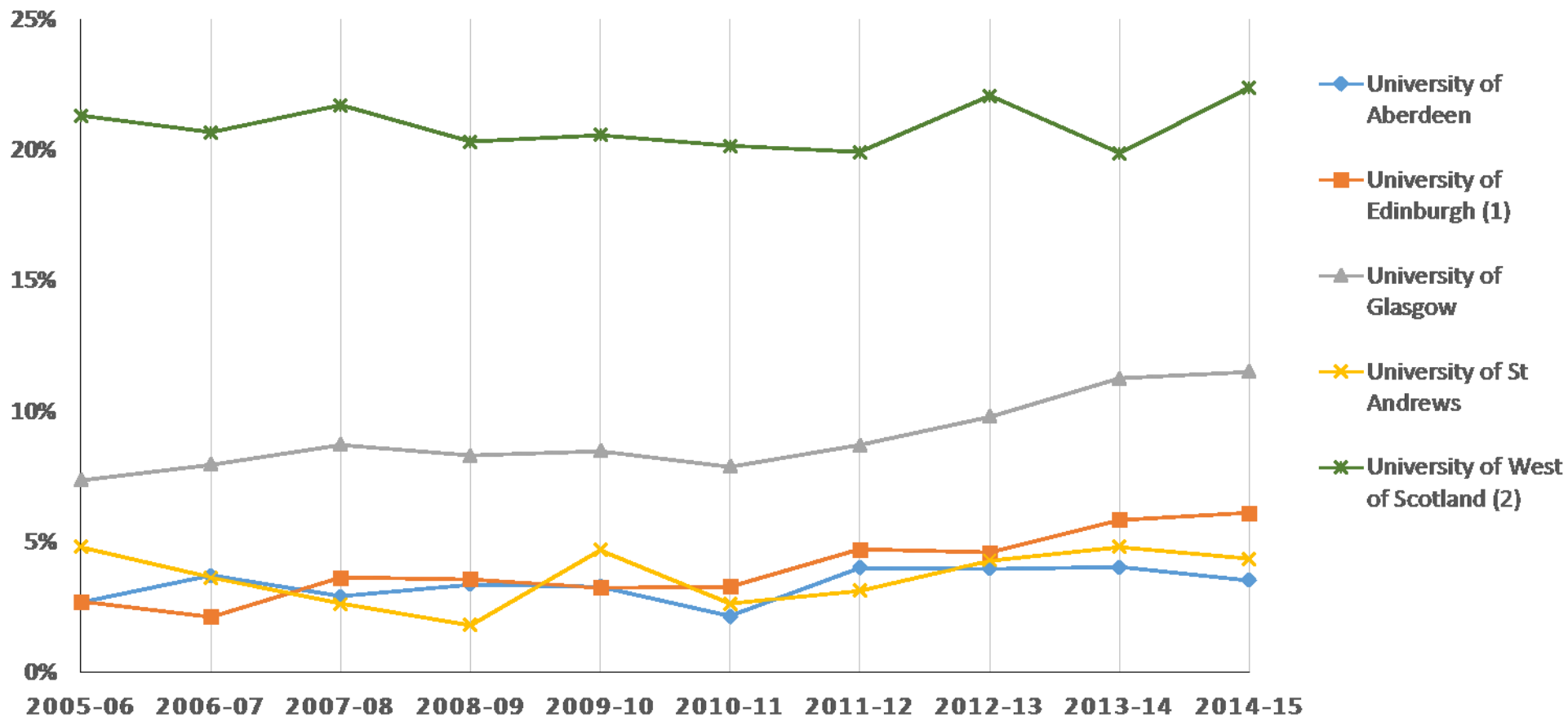
18 year old entry rate ratios (higher tariff providers): most advantaged areas (POLAR3 Q5) to most disadvantaged areas by country of domicile





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Young Scottish-domiciled SIMD20 entrants to full-time undergraduate courses at selected Scottish HEIs, 2005-06 to 2014-15



Notes:

(1) Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) merged with the University of Edinburgh on 1 August 2011. These figures for the University of Edinburgh for earlier sessions include students at ECA.

