Our Future Information Sheet 4: Widening Access to Higher Education

Introduction
Across the UK, there is general agreement with the principle that all children should have an equal opportunity to develop their academic potential. Scottish Government representatives are emphatic that 'education in Scotland should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay'. However, official statistics show that across the UK, Europe and the developed world, the majority of young people who go to university are from middle class backgrounds. In both England and Scotland, students in the most selective older universities are likely to be from the most socially advantaged backgrounds. The European Union is committed to severing the association between social background and higher education participation, and irrespective of the outcome of the referendum, Scotland needs to consider what can be done to erode the inequalities within its higher education system. These are issues that are also of importance to the National Union of Students, Scotland, as Gordon Maloney points out in the widening access section of the film.

In this information sheet, we (i) outline widening access policies in Scotland and England; (ii) provide some evidence on the social profile of students in different types of institution in Scotland and England; and (iii) consider the factors which contribute to inequality in access to higher education.

Common strands in UK higher education policy on widening access
There are strong similarities between approaches to widening access to students from socially disadvantaged groups in Scotland and in other parts of the UK. Since the late 1990s, there has been a commitment to redressing imbalances in admissions from different socio-economic groups. Universities across the UK have undertaken the following types of activities:

- Running outreach programmes to encourage young people at schools in low participation areas to apply to university. Outreach programmes may involve summer schools, buddy arrangements and the organisation of visits to university to get a taste of student life;

- Forging links between universities and colleges to enable college students on HNC/HND programmes to transfer to university for the last two years of a degree programme. These linking arrangements are sometimes referred to as articulation hubs;
• Providing study skills classes aimed at students from low participation neighbourhoods in order to improve retention and completion rates;

• Allowing admissions tutors to make slightly lower offers to pupils from low participation neighbourhoods (known as contextualised admissions policies). The idea of contextualised admissions policies is that students from below average achieving schools are expected to gain minimum course requirements to secure the offer of a place, whereas those from above average achieving schools are expected to gain higher grades.

We now explore some of the ways that widening access policy differs, or diverges, between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

Policy divergence on widening access post-devolution

As noted in Information Sheet 2, approaches to undergraduate student funding and widening access in Scotland and England have diverged since devolution. In England, the planned introduction of higher levels of fees in 2004 by a Labour administration caused anxiety about deterring bright students from poorer backgrounds from attending university, leading to a greater focus on widening access. As a result, under the terms of the Higher Education Act 2004, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established, and universities wishing to charge variable fees were obliged to submit a widening access agreement for approval. In order to charge fees above £1,200, institutions had to convince the regulator (OFFA) that adequate provision was being made for widening access and encouraging participation. All institutions were obliged to submit access agreements to OFFA, setting out targets and milestones. These targets were set by the individual institution, and OFFA has tried to encourage institutions to set challenging targets. This approach has been characterised as more carrot than stick, and OFFA has been seen by some as lacking teeth. Others believe that the government should not interfere in university admissions, and encouraging students from poorer backgrounds may be at the expense of bright pupils from more advantaged backgrounds.

Through the now discontinued Aim Higher programme, considerable government funding in England was channelled into widening access initiatives. As described in Information Sheet 2, a relatively generous system of non-repayable bursaries and grants and repayable loans to cover living expenses was also established, targeted specifically at students from poorer backgrounds. It was hoped that these support measures would ensure that students from poorer backgrounds would continue to apply to universities, rather than being put off by high fee levels. So far, there has been no decline in university participation by students from poorer backgrounds. However, the Independent Commission on Fees (ICoF, 2013) noted that in 2012, university applications from mature students fell by 40%, whilst applications from part-time students fell by 14% in England. This contrasts with the situation in Scotland, where there has been no reduction in applications from mature and part-time students.

In Scotland, until recently there was less action of widening participation because it was believed that the absence of tuition fees would ensure that no one would be deterred from studying through lack of funding. However, despite the absence of fees, there are still
major social inequalities in university participation in Scotland. Recognising this problem, the Scottish Government has decided that institutions should be obliged to produce evidence of progress on widening access in order to qualify for government funding. Since 2011, Scottish universities must submit their plans on widening access to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) as part of their outcome agreements (SFC, 2012). The Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 allows the SFC to impose financial penalties on institutions deemed to have achieved insufficient progress in relation to widening access. The Act also makes provision for extra university places for widening access initiatives and articulation with colleges. The additional places for students from poorer backgrounds have been made available to the more selective older institutions. The extra places for college students with HNC/HND qualifications have been made available to the new (post-92) universities, which have tended to include a wider social mix of students compared with older (pre-92) universities.

