



Scottish education: why don't the sums add up?

Gill Wyness asks how Scottish higher education participation rates are so high when inequality of school attainment is rife



Scotland isn't getting its sums right on education. Photograph: imagebroker/Alamy

With the Scottish independence debate in full swing, the Scottish electorate will need to consider how Scotland has fared in its governance of areas that have been long since devolved. Education is one such high-profile area of policy. Since the day of the enlightenment, Scotland has pursued separate education policies to the rest of the UK.

Education has been one of our most defining characteristics – and proudest traditions. By 1750, 75% of Scotland's population was literate, one of the highest rates in Europe. By the late 16th century, several Scottish universities were already established, including two in Aberdeen – as many as in the whole of England at that time.

Scotland's differing attitude towards higher education continues to the present day. The government's decision to abolish tuition fees after devolution was intended to "restore Scotland's centuries-old tradition of free education" and ensure that its high rates of university participation continued. And the domestic higher education sector does seem to be flourishing.

The higher education initial participation rate (which measures the proportion of 16-30 year olds in higher education) stood at 56% in Scotland in 2011, 7 percentage points higher than England's 49%. But before breaking out the whisky, it is worth studying Scotland's education figures in a bit more detail, an exercise we recently performed at LSE.

Scotland's apparent historic prioritisation of education holds up when it comes to compulsory school education. Around 80% of young people in Scotland achieve five or more standard grades – roughly the same figure as GCSE attainment in England. But when it comes to the next level of education – Scottish Highers, essential for entrance to university – attainment of Scottish pupils is surprisingly low compared with England.

Only 37% of young people in Scotland achieved three or more Highers (enough to get into some but not all degree programmes at Scottish colleges and universities) by the end of sixth year in 2011. By way of rough comparison, 52% of English students got two A-levels. And when looking at the proportion of Scottish young people getting five Highers – enough for a chance to get into an elite institution, the proportion slips back to

26%.

How can Scotland's higher education participation rate be so high when many of Scotland's young people don't appear to be achieving the results to get into degree programmes? The answer may lie in the Scottish executive's definition of higher education, which includes one and two year higher national diploma (HND) and higher national certificate (HNC) courses as well as degrees. Statistics show that almost half of Scotland's higher education students are actually studying for the former.

This may not be a problem, of course. Scotland's education system is known for its flexibility and has a history of promoting shorter courses, which can be topped up later. However, [research shows](#) that individuals with fewer years of education gain lower wage returns on average. And perhaps more significantly, HNDs and HNCs may carry less cachet in job markets in England and overseas, making Scotland's economy potentially more insular.

But a further and potentially more damning issue emerges around inequality of educational outcomes. Our research revealed startling levels of inequality in attainment between Scottish pupils from different socio-economic groups. As early as age seven, there are large differences in reading and maths attainment between children from rich and poor backgrounds.

These inequalities increase with age. At the age of 15, the richest quartile of pupils achieved 549 points on the [well-recognised international PISA test](#) in 2009, on a par with the average score in Hong Kong (which was placed third in the OECD for maths that year). The bottom quartile achieved only 456 points, on a par with Turkey, which was placed 44th.

Data [published by the Guardian's datablog](#) reveals equally shocking statistics. In 2011 only 220 – that's 2% – of the poorest fifth of Scottish pupils managed to achieve sufficient grades in their fifth year (three or more As at Higher) to get them into one of the best universities, versus 17% of the richest fifth. In my own home town of Dundee, only five pupils from the poorest quintile achieved three or more As.

Evidence from the Scottish Government's new post-16 bill [backs up this evidence](#). It reports that 11% of students attending university in 2010/11 came from the 20% most deprived areas. This bill aims to target this group and ensure they have "fair access" to education.

This seems like a laudable goal, and it's good news that the inequality in our education system is being brought into the referendum debate. But the fact remains that Scotland's long devolved education system has done little to tackle this shameful issue. Inequality is a deep-rooted problem which starts in youth, and an independent Scotland will have to focus its resources far beyond post-16 outcomes if it wants to get to grips with it.

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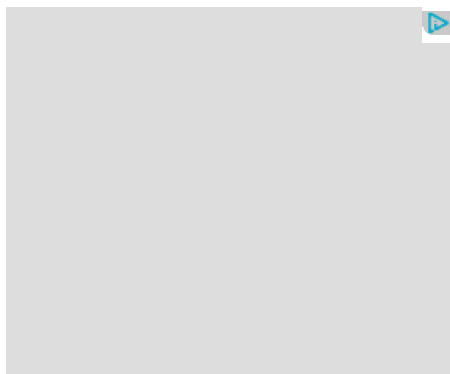
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