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Getting into higher education: young people's views of fairness

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ABSTRACT

Free tuition in Scotland is frequently linked to principles of equal access and fairness. But just how 'fair' do young people think access to higher education is? And what concepts of fairness are their views based on? This article reports the findings of semi-structured interviews with 121 young people aged 15-18 in Scotland. The paper outlines the position of those who felt access was equal for all, where meritocratic ideas of hard work, motivation and individual ability were paramount, versus those who believed that access is inherently unequal and based on socio-economic background and school attended. The majority of young people conceptualised fairness on the basis of equality of procedure, with many perceiving contextual admissions to be an 'unfair' form of discrimination. Findings point to the need for better communication of the rationale behind contextual admissions and greater discussion of social justice issues in schools more broadly.

INTRODUCTION

Free tuition in Scotland is frequently linked to principles of equal access and fairness, and is presented as a symbol of a more egalitarian and socially just approach to education. The Scottish Government contends that access to higher education should be based on the 'ability to learn rather than the ability to pay' (Scottish Government, 2013), contrasting its approach with that of high fees and high debt in the rest of the UK. The rarely questioned assumption is that free tuition improves access to higher education for those from less affluent backgrounds. Yet, despite free tuition, research suggests that the Scottish system appears to reproduce rather than undermine existing social inequalities. Rates of higher education participation for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland remain static (Croxford and Raffe, 2014) and highly stratified, with little to suggest that free tuition has led to increases in the proportion of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Riddell, 2015b). With so much attention focused on free tuition, this tends to ignore the skewed nature of student loan distribution in Scotland, whereby the poorest shoulder the greatest debts (Hunter Blackburn, 2015), and debt aversion can impact on young people's

HE choices (Minty, 2015). Meanwhile, prior attainment continues to be a key factor in determining access to higher education generally, and in particular to the most prestigious institutions (Croxford, *et al.*, 2014; Boliver, 2013), leading many to question the claims to fairness of free tuition.

But what of the views of those at the centre of the higher education debate – the young people themselves? Just how ‘fair’ do they think access to higher education is? And what concepts of fairness are their views based on? This article seeks to answer these questions. It reports the findings of semi-structured interviews with 121 young people, living in Scotland and aged 15 to 18, as part of the ESRC study ‘Higher education in Scotland, the devolution settlement and the referendum on independence’ which explored young people’s views of higher education access within the context of free tuition.

In the following sections I introduce the methods used in the research, before outlining key literature in relation to notions of fairness and equality within the context of higher education. I then present findings from the study, contrasting the position of those young people who felt higher education access was equal for all as a result of free tuition and meritocratic ideas of hard work, motivation and individual ability, with those who believed that access is inherently unequal and that socio-economic background and school attended act as barriers. Finally, I outline young people’s views of contextualised admissions which many perceived to be an ‘unfair’ form of discrimination and consider the extent to which the views of young people are aligned with Scottish Government policy.

METHODS

This qualitative study was conducted in 2013 and 2014 and formed part of a larger ESRC funded project on Scottish higher education, the devolution settlement and the referendum on independence. It was designed to explore young people’s higher education choices as well as their views on the funding of, and access to, higher education in Scotland and the rest of the UK. In the first instance, 89 young people aged 15 to 18 in nine Scottish schools and a Scottish college were interviewed for a short film¹ to be used as a teaching resource. A further 59 young people from six schools in Scotland and the north of England took part in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Findings reported in this paper relate to interviews with 121 young people based in Scotland only. For other findings from the project relating to young people’s views on the funding of higher education in England and Scotland see Minty (2015).

Participating schools and the college were selected so as to represent a range of different demographics and regions, and were located in eight Scottish local authorities in both rural and urban areas. Young people were selected by school and college contacts. Postcode data was collected from interviewees, allowing this to be matched to indices of relative deprivation (SIMD or the Scottish Index

¹ (‘Our Future: Young people’s views on higher education in Scotland’, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Alc1XzblgpE>)

of Multiple Deprivation database¹). More than half of pupils said that neither parent had been to university. The vast majority of participants planned to attend university or college upon leaving school, and as such the sample should be seen to reflect the views of a particular sub-group of young people considering higher education, and should not be considered representative of the wider population.

Consent was obtained from all young people, and the parents of those who appeared in the film. In both stages of the research, interviews were recorded and transcribed and entered into NVivo. Data was analysed thematically and emerging patterns and differences were explored by social background and gender. Pseudonyms are used throughout. Further details about key school/college and pupil characteristics can be found in the Appendix.

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Notions of equality and fairness

A desire to create a fairer and more equal society is at the heart of many efforts to widen access to higher education. It is thus important to consider how equal access is being understood within a policy context before considering how these notions are at work in the ideas of young people considering access to higher education.