(2) Contains the figures for Bell College and the University of Paisley for 2005-06 and 2006-07. These institutions merged on 1 August 2007 to become the University of the West of Scotland.

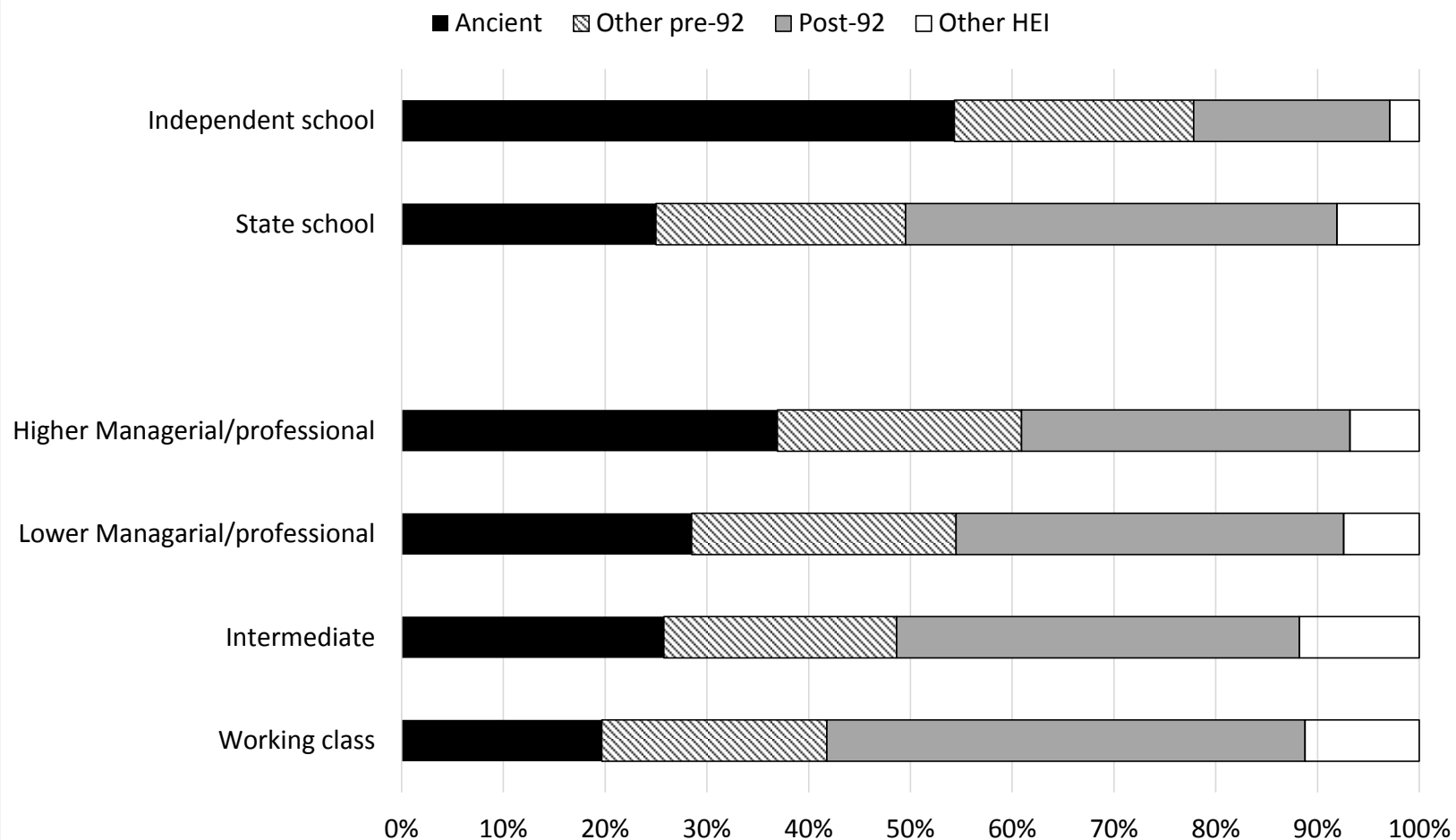


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Inequality in participation by different social groups in Scotland

