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The pros, cons and challenges of setting targets in the field of widening access to higher education

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The rise of social audit



- New Public Management has been in ascendancy since 1980s. Commentators have described the ‘rituals of verification’ associated with the Audit Society.
- Target setting central component of NPM.
- Literature of the 1990s (Power, Meyer & Rowan) describes audits as ‘rationalized rituals of inspection’ which produce comfort and organisational legitimacy by attending to formal control structures and auditable performance measures.
- Panic about systemic failure leads periodically to radical overhaul. New technical guidance is issued which signals radical overhaul (for regulatory audience) or codification of what is happening anyway (for practitioner audience).
- Organisations respond to social audit in different ways - at different ends of spectrum may leads to a process of ‘decoupling’ or ‘colonisation’.
- Decoupling involves compartmentalisation of audit – indicated by establishing special unit operating independently from mainstream practitioners (WP practitioners & academics?)
- Colonisation occurs when values and practices of audit invade organisation, to detriment of organisational autonomy & purpose.



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Different views of social audit



- Strong arguments that social audit may promote social justice by revealing extent of inequality and measuring change over time.
- But also danger of perverse consequences as organisations seek to protect themselves from external scrutiny.
- Negative consequences may include erosion of public trust, minimal compliance and cherry picking.



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Regulating access to higher education in Scotland: a brief overview



- In Scotland, belief that lack of tuition fees would automatically lead to 'fair access'.
- Under terms of Further & Higher Education (Scotland) Act, ministers prevented from imposing terms and conditions on university admissions.
- White Paper *Putting Learners at the Centre* (SG, 2011) proposed financial penalties on institutions showing inadequate progress on widening access – instituted under Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013.
- Institutions submit outcome agreements to SFC including widening access targets. As in England - soft regulation.



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More recent action on widening access in Scotland



- Recognition of continuing social inequality in access to Scottish HE led to establishment of Commission on Widening Access in 2015 to ensure that ‘a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should have no less a chance of entering higher education than a child born in one of our least deprived. We want every child- whatever their background – to have an equal chance of attending university’ (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)
- Interim report argued that scale of inequality in Scottish higher education is ‘unfair, damaging and unsustainable. Scotland has a moral, social and economic duty to achieve equality of access’.



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New (demanding) targets



By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to higher education.

Equality of access should be seen in both the college sector and the university sector.

To drive progress towards this goal:

- By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 16% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish HEIs as a whole.
- By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10% of full-time first degree entrants to every individual Scottish university.
- By 2026, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 18% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities as a whole.
- In 2022, the target of 10% for individual Scottish universities should be reviewed and a higher level target should be considered for the subsequent years.



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Competing targets? SFC Gender Action Plan – by 2030, no college or university course will have more than 75% of one gender



Subject areas in colleges and universities with severe gender imbalances

Colleges	Universities
Female under-representation	
Construction (general)	Architecture, Building and Planning
Building/Construction Operations	Engineering
Building Services	Technologies
Engineering/Technology (general)	Computer Sciences
Mechanical Engineering	
Electrical Engineering	
IT: Comp Science/Programming/Systems	
Vehicle Maintenance/Repair	
Male under-representation	
Child Care Services	Social Studies
Hair/Personal Care Services	Nursing
	Training teachers
	Psychology

Source: Scottish Funding Council Gender Action Plan 2016, at:
http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Corporate_publications_SFCCP052016_GenderActionPlan/SFCC_P052016_Gender_Action_Plan.pdf, accessed on 02.02.2017



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How effective have outcome agreements been in to date?



- CREID researchers conducted content analysis of first two rounds of outcome agreements & interviewed senior managers – see report to Universities Scotland: <http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/uploads/WideningAccessToHE-CREID.pdf>
- Controversy over measure of deprivation. SFC suggests that all universities should use SIMD – but may also use other measures of social class and focus on protected characteristics. Institutions with rural hinterland argue that SIMD does not capture rural poverty. HMRC data suggest that 54% of children living in poverty do not live in SIMD20 neighbourhoods. EMA data not routinely used
- Outcome agreements might be characterised as ‘producer captured’ documents – different lengths & formats. Audience unclear - students, general public, SFC, SG?
- Indicate much widening access activity in universities, but little analysis of effectiveness.

