



Scotland's two largest cities are both near and far: an hour's train ride apart, they flank the east and west of the country. Culturally, they are both large, bustling cities with ancient universities. But where

As widening access ascends the political agenda, these two cities each with their separate challenges will have to work together to meet government targets.

backgrounds in Scotland are found to be less than their better off peers, compared to the rest of the UK.

The Scottish National Party has set closing the attainment gap as a “top priority” for the coming parliament. As part of that drive, it has agreed to accept most of recommendations made by the Commission on Widening Access, which was established in November 2014. Its final report, published in March, suggested reserving 16 per cent of university places for students from the

### A tale of two cities

Indeed the University is on track for 2020

Jonathan Jones, head of recruitment and widening participation, says institutional strategy has never been "based on any government colour". Two of its programmes, which cover 100 schools in 13 local authorities, are the longest running in Scotland. Their cornerstone is

Although Glasgow has a wide pool of students from deprived postcodes to draw on, Neil Croll, head of widening participation, insists that the university still has its work cut out persuading such students that they are capable of securing places at "the posh university in the west end". He attributes Glasgow's success in widening participation to the fact it is embedded in terms of ethos and culture "across the university and at every level" including from

The principal and senior management team's commitment among staff is important too, as they give up time that could be used for research or holidays to teach on the summer schools. Equally important is the widening participation team's close collaboration with the admissions department, he says.

The institution runs some widening participation programmes alone, while others are executed collaboratively. All participants are able to use the experience to apply for any university, a "multi-exit dimension" that was identified by the Commission on Widening Access as an example of best practice. Indeed, its report calls for a

attend a summer school run by one university and take the benefits accrued from that experience to another. Croll suggests that the government may also wish to look at regional targets to limit competition between universities over widening access students or at ways of "giving credit where it's due" to institutions that have run a summer school that resulted in a student attending another university.

This could be a remedy for a potential scramble for students as universities seek to hit their targets. Rebecca Gaukroger, director of student recruitment and admissions at the University of Edinburgh, is concerned that the government's access targets are going to be "really stretching" given how early the attainment gap begins and how many pupils drop out from school. "It's got to be a pretty sophisticated joined-up effort," she says. Recent figures showed a drop in the number of poor 18-year-olds admitted to Edinburgh, as well as quite low rates of recruitment overall. But the university is

has been pushing for the Scottish Funding Council to publish more data to demonstrate the whereabouts of the missing students and to develop a more sophisticated approach that reflects the multiple layers of disadvantage, including ethnicity and gender as well as socio-economic background. It is also planning to develop a new widening participation strategy this year, informed by the work of the Commission on Widening Access.

The university is particularly keen to encourage school-leavers to stay on for Highers, so that there is a wider pool from which to recruit; students should also be encouraged to pick the right subjects to enable them to attend an ancient university. The highly academic subject mix on offer at Edinburgh also does not lend itself so well to articulation from the more vocational routes on offer at colleges either, says Gaukroger. Meanwhile the fact that the university recruits internationally means it has a "commitment to widening participation that extends beyond Scotland", with internal targets that are UK-wide, unlike the Scottish government's benchmarks.

### **The third way**

These milestones are important in that they represent a shift away from the Scottish National Party's rigid focus on its flagship policy for widening access: free university tuition. Although it is tempting to

students attending university, in reality it does not, says Lucy Hunter Blackburn, a researcher and former head of higher education in the Scottish government. She thinks free university tuition has mostly been effective in keeping “young people from middle class backgrounds out of debt”. The system does not allow for expansion, making it difficult to widen access where places are oversubscribed, and its high costs have resulted in cuts to the maintenance grant budget, leaving the poorest students with higher levels of debt than their wealthier peers. “I think there’s been an unwillingness to admit that if you’re spending money on tuition fees, you’re not spending money elsewhere,” she says. “People need to justify those choices.”

reactive attitude to the reforms in England and that it is quick to attribute any differences to their alternative approaches. "As England embraced various fee regimes and looked at expanding their system and making degree awarding powers more easily available, Scotland has tended to stand a bit aloof from that, and say we have a good system, it's high quality and we don't want to see it changing dramatically." She thinks the government should now consider modelling some systems that might involve means-tested fee contributions, albeit not necessarily to levels in England, and lifting the numbers cap for certain groups of disadvantaged students.