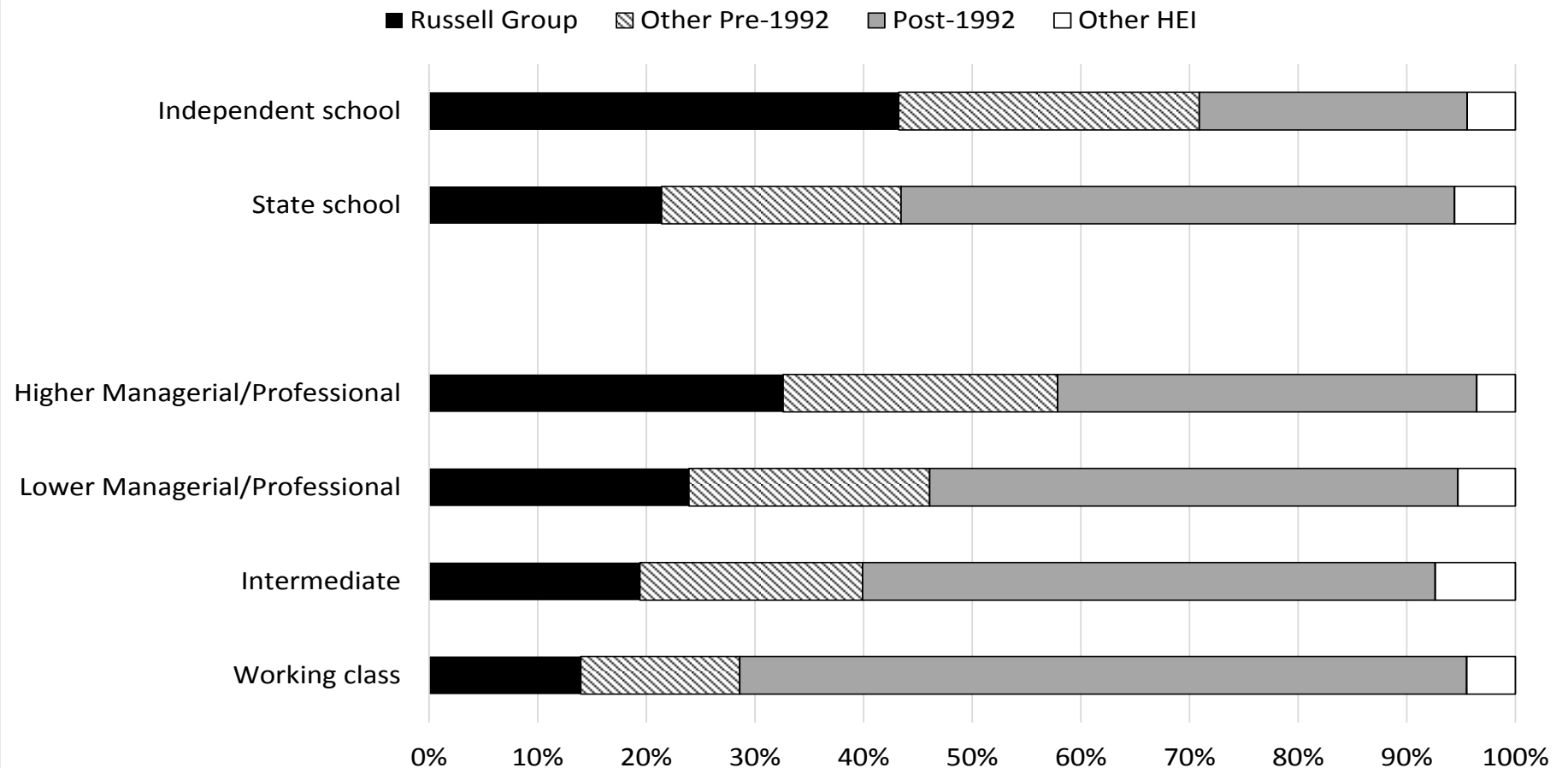


Higher Education Institutions attended by student background: young Scottish-domiciled students entering HEIs in Scotland (Source: HESA record 2012/13)



....and in England

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





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Pros and cons of college as entry route to HE



8.5% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities from SIMD20 backgrounds.