The terms ‘equal’ and ‘fair’ can be used to mean very different things; what is ‘fair’ to someone might be considered ‘unfair’ to another. There are multiple interpretations of equality, but the literature often refers to equality of opportunity, equality of procedure and equality of outcome (Miller, 1999; Riddell, 2015a). Equality of opportunity is about placing everyone on an equal footing or starting point, but of course this may not necessarily lead to equal outcomes for all, as some may rise to the top faster than others. Equality of procedure places importance on the transparency of procedures and processes. Fairness in this sense relates to the extent to which people are deemed to be treated the same. Equality of outcome regards disproportionalities relating to groups as fundamentally problematic, whilst recognising that individuals within each groups will have different preferences and make different choices. As discussed below, young people within the ESRC study favoured an equality of procedure approach. This fits with Murphy *et al.*'s view (2015) that young people tend to accept ‘limitations on their freedom or apparent inequalities if they believe the process is fair’ (p. 45).

THE SCOTTISH CONTEXT

- Equal access is fundamentally about fairness. [Commission on Widening Access, 2015, p. 8]

¹ Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is a postcode based measure. For the purposes of this paper, SIMD 1 to 5 is used, with SIMD 1 denoting a postcode in the most deprived quintile, and SIMD 5 denoting that in the least deprived quintile.

Themes of fairness and equality for all are prominent in Scottish Government policy. There has been an emphasis on equality of opportunity, with the aim that 'A child born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities' (Sturgeon, 2015). This can be viewed as a 'weak' version of fairness, and it is this approach which has been most evident up to now in Scottish Government policy.

Discourses of merit, whereby the distribution of goods is determined by ability, are also prominent in discussions of fair and equal access to higher education. In Scotland, the debate as to the values and principles of education have often centred on the ideals of equality of opportunity for all, alongside a strong tradition of meritocracy which prioritises the intellectual ability of the individual (Murphy, *et al.*, 2015). Admission to higher education is, on the face of it, based on individual ability, and accords well with an equality of opportunity paradigm. However, the idea of advancement based on merit hides the socio-economic realities of the context in which individuals achieve their grades; whilst the ideal is to treat everyone in the same way, it is expected that people will achieve different outcomes. There is thus a danger that unequal access to economic, social and cultural capital may be ignored within a meritocratic version of fairness which may lead to greater educational inequalities (Young, 1958).

The desire to portray Scotland as a more democratic, egalitarian society in which people from poorer backgrounds are able to make their way up the social class ladder through education goes back to the eighteenth century idea of the 'lad o' pairts' (Howieson, 2008; Paterson, 2003). Recent speeches by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon make reference to this (2015), framing free tuition policy as a continuation of the Scottish tradition of universal access to school education and noting that 'a commitment to universal education has been part of our identity ever since'. This further cements the idea of Scotland as a more egalitarian and fairer society, an idea which is bolstered by contrasting the Scottish system of free tuition with the high fees of the rest of the UK.

However, these claims do not necessarily stand up when viewed alongside participation rates (Riddell, 2015b). Additionally, Pitman (2015) notes that the focus on 'free' tuition serves to hide the real, private costs to students who must nonetheless pay living costs, and to the taxpayers who ultimately fund tuition.

POLICIES OF REDISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE: CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS

Different definitions of merit are at the centre of contextual admissions policies, which can be traced back to the Admissions to Higher Education Review (generally known as the *Schwartz report*, 2004). While admission has traditionally been granted on the basis of achieving the highest examination marks, the report advocated for a wider view of the conditions under which a student's grades are achieved: 'it is fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors as well as formal educational achievement, given the variation in learners' opportunities and circumstances' (p. 6). Based on what Iris Marion Young refers to as the 'politics of difference' (1990) these policies can be viewed as a form of affirmative action which recognise diversity and represent those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the use of contextual admissions policies

has not been without controversy, with some complaining of social engineering (Johnson, 2011).

The justification for the use of contextual admissions is provided by a number of recent studies which show that predicted or actual school qualification grades alone are unreliable indicators of a student's potential at university, since the social context in which a student achieves these examination grades is critical (Laselle, *et al.*, 2014; Croxford, *et al.*, 2014; HEFCE, 2005; Hoare and Johnston, 2011). Crawford's 2014 study of the link between secondary school characteristics and university outcomes found that students from non-selective schools or low value-added state schools actually have higher 'potential' than their peers from independent or selective state schools who tend to have poorer degree outcomes relative to their level of attainment on entry (see also Hoare and Johnston, 2011; Laselle, *et al.*, 2014).

A range of indicators are used to provide data on socio-economic or educational background. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is one of the most commonly used, and matches postcodes to deprivation data. Others relate to school attended (e.g. rates of progression to higher education or Highers or A-level performance); whether a student has participated in one of the Schools for Higher Education Programmes (SHEP); whether they are first in family to attend HE; have experienced disruption to their formal education; are a care leaver; or have young carer status. Students meeting one or more of these criteria may be offered extra credit. The interim report from the Commission on Widening Access (2015) describes contextual admissions as a means to 'broaden the applicant pool and make the admissions process fairer', but calls for simplified, more cohesive and transparent systems across institutions.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS OF FAIRNESS AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Whilst a number of studies have been undertaken which consider young people's ideas of fairness (e.g. Dooly and Ross, 2010), there is little research relating to their views of equality and fairness specifically in relation to access to higher education, including the use of contextualised admissions policy.

