

R E S E A R C H

Access to higher education in Scotland for people from less advantaged backgrounds: the major role of further education colleges

Access in Scotland: Access to higher education for people from less advantaged backgrounds in Scotland, by Lucy Hunter Blackburn, Gitit Kadar-Satat, Sheila Riddell and Elisabet Weedon, the University of Edinburgh, the Sutton Trust and the Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity, 27 May 2016.

This research analyses the extent to which efforts to widen access to Scottish higher education have been successful, compared with other parts of the UK. It illustrates the significantly different position of further education colleges in Scotland, which account for 20.9% of those going in to higher education by the age of 30, compared to 6% in England.

This accounts for the higher proportion of people in Scotland going into higher education. In Scotland 55% go into higher education by the time they are 30, while in England it is 46.6%. In Scotland 34.1% go from school to university, while in England it is 94%. The contribution of further education colleges in Scotland to narrowing the social gap, which is bigger in Scotland than anywhere else in the UK, has been considerable. Some 90% of all the growth in higher education places for disadvantaged students in Scotland over the last decade has been provided by further education colleges rather than universities.

- Scottish 18 year olds from the most advantaged areas are more than four times more likely to go straight to university than those from the least advantaged areas. In England, those from the most advantaged areas are 2.4 times as likely to go to university as those from the least, and three times as likely in Wales and Northern Ireland.
- The access gap between higher tariff universities, including the Ancients, is not very different from that to other Scottish universities. This is in contrast to the seven-fold gap at higher tariff, mainly Russell Group, universities in England. This has been attributed to the provision of 720 funded places for disadvantaged students at the ancient universities since 2012.
- Much – although not all – of the relationship between socio-economic background and HE participation is accounted for by previous educational attainment. So the messages that young people receive in school about higher education and subject choices, as well as the support they receive to do well in their Highers are important.
- There has been improved access for disadvantaged students in Scotland as well as in the rest of the UK. However, detailed analysis of Scottish Funding Council data reveals in Scotland this has been met almost entirely by the expansion of sub-degree programmes in FE colleges. Since 2006, 90 per cent of all the growth in entry into Scottish higher education by disadvantaged students has been through sub-degree courses in colleges. The funded places at the ancients are a notable exception, but there have been few other extra university places taken by disadvantaged students.
- Academically selective Scottish universities are at least as socially selective as similar types of

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institution in other parts of the UK. Students from managerial and professional backgrounds are over-represented in highly selective universities in both Scotland and England, and this gap has not narrowed between 1996 and 2014.

- Analysis of students' higher education destinations shows that in Scotland there is a growing tendency for socially advantaged students to opt for courses in more selective universities.
- In 1996, independent schools (catering for about 5% of the Scottish school population) accounted for 23% of young entrants to ancient universities compared to only 9% of entrants to other pre-1992 universities and 5% of entrants to post-1992 universities. By 2004, the average percentage of students from independent schools in ancient universities declined to 19%. Since then the proportion has gradually increased, peaking at 26% in 2014/15. Privately educated pupils make up an increasing proportion of entrants to leading universities in Scotland
- Scottish universities have a greater proportion of more academically selective institutions, whilst England has a higher proportion of less selective institutions. This reflects the fact that England has a relatively large number of post-1992 universities, providing more places for students with lower academic qualifications. The profile of the Scottish university system is likely to militate against the inclusion of students from less advantaged backgrounds in comparison with other parts of the UK.

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Overall, Scottish universities' efforts to widen access for students from poorer backgrounds have achieved only partial success. Divergence in fee policy has not given Scotland any specific advantage, compared to other parts of the UK, in relation to increasing overall levels of participation or participation by more disadvantaged groups. Improvements in participation have been largely driven by the growth of college Higher National provision in which students from poorer backgrounds are over-represented. This is because the supply of university places in Scotland has not kept pace with rising demand and increased competition for university places, particularly in the most selective universities, has had a disproportionately negative effect on students from the most deprived backgrounds.