23% of HE college students from SIMD20 backgrounds – colleges may be close to home and offer friendlier environment. Also, much cheaper form of HE for government.

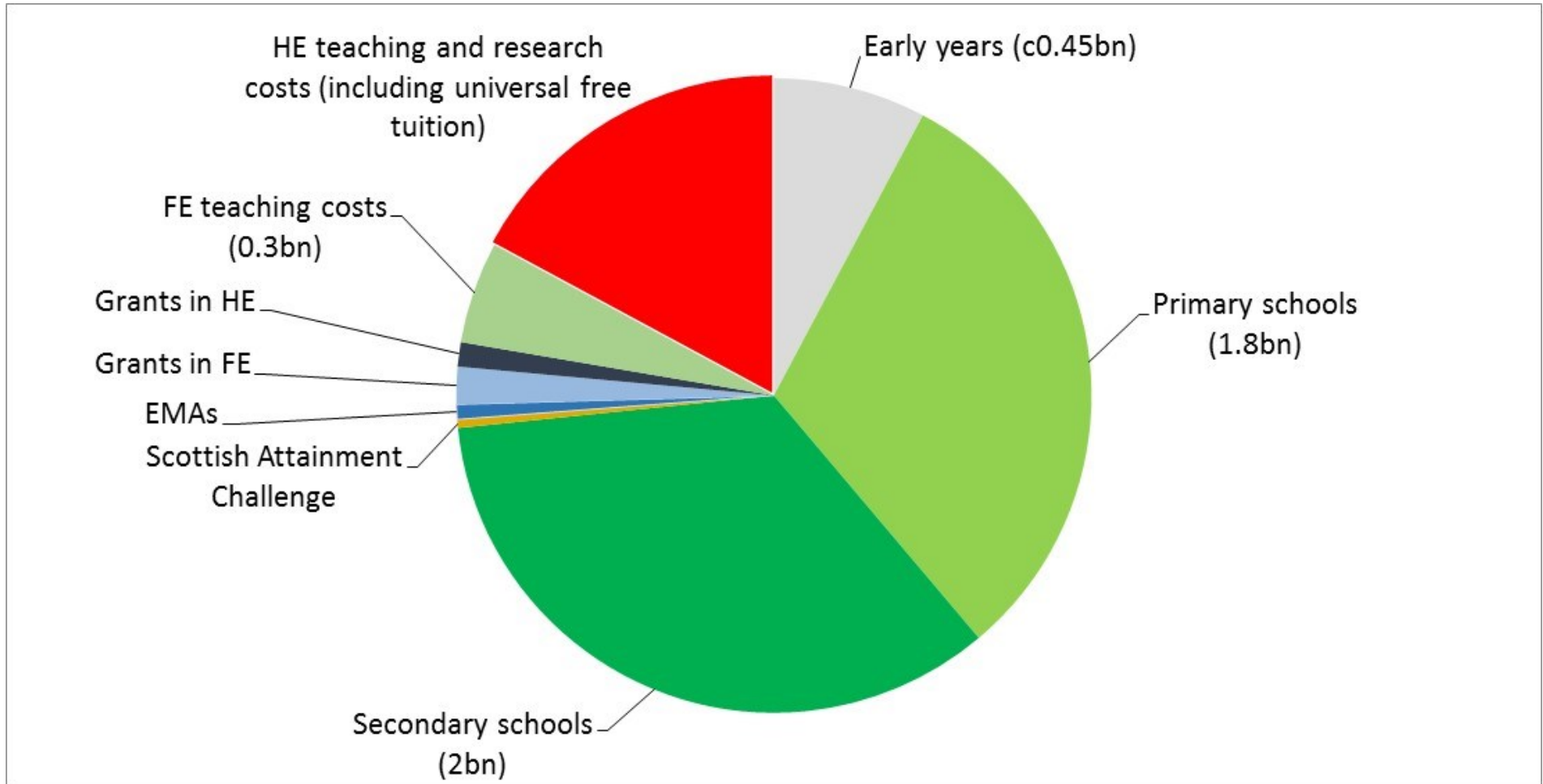
Only 50% of HN students progress to university – generally to post-92 institutions.

