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Target setting and widening access to higher education: Pros, cons and challenges

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The rise of social audit



- New Public Management in ascendancy since 1980s.
- Literature of the 1990s describes audits as ‘rationalised rituals of verification’ - 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 signals major change(for regulatory audience) or codification of what is happening anyway (for practitioner audience).
- Commission on Widening Access – A Blueprint for Fairness – may be seen in this light.
- Organisations respond to social audit in different ways - may lead to a process of ‘decoupling’ or ‘colonisation’.
- Decoupling involves compartmentalisation of audit – indicated by establishing special unit operating independently from mainstream practitioners (WP practitioners?)
- Colonisation occurs when values and practices of audit invade all aspects of organisation’s work, subsuming other goals, to detriment of organisational autonomy.



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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 of clients to meet targets.



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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’.
- Concern when it became clear that Scottish HE was not ‘the fairest of them all’.
- Scottish 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.
- SFC Triennial Review on Widening Access reviews progress



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Recent rediscovery of inequality in Scottish higher education



- Commission on Widening Access established 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 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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Similar developments in England, but a decade earlier



- Higher Education Act 2004 introduced variable tuition fees.
- ‘Political price’ included establishment of the Office for Fair Access, led by Director of Fair Access.
- The Act empowered the Director to prevent an HEI charging fees above £1,200 if unable to satisfy the regulator that it would make adequate provision for widening access.
- Institutions required to submit annual access agreements setting targets. About a third of outcome agreements deemed to be insufficiently rigorous – subject to renegotiation.



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How effective are widening access outcome agreements?