As in England, universities are free to establish their own targets, although guidance from the SFC stipulates that institutions must state how they intend to increase participation from Scottish domiciled learners from the 20% and 40% most deprived postcode areas. The SFC also wishes to see plans to equalise participation from learners from different ‘protected characteristic’ groups where there is evidence of under-representation. This would include students from minority ethnic groups, disabled students, mature students and those from care backgrounds. Whilst all outcome agreements would be expected to establish widening access targets for students from poorer backgrounds, universities are encouraged to establish their own priorities reflecting their specific contexts (e.g. some universities might wish to increase participation from those living in remote rural areas). As in England, there are debates about the extent to which outcome agreements are going to produce real change. Some universities worry that their autonomy is being eroded, whilst others are concerned that universities are being given too much freedom to set their own targets, which may therefore be insufficiently challenging. It is probably too soon to judge the extent to which the outcome agreements relating to widening participation are likely to produce significant change in the social composition of universities.

**Higher education participation and the social profile of students in different institutions**

As discussed in Information Sheet 1, Scotland has a higher proportion of 18-30 year olds in HE compared with England, but the proportion on degree programmes in university is very similar. When we compare all students on higher education courses in Scotland and England, we find that England has a larger gap between those from the most and least deprived backgrounds (see Figure 4.1). This is partly because students in Scottish colleges on HNCs and HNDs tend to be from more deprived backgrounds. From 2015/16, there will no longer be a cap on the recruitment of students in England. It will be interesting to see whether Scotland follows England’s lead, and whether the lifting of the numbers cap means that more students from poorer backgrounds will go to university.
Figure 4.1: Percentage gap between participation of students from most and least deprived backgrounds in England and Scotland

![Figure 4.1: Percentage gap between participation of students from most and least deprived backgrounds in England and Scotland](image)

As Gordon Maloney points out in the film, there are also important differences in the social class profiles of different types of institutions. Table 4.1 shows the distinction between the Scottish ancient\(^1\), old\(^1\), new universities\(^1\) and colleges in terms of student population and deprivation quintile. It shows that students from the most deprived postcode areas are more likely to access higher education in colleges and least likely to do so in ancient universities.

### Table 4.1: Participation in higher education in Scotland by deprivation quintiles (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deprivation quintile</th>
<th>Ancient universities</th>
<th>Old universities</th>
<th>New universities</th>
<th>Colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (least)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (most)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A comparison between Scotland and England shows that older universities (pre-92) tend to have a more middle class student body than newer (post-92) institutions. Figures 4.2 and 4.3 show the social class profiles of pre-92 and post-92 institutions in Scotland and

\(^1\) Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrew are categorised as ancient; universities of Dundee, Heriot-Watt, Stirling and Strathclyde are classified as old; universities of Abertay, Edinburgh Napier, Glasgow Caledonian, Queen Margaret, Robert Gordon, University of the Highlands and Islands and University of the West of Scotland are classified as new.
England. Private school pupils make up about 8% of the total pupil population in England and a slightly lower proportion in Scotland (about 5%). Pupils from the private school sector are over-represented in the pre-92, more selective, institutions in both countries. As shown by Figures 4.2 and 4.3, students from professional and managerial backgrounds are much more likely to study in old (pre-92) than new (post-92) universities and the profile of different institutional groups has changed little over time.

Figure 4.2: Average percentage of under-21 entrants (i) from managerial & professional classes and (ii) from private schools, by university sector: England

Figure 4.3: Average percentage of under-21 entrants (i) from managerial & professional classes and (ii) from private schools, by university sector: Scotland

Source: Croxford, 2013, analysis of HESA data
The social diversity of the most selective institutions is an important issue throughout the UK. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission was set up by the Westminster Government to monitor levels of social mobility in the UK and to consider how society could be fairer. Their report, *Higher education: the fair access challenge* (2013a), expressed concerns about the prospects for improving fair access for those young people wanting to enter higher education, especially at the most selective (Russell Group) institutions. In another recent report, *State of the Nation: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain* (2013b), the Commission found that while more low-income students now attend university than ever before, the social composition of students in top universities in the UK has not changed to any extent. There is also evidence that the proportion of students from state schools and disadvantaged backgrounds attending the most selective institutions has actually got worse and is lower than it was a decade ago. The authors conclude that there are 3,700 ‘missing’ state school students each year who have achieved the grades to get into the Russell Group of universities but do not go on to attend a Russell Group institution. In the most selective English universities, the authors write:

> Currently, even after controlling for a range of factors, including A-level grades and the subjects taken at A-level, pupils from state schools in England need to be the equivalent of two grades better qualified than privately educated pupils to be as likely as those pupils to apply to Russell Group universities.