In 2013/14, only 12 students from SIMD20 areas progressed to ancient universities with full credit, 10 with partial credit and 91 with no credit (i.e. began again in first year). For these students, an honours degree would take 6 years, with a 50% drop-out rate.



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Distribution of Scottish Government education budget 2012-13





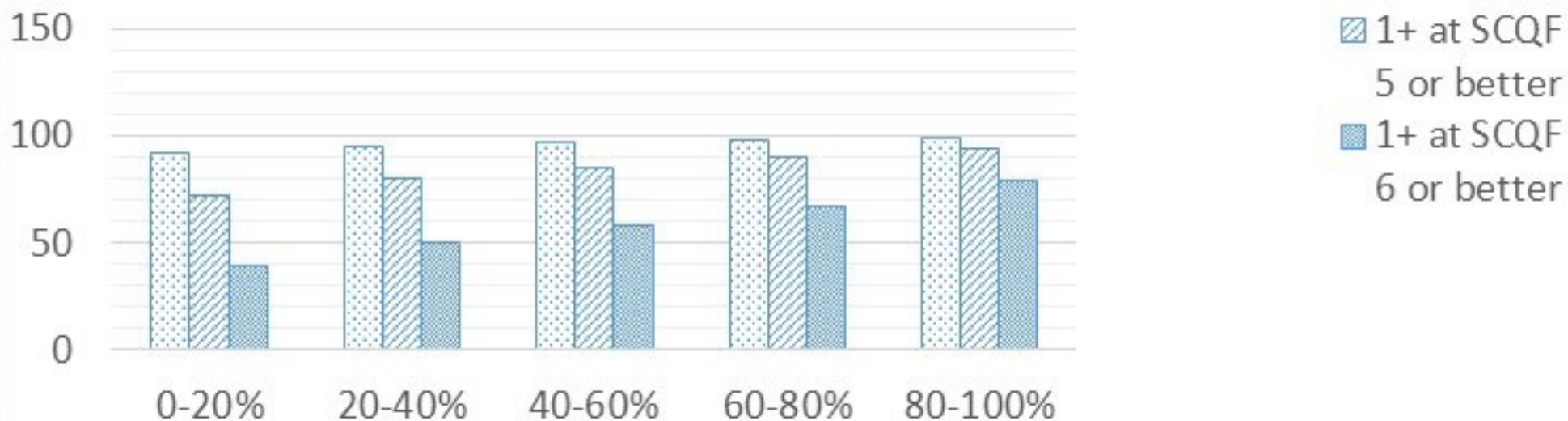
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Marked social inequalities in school attainment – particularly at higher levels

Children from more least deprived neighbourhoods twice as likely to get one Higher as those from most deprived neighbourhoods



Percentage of school leavers by attainment at SCQF level 4 to 6 or better, by SIMD, 2013/14





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Highest qualifications attained by Scottish state school leavers by SIMD decile



SIMD Decile	Percentage achieving 5+ SCQF Level 6 (Highers) %	Percentage achieving 1-2 SCQF Level 7 (Advanced Highers) %	Percentage achieving 3+ SCQF Level 7 (Advanced Highers) %	Total % school leavers likely to be qualified for direct university entry
Most deprived 20%	4.9	5.2	0.45	10.5
20-40%	8.25	9.25	0.7	18.2
40-60%	10.2	14.55	1.7	26.45
60-80%	13.05	19.05	2.85	34.95
Least deprived 20%	17	26.9	4.65	48.55



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Beliefs of Scottish policy makers: Defence of free tuition by senior managers in ancient universities



‘[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’.



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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)*



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But college managers express scepticism about government policy on free tuition



[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.



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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 backgroundI 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)



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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.



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Thank you for listening!