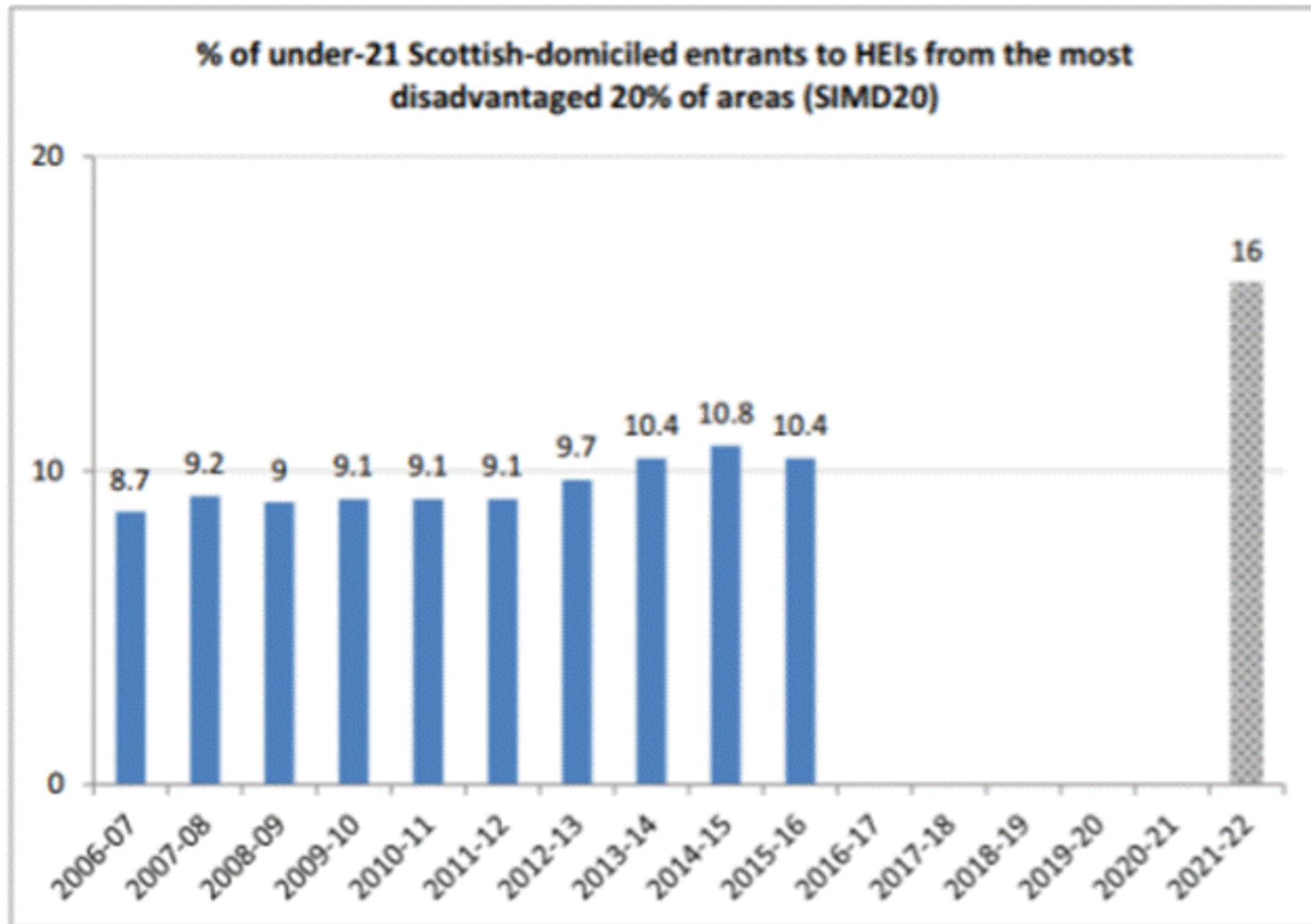


- CREID researchers conducted content analysis of first two rounds of outcome agreements & interviewed senior managers – see report to Universities Scotland: <http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/uploads/WideningAccessToHE-CREID.pdf>
- Universities disputed use of SIMD – SG’s preferred measure of deprivation – with some justification. HMRC data show that 54% of children living in poverty do not live in SIMD20 neighbourhoods.
- Overall, outcome agreements might be characterised as ‘producer captured’ documents. Tend to be self-congratulatory. Audience unclear - students, general public, SFC, SG?
- Indicate much widening access activity in universities, but little analysis of effectiveness.



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Hunter Blackburn points out major challenge in achieving 2021 SIMD20 target