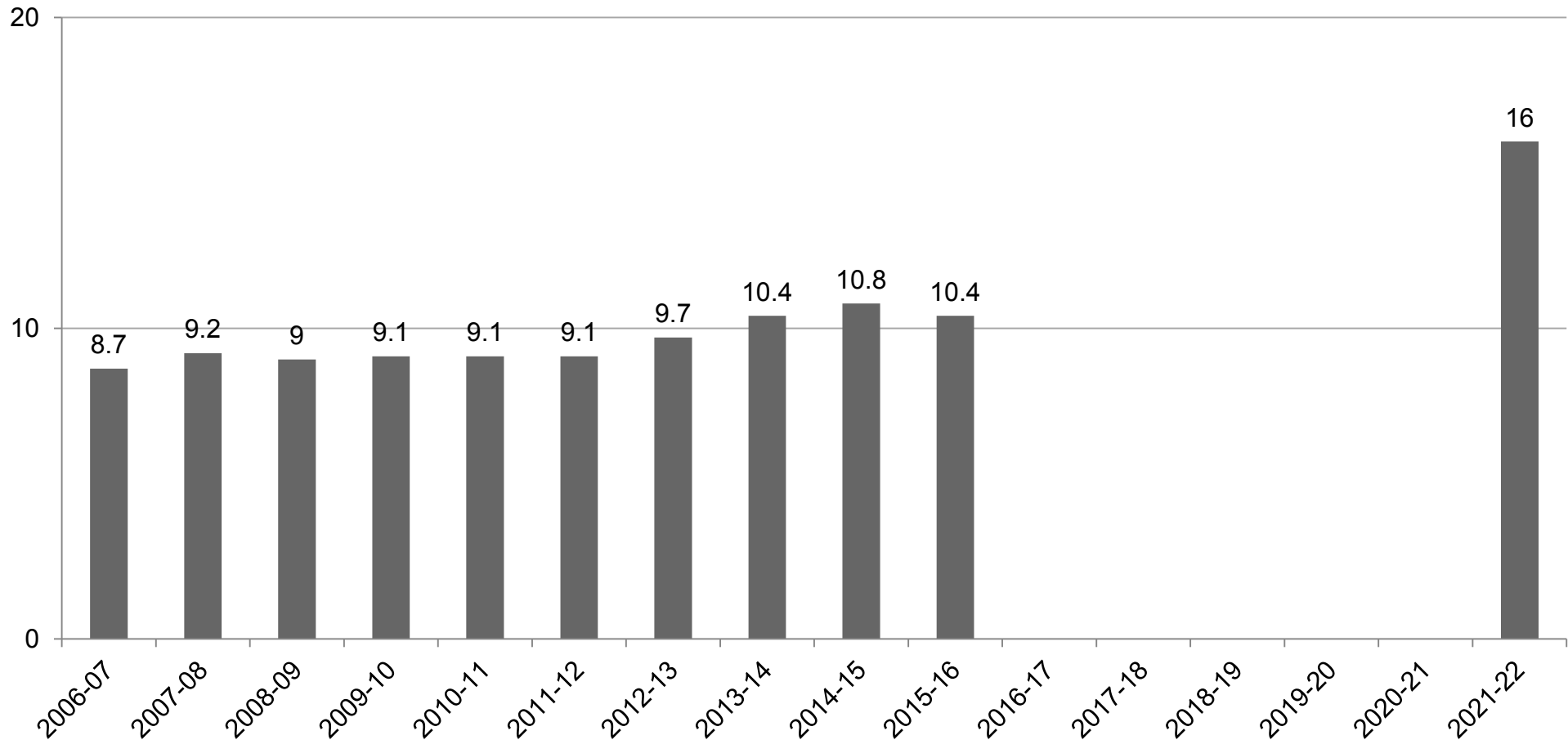


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Major challenge in achieving 2021 target



% of under-21 Scottish-domiciled entrants to HEIs from the most disadvantaged 20% of areas (SIMD20)



