

Higher Education - Providing keys to the university kingdom



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Scotland continues to oppose tuition fees, yet the number of poor students going on to higher education stubbornly refuses to rise. If money isn't the magic bullet, what is? Julia Belgutay investigates

When it comes to widening access to higher education, universities and the Scottish government have certainly upped their game.

Fees are often seen as a major barrier to young people from deprived backgrounds applying for university. However, first minister Alex Salmond made a promise in 2011 that "rocks will melt with the sun" before he would allow the introduction of tuition fees for Scottish students, and the SNP continues to oppose them.

Meanwhile, the government has also tied universities' performance in widening access to their funding, with the introduction of formal outcome agreements setting out how the institutions will use public investment to achieve public priorities.

Few would question that universities have also stepped up. Only this week, Universities Scotland published its Access All Areas report on the schemes and programmes that Scottish institutions have introduced to ensure fair access, from summer schools to early-engagement programmes.

However, the effects of all this significant investment are yet to be felt. Only a very small minority of new students at Scottish universities, particularly at the ancient institutions of St Andrews, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, come from the most deprived parts of the country.

This month, academics from the University of Edinburgh released a briefing concluding that the absence of fees in Scotland has failed to change the student population at its universities significantly; at the same time, the number of students from deprived backgrounds applying to English universities, where they face up to £9,000 a year in tuition fees, has risen slightly.

"Unless one subscribes to the view that academic ability is concentrated in the middle classes, major questions arise as to how a system based on meritocratic principles produces highly unequal outcomes," the briefing reads.

The slow pace of progress is likely to be down in part to other financial factors. Gill Wyness, a research officer from the London School of Economics, told an audience at a higher education event organised by the Economic and Social Research Council in Edinburgh earlier this month that the availability of grants and loans could be as big a factor as tuition fees. "It's not just about fees, it is about how much they have got to live on as well," she said.

However, money is not the only factor. Dr Wyness stressed that financial considerations played only a small part in influencing university access. "Attainment is the most important, overwhelming factor," she said. In other words, if young people do not have the grades they need to get in to university when they leave school, they cannot go on to higher education, no matter how little they are charged.

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In Scotland, a significant gap exists between the average school attainment of those in deprived neighbourhoods and those from better-off areas, and education secretary Michael Russell is determined to close it.

"For some children, where you live still determines your prospects more than just your abilities," he said earlier this year. "Clearly, this is a problem. It has existed for decades and others have tried to tackle it, but we can and must do more to ensure that all our children get the skills and the knowledge to succeed in life."

Mr Russell has made raising attainment among disadvantaged learners a priority, and has stressed the importance of "breaking the link between poverty and attainment".

Upward mobility

Subject choice also plays a role, as Dr Cristina Iannelli, senior lecturer at the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh, has found. Her article in last month's *British Journal of Sociology of Education* states that the curriculum that students follow has a greater effect on social mobility than the school they go to.

The study found that people from more advantaged social backgrounds were more likely to study a larger number of subjects, such as languages, English, maths and science, which increased their chances of entering professional and managerial occupations.

A number of universities have started accounting for differences in attainment by adjusting their minimum requirements for access to their courses, or by using contextual data about prospective students' backgrounds to assess their applications. Some have also launched schemes to support young people in making the right subject choices.

But this is likely to help only those students already thinking of going to university. A lack of ambition and a belief that higher education is simply not for them stands in the way of many talented young people ever considering it. "A lot of youngsters don't see it as an option for them. For most of them, that is due to a lack of aspiration. Their parents never went to university, so they don't go, either," said Ken Cunningham, general secretary of School Leaders Scotland.

This argument has found support in the wider HE sector. "Unfortunately, many people still hold on to the notion that university, or perhaps the most selective universities, are not for them or their children, and these misperceptions can be pretty deeply ingrained and difficult to overcome," a spokesperson for Universities Scotland said.

One example of this can be found in the recent *Learning Journeys* study published by NUS Scotland and the Higher Education Academy (HEA), which reports that two-thirds of undergraduates from the most deprived areas studying at college did not consider going to university instead.