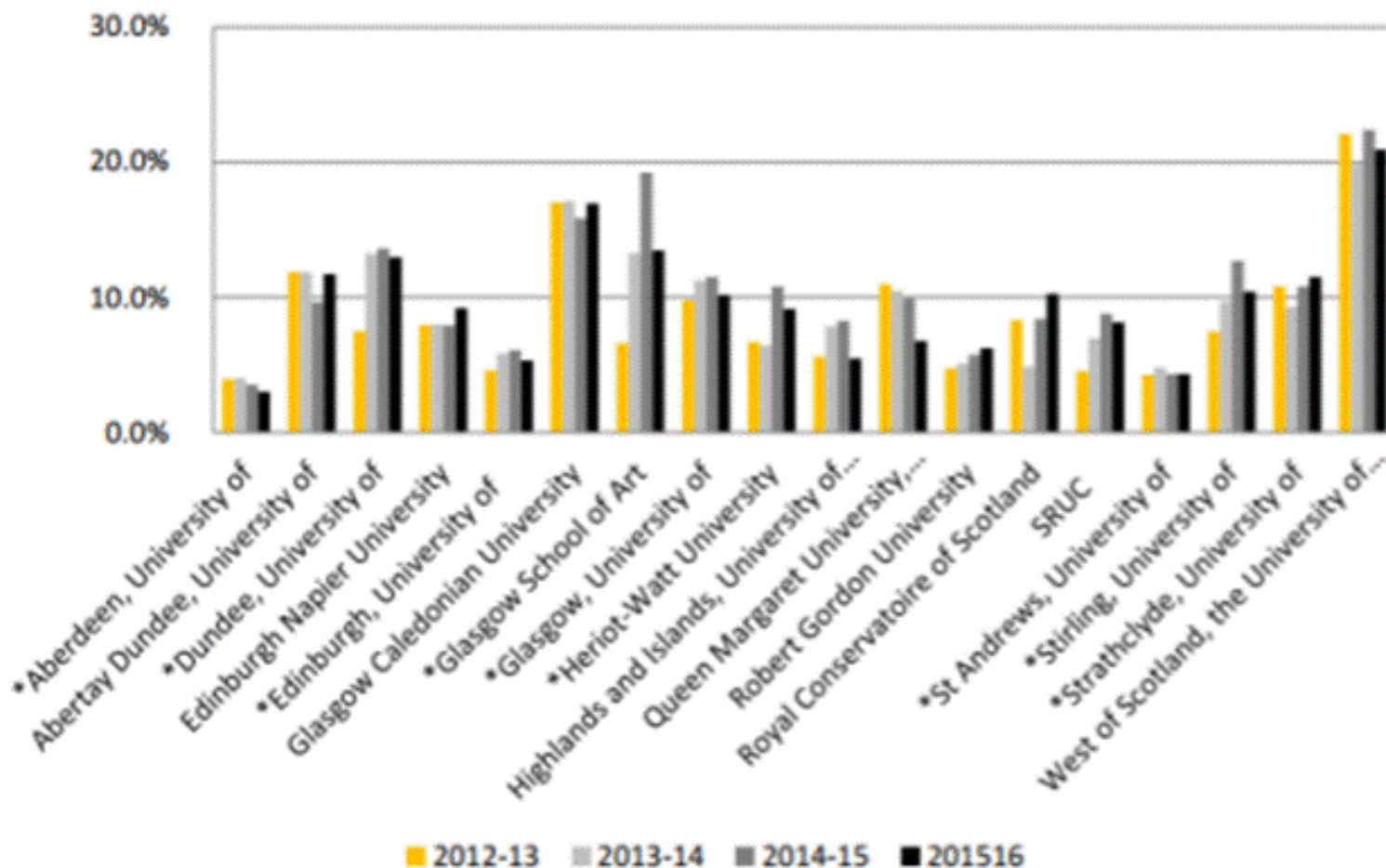


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Wide variation in institutional social profile – at ancient universities, students from most deprived backgrounds make up about 5% of total population



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





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Which policy levers might make a difference?



- **Targeted places for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.** In 2013-14, SFC allocated 727 undergraduate places for widening access to most selective universities, and 1,020 undergraduate articulation places across 14 universities. Students in receipt of these places not in competition with others from more advantaged backgrounds - but future of the scheme is uncertain
- **Administrative changes** – e.g. inclusion of UTT within UCAS from 2015 onwards made a measurable difference to inclusion of students from less advantaged backgrounds – most UTT in Scotland takes place in ancient/pre-92 universities and boosted widening access figures.
- In England, **uncapping of student numbers** has widened participation – despite negative consequences for some institutions.



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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/SFCCP052016_Gender_Action_Plan.pdf, accessed on 02.02.2017



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Resource distribution key to major change



- Free tuition policy means that universities capture lion's share of educational resources - about £1 billion allocated to university teaching, c.f. £300 million to colleges and £450 million to pre-school.
- Reduction in college places and funding - Recent Audit Scotland report showed that college headcount in 2015-16 lowest since 2006/07.
- Audit Scotland have also noted reduction in school funding. Until recently, little targeting of resources at pupils experiencing social disadvantage.
- Evaluation of NIF unclear.



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Can social audit be used to achieve social change?



- A cautious yes. Well thought out targets focus institutional attention and independent evaluation reveals the extent of progress.
- However, dangers of surface compliance should not be underestimated.
- In Scotland and the rest of the UK, many vested interests in retaining the status quo.
- Access to the most selective universities continues to confer social and economic privilege
- Extremely difficult for less advantaged students to displace more socially advantaged – Further expansion is essential.