**Why is there inequality in access to university?**

Prior attainment at school is the most important factor contributing to inequality in higher education participation. Although attainment is linked to individual ability there is also much evidence to show that other factors such as unemployment, poor health, low levels of parental education, poverty and poor housing have a detrimental effect on children’s opportunities to learn. The Growing Up in Scotland Study is a large longitudinal study following children born in 2005 from birth to teenage years and beyond. The study found that, at age 5, compared with children whose parents have no qualifications, those with degree-educated parents are around 18 months ahead on vocabulary and 13 months ahead on problem solving ability (Scottish Government, 2011). This is later reflected in differences in educational attainment related to socio-economic status. For example, as shown in Figure 4.4, in all the countries of the UK, there are significant differences in attainment in mathematics linked to neighbourhood deprivation.
Schools in different areas have access to different resources and there may be inequalities in access to certain subjects. All of these factors have an impact on an individual’s ability to gain the grades required for university. Universities have been encouraged to ensure that opportunities to study are extended to all those that have the potential to benefit from university education. However, it is clear that much more needs to be done in reducing inequalities in earlier attainment and in encouraging wider participation.

**Young people’s views of social factors affecting access to university**

Young people in our interviews expressed a range of opinions when asked whether everyone has equal access to university regardless of their background or school attended. Callum, from Glasgow, pointed to the differences in terms of attainment which we discuss above. He said:

*I mean, people from more affluent areas and better schools are more likely to get the exam results. So people from less well areas are gonna have to work harder to get there.*  
(Callum, Glasgow)

Iain, from Edinburgh expanded on this point:

*I think that access to university is not to do with getting into the university itself. I think it’s the education provided beforehand, as you could have equally smart people but one of them will have gone to a private school and one will have gone to a state school. And through no fault of the person in the state school, they will have acquired less education than the person in the private school and will probably be at more of a disadvantage when it comes to get into university with the grades they received at Higher. And I think there is disadvantage.*  
(Iain, Edinburgh)
Some students, particularly those in areas where fewer young people go on to university, suggested that universities favoured those applying from private schools. Some said that private school students were in a more advantaged position when it comes to applying to university as they have access to better resources and smaller class sizes. In contrast, other interviewees suggested that it is up to individuals to obtain the entrance grades, and that as long as applicants manage this they would be treated equally irrespective of what school they came from.

*I believe there’re no difference between pupils who go to state schools and those who go to private schools. I feel if you work hard you can easily achieve more than those in private schools. And be harder working, be better to go to university, better equipped for a job. Just because they’ve paid to go to school doesn’t mean they are any better or worse than we are.* (Daniel, Fife)

**What can be done to equalise access to higher education? Some practical examples**

The Scottish Funding Council’s Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) works across four regions, targeting schools with low rates of progression to higher education. Outreach programmes are also provided by individual institutions. For example, Glasgow Caledonian University’s Caledonian Club uses student mentors to engage with children and young people in nurseries, primary and secondary schools to raise aspirations and build skills. University of Glasgow’s Top-Up access programme provides targeted support for students from under-represented groups once they get into university. Students from less advantaged backgrounds often do not have the contacts and networks needed to help them access professional occupations, so additional measures are needed to provide these links. The Reach Scotland project is run by the universities of Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Glasgow and St Andrews and works with secondary school pupils with the aim of increasing access to the more highly selective professional areas.

A number of young people who were interviewed as part of our film had been involved in university outreach programmes. They all spoke very highly of their experiences of visiting universities, either through attending Advanced Higher classes at one of the hub universities or through attending lectures and staying in halls as part of summer schools. They said they felt more comfortable about going to university, more confident meeting new people and being away from home, and that it had helped them make subject decisions. Further information about local widening access programme can be found in the resources section below.