Nevertheless, Jim Gallacher, emeritus professor of lifelong learning at Glasgow Caledonian University, stressed the crucial role that colleges played in widening access to those who either did not have the grades required for university or who could not picture themselves there. Colleges were "important providers of non-traditional routes into education", he said.

Colleges Scotland chief executive John Henderson agreed. "Colleges are one of the most effective ways to widen access to higher education," he said. "An increasing number of students are able to move straight from an HNC (higher national certificate) or HND (higher national diploma) award in college into the later years of a university course, meaning they are not repeating years of study at the same level."

However, many students in the NUS report said they struggled when they went to university later on because they felt unprepared and found it hard to adapt to a new learning style.

Aspirational choices

In *Learning Journeys*, NUS Scotland and the HEA said that all students must have guidance on all the choices available to them. The student union's president, Gordon Maloney, said: "Students should not be steered away from one choice or another based on their background. They need to have a real choice over their future, backed by assurances of schools, colleges and universities that the support needed will be provided, no matter the path taken."

And David Cameron, head of careers management skills at Skills Development Scotland, agreed. "(Our organisation) is very aware of the importance of aspirations and of early decisions taken by young people and their families on their eventual careers," he said.

"We continually stress what they can do, rather than anything that they might feel would hold them back. We also stress 'horizons', and while we make sure that they are aware of the opportunities that there are in their local labour market, we encourage them to look beyond that."

But universities can also help to create change. Many institutions now run early-engagement programmes in association with local schools. And, only this month, the University of Strathclyde became the first Scottish HE institution to link up with the Children's University. This scheme offers students all over the UK aged 7-14 opportunities for high-quality learning outside school hours.

In cooperation with Glasgow City Council, Strathclyde will provide access to specially designed lectures at the university as well as visits to city galleries and museums. The children will collect credits as they progress, before being able to "graduate" at a ceremony at Strathclyde's Barony Hall in February next year.

"The aim is to narrow the gap and to provide those young people who struggle with the kind of learning experiences they would not normally get," said Mr Cunningham, a trustee of the scheme.

But it is crucial for university to remain affordable if the seeds of ambition that have been sown are to grow, student representatives believe. NUS Scotland welcomed the government's announcement earlier this month that undergraduate student loans would increase by £250 a year, bringing the minimum income for those from the lowest-income households to £7,500 per annum.

The government also said that Scottish postgraduates on "eligible supported courses" would be able to apply for a loan of up to £4,500 a year to help with living costs from 2015-16.

Mr Maloney said that tuition-fee-free education was a critical factor in helping to increase fair access to Scotland's universities, and that the announcements were "very good news".

"Students need enough money to get by to be able to concentrate on their studies," he said. "Too often, students in colleges and universities have to take on multiple part-time jobs, or go deep into commercial debt to avoid dropping out. While of course grants and bursaries would be better than loans, worst of all would be no increases in support at all."

'I GOT THERE IN THE END': THE STRUGGLE OF NAVIGATING ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO UNIVERSITY

NUS vice-president Robert Foster recently completed his first year of a social science degree at Glasgow Caledonian University.

However, his journey has not been the traditional smooth ride from school straight into the university of his choice via five straight As in his Highers.

Mr Foster, now aged 33, left school at 16. University never occurred to him as an option, he said, because it had never been "on the table" to start with, and by the time he left school he "simply didn't have the grades".

"It was never on my radar to go to university because I was never pushed into academic subjects. The option was never mentioned to me," he said.

After a decade working in the construction industry, he decided to return to education to study social care at national certificate and higher national certificate level at James Watt College in Ayrshire.

"Part of the core skills were literacy and numeracy skills, which I didn't think I had from school. But I got there in the end," Mr Foster said.

But even when he made it to university, his struggles were not over.

"Academic writing styles like referencing were things that we did not really do at college. We got an hour's tutorial on Harvard referencing. The others all got that from school."

Mr Foster said that initiatives such as the Children's University or schemes involving Glasgow Caledonian University and its partner schools in the city would be "hugely beneficial" in creating ambition and ensuring that children were aware of all the options open to them.