While Hunter Blackburn praises the Commission on Widening Access for encouraging debate, she thinks it was given too little time and too limited a research budget to produce a truly robust report—particularly when contrasted with Wales' Diamond review of higher education funding. She sees this as emblematic of a wider defensive approach from the Scottish government. "I think the Scottish government still isn't showing the commitment it needs to data and evidence gathering," she says. "I think there's an element of

has treated all critiques as inherently political and has rebutted them in a political way. People may contest research but at least it's there to be contested."

Indeed, in Hunter Blackburn's work for the Sutton Trust, she revealed that 90 per cent of the growth in access to higher education in the past decade has come from colleges, not universities. While articulation could be considered a Scottish model comparable with England's post-1992 offer, it carries several drawbacks, such as a challenging transition experience for some students, many of whom are required to repeat the year, as well as a more limited range of higher education options. Hunter Blackburn suggests government may wish to consider "whether we should just let more people into universities in the first place." Scotland could also create more places by reducing its four-year degree to three, in line with England. But there is resistance in terms of a cultural affection, a sense of the distinctiveness it confers on brand Scotland, and fears over the

There are other reasons why Scotland may appear to underperform compared to England. In 2004 its southern neighbour obliged English universities to draft access agreements in return for the ability to charge high tuition fees. It took another ten years before the Scottish parliament passed similar legislation. Sheila Riddell, a researcher at the University of Edinburgh and a co-author of the Sutton Trust report, says "It has always been assumed that the lack of tuition fees would automatically rectify the problem—we have a perfect meritocracy so all those with the ability to do so can go to universities, and it wasn't properly recognised the way in which social background affects who gets into university. It wasn't recognised in Scotland that there was need to regulate, and universities here have been quite resistant to it." Indeed, Riddell views suspicion over the regulation of access as part of a wider distrust of government within universities, which she thinks was similarly evidenced in the controversial university governance reforms. "There's a constant

Furthermore, unlike England, which uses neighbourhood participation in higher education as a measure of the socioeconomic status of undergraduates, Scotland's index of multiple deprivation fails to identify youngsters from poor backgrounds who live in more affluent neighbourhoods, and can serve as a poor measure in Scotland's many rural areas, says Riddell. This may account for

debate about changing the measure, or introducing new variables such as parental level of education, but this would hamper longitudinal analysis. There are other gaps in the data, too, since there is limited information about students in higher education outside of universities, which makes comparisons with England and Scotland challenging. "Not having the data available does have quite major consequences," Riddell says.

**Joined up thinking**

But closing the attainment gap is more complicated than the targets suggest. Maureen McKenna, director of education at Glasgow City Council and a member of the Commission on Widening Access, says that widening access is a "huge issue" for the council. A decade ago, 18 per cent of school-leavers in Glasgow progressed to higher education; last year the figure was 34 per cent. But further progress will be challenging. "Since 2007 I think I have been raising expectations and successfully raising attainment among young people in the city," she says. "But actually we're raising the bar for

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McKenna thinks that meeting the targets will be “challenging” and will involve balancing other, occasionally conflicting priorities, such as delivering high-quality research and performing well in league tables. Instead of seeking to game the statistics, as she thinks some institutions do, they should ensure this commitment is embedded at all levels, with buy-in from senior management filtering down through institutional culture. This cultural change could also be reflected in the language used to talk about widening access, she suggests. Where UK universities talk of lowering grades in contextualised admissions, in Australia, such students are referred to as being given “points up” to match the exam performance of their more privileged peers. “I think it’s really important for everybody to understand that these young people in Glasgow have just as much to offer, and more potentially, than someone from the leafy suburbs who’s been hot-housed through exams via tutors that our young people don’t have access to.”

McKenna says she would also welcome the appointment of a director for fair access to oversee the outcome agreements that are made between universities and the Scottish Funding Council. "With diverse universities and colleges with diverse interests, having a person who will have that overview is really important," she says.

Increasing collaboration between schools, colleges and universities will be important too, to maximise efficiency. "There's some really good examples, but we do have situations where the universities are chasing funding for widening access programmes and then coming into our schools and they're overwhelmed by the different programmes targeting young people from deprived communities," she says.

Ultimately, McKenna would like to see management staff at Scottish universities undertaking a close and thoughtful reading of the

bottom-up basis, rather than waiting for direction from government. They should seek to build partnerships among each other, and with local schools and colleges. "We need to think about the learner journey from cradle to grave and where we all have our respective roles in it," she says. "We need to develop widening access programmes that reduce duplication, and to work as a region, with Strathclyde delivering this and Glasgow delivering that, then we'll all take recognition for it and behave like grown-ups."

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