There was also some discussion of contextualised admissions policies. Jonathan, from Fife, believed that school background should be taken into account. He said:

*I’ve heard of a scheme that if your parents didn’t go to university then you should get a better scoring and you should be favoured. And that might eliminate people from private schools automatically getting the places and people from public schools will have more of a chance at university.* (Jonathan, Fife)

However, others were more critical of contextualised admissions policies, suggesting that these were not ‘fair’ and that everyone should be treated the same way.
Conclusion
Despite having free higher education, it is evident that Scotland, like other parts of the UK, has a major problem with social inequality in higher education participation, particularly in the older more selective institutions. Over the past decade, there has been some evidence of policy divergence between England and Scotland on widening access, with England taking the lead in establishing the Office for Fair Access in 2004 when higher fees were being introduced. Scotland has recently taken stronger measures, requiring universities to set targets and milestones in relation to widening access and to submit outcome agreements to the Scottish Funding Council for improvement. Despite these efforts, it is clear that students from wealthier backgrounds have a much better chance of going to university, partly as a result of differences in school attainment. This inequality is a major driver of wider, and growing, economic inequality, which over time may threaten social cohesion and stability. There is a general consensus in Scotland and the rest of the UK that much more needs to be done to tackle inequalities in higher education, but less certainty about which measure are likely to be most effective. Social inequality in educational attainment at school needs to be tackled, but universities also need to do their part by developing effective outreach programmes, contextualised admissions policies and learner support. A question for the future is whether lifting the cap on students numbers in England from 2015/16 will have a positive impact on widening access.

References


**Outreach programmes and initiatives**

Access to Creative Education in Scotland (ACES): University of Edinburgh  
http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/student-recruitment/widening-participation/projects/aces/about-aces

ACES at Glasgow School of Art http://www.gsa.ac.uk/media/430162/aces_a3_v7_lores.pdf

ACES at University of Dundee http://www.dundee.ac.uk/admissions/participation/aces/

ASPIRENorth http://www.scotland-aspirenorth.ac.uk/

Focus West: Focus On College and University Study – West of Scotland  
http://www.focuswest.org.uk/

Glasgow Caledonian University Advanced Highers Hub  
http://www.gcu.ac.uk/media/gcalwebv2/thelibrary/centresprojects/advancedhigherhub/A5%20ADVANCED%20HIGHER%20HUB%20BOOKLET%20COPY.pdf

Lift off: Schools for Higher Education Programme http://www.lift-off.org.uk/

REACH at University of Aberdeen http://www.abdn.ac.uk/study/about/reach-532.php

REACH at University of Edinburgh http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/student-recruitment/widening-participation/projects/reach/about

REACH at University of St Andrew’s http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/schoolprojects/reach/

REACH Scotland at University of Glasgow  
http://www.gla.ac.uk/about/wideningparticipation/reach/

REACH Tayside http://www.dundee.ac.uk/admissions/participation/reach/

The Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS) http://www.leapsonline.org/

University of Aberdeen S6@Uni http://www.abdn.ac.uk/cops/about/s6uni-285.php
Widening Access to Higher Education

Suggested classroom activities

Activity 1: Group discussion on widening access to higher education
In small groups, discuss the following questions:

- Does everyone have equal access to university regardless of their background or school attended? Why/why not?

- What are the differences between students that go to private schools and those that go to state schools?

- Why are students from socially advantaged backgrounds more likely to go to university (and, conversely, why are students from poorer backgrounds less likely to go)?

- Some people predicted that when higher student fees were introduced in England, this would mean that fewer young people would decide to go to university. Why do you think this does not appear to have happened?

- People also thought that, following the introduction of higher fees in England, there might be a reduction in young students from poorer backgrounds, but this has not been the case. What explanations could you suggest?

- In Scotland, the abolition of student fees has not altered the social profile of students, particularly in the most selective universities. Why do you think this is the case?

- What do you think needs to be done to narrow the gap in higher education participation between those from different social backgrounds?

Activity 2: Research
Design an interview study or a survey investigating attitudes to participation in higher education by people from different social backgrounds. Think carefully about the research methods you adopt, including sampling, data analysis and writing a report. In addition, think about how you can ask people questions about their social background in a meaningful but sensitive way. You might want to conduct interviews with older relatives or friends to talk to them about their thoughts on going to university. How have things changed since they were at school?
Activity 3: Newspaper analysis
Below is a link to a recent newspaper article on widening access and the Scottish higher education system.


Read the article and consider the following:

- How balanced is the article?
- Does it explore all sides of the argument?
- Do you think the newspaper has a particular political leaning when it comes to the independence debate?
- Do you think it is still possible for working class young people to rise to the top of their profession like the writer's dad did?

Activity 4: Role play
Take on the role of a government policy maker to discuss which sectors of education should receive increases in funding over the coming years. In role, discuss the pros and cons of increasing funding for pre-school education, primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and universities. Where would the money best be spent to widen access?

Project website: http://bit.ly/1aceEel Follow us on Twitter @Indy_Scot_HE