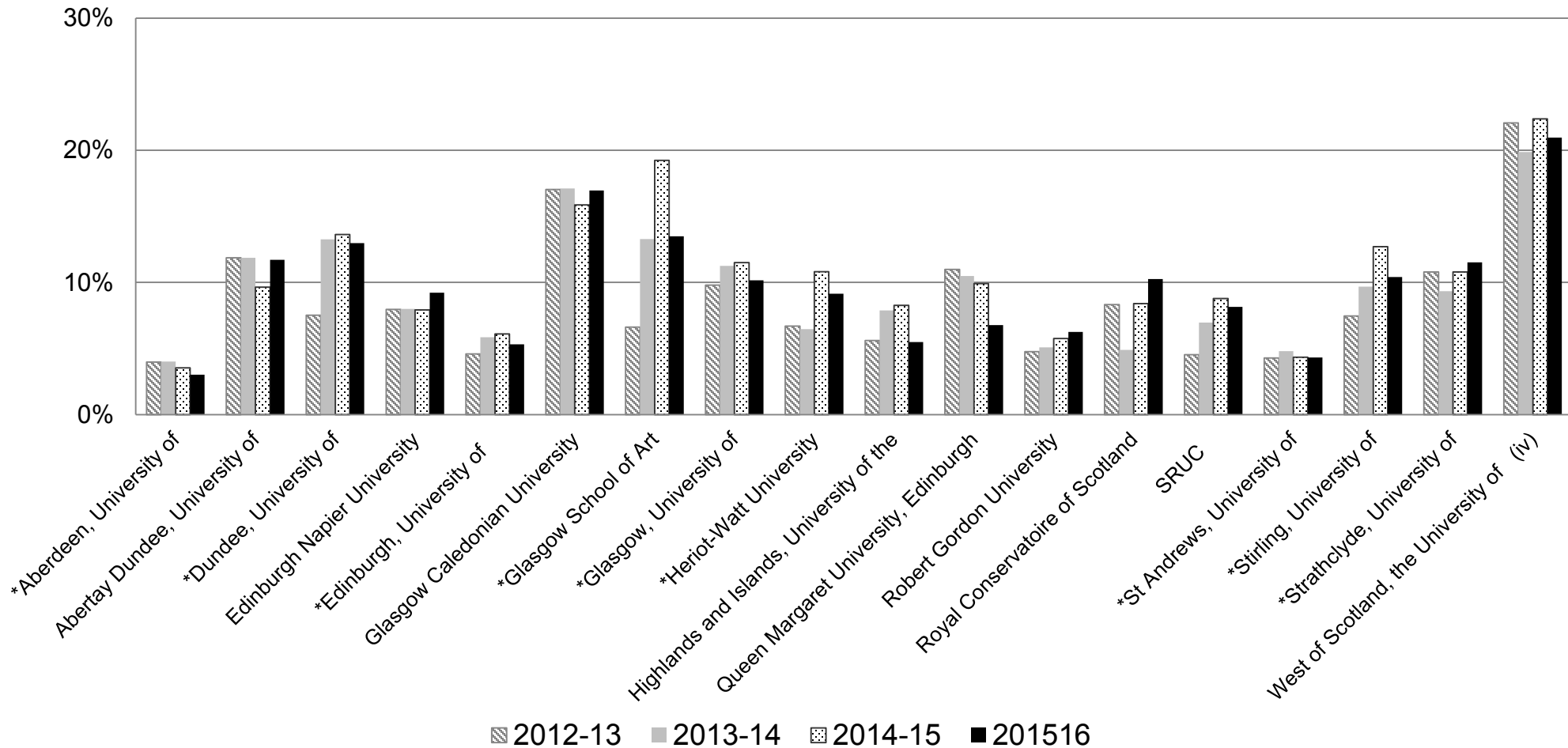


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Wide variation in institutional social profile



SIMD20 as % all under-21 f/t Scottish-domiciled entrants





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Conclusion

- Scottish Government has promoted principles of universalism in key areas of social provision – bus fares for older people, prescriptions, tuition fees.
- Has been reluctant to recognise that these measures have not been redistributive in their effects.
- Response to inequality in HE is to implement more rigorous target-setting regime.
- There is a need to monitor closely not only progress in relation to targets, but also organisational responses and unintended as well as intended consequences.
- Targets may be part, but probably not the whole, solution.