Within the field of higher education research, the majority of studies focus on young people's plans for the future and focus on the factors affecting their higher education choices rather than their views of access per se. A common theme is the importance of aspirations in improving the participation of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A number of commentators have argued that this indicates a deficit approach, locating the problem within the low aspirations young people and their families rather than the structural factors which inhibit their choices. For example, Kintrea and colleagues (2011) conducted longitudinal interviews with school pupils aged 13, and then again at 15, in disadvantaged parts of Glasgow, Nottingham and London. The researchers found that aspirations were high but that young people did not have the skills to identify what was necessary to reach their goals, pointing to the salience of social and economic capital in structuring choice. However, it is evident that young people are likely to be influenced by ideas of meritocracy which are frequent cultural motifs. For example, a qualitative study based on interviews with 148 young

people aged 15 to 17 in England found that young people were highly committed to the ideas of meritocracy and hard work (Mendick, *et al.*, 2015). The authors highlight David Cameron's 'aspiration nation' and politicians' references to 'hard-working people/ families' as factors which inform young people's views of how hard work can be perceived as a means of overcoming structural disadvantage. As we will see later in this paper, this is a theme which formed a central part of the narratives of young people in my study.

Similarly, little research has been undertaken to explore young people's views or understanding of contextual admissions. A study by Minty (forthcoming) on students' perspectives on widening access at the University of Edinburgh found that students who had been involved in widening participation programmes prior to joining the University tended to downplay their achievements, believing that they were offered a place on the basis of their background rather than their qualifications. The study considered in this paper is thus unusual in that it explores young people's views specifically in relation to equality and fairness of access to higher education and issues relating to contextual admissions.

SCOTTISH HIGHER EDUCATION AND FAIRNESS: FREE TUITION, INDIVIDUAL ABILITY AND MERITOCRACY

Many young people amongst the group interviewed in Scotland were of the opinion that access to higher education was largely fair. This view was based on the belief that free tuition promotes wider access for those from poorer backgrounds in Scotland, improving social mobility and people's life chances. Many interviewees echoed the rhetoric of the Scottish Government, contrasting free tuition with the high fees and high debt of the English system which was largely viewed as a deterrent to HE access. Some young people believed that they would not have felt able to apply to university had they been living in the rest of the UK.

I think so [access is equal] because of the free higher education. I think that it does play a big part in it and allowing everybody no matter what their background to go in. So that's how I think if the fees were reintroduced that would be totally different.

[Isla, SIMD 2, South Lanarkshire]

The majority of interviewees in Scotland supported free tuition, and variously described it as 'fair', 'equal' and 'open'. Great importance was attached to the fact that it is a universal benefit which treats everyone the same regardless of their background. In this respect, interviewees' concepts of fairness were predicated on the idea of equality of procedure. This impacted on young people's views of tuition fees, to the extent that few supported the idea of means-tested fees based on household income, with some suggesting that it would be 'unfair' to charge pupils from better off families if others were exempt from tuition fees.

I think everybody should be equal. No matter if you can afford it or not. It's not fair that just because you have more money you should pay. I would say it should just be equal I think and all get it free.

[Laura, SIMD 4, South Lanarkshire]

Of course, the Scottish system differentiates between higher education entrants on the basis of their country of origin, with free tuition available to those living in Scotland and the EU, but not to Scottish students studying in the rest of the UK or students from the rest of the UK studying in Scotland. Interviewees questioned the fairness of a system which allowed students from the EU to receive free tuition while those from the rest of the UK were obliged to pay. It should be noted that young people who perceived access to be equal concentrated very much on free tuition with little consideration of the living costs involved in studying.

The most common argument offered by those who believed access was already equal was that gaining a university place is dependent upon the individual ability of the young person, and that consequently social background does not impact on academic success. Young people espoused meritocratic ideals that hard work, motivation and commitment would ensure access to university. Such opinions were most frequently voiced by those from areas of medium deprivation, particularly those in rural areas, and those from small towns in the central belt.

I think it's up to the individual themselves as well. I think it doesn't matter what area you come from, if you want it you can get it. So if you are at a state school and you want to go to uni, you can go to uni if you just work hard. The same as private school students if they want to go to uni they'll just work as hard. I think as an individual if that's your dream you can do it.

[James, SIMD 2, South Lanarkshire]

For these young people, responsibility for accessing higher education was placed firmly on the shoulders of individuals. As long as they study hard, aim high and stick to their goals, then anything is possible. Such self-belief is to be applauded and points to the high aspirations of this group of young people. However, in line with Mendick *et al.*'s work (2015), it also shows how young people are embracing ideas of aspiration and individualism, shifting the responsibility for HE access away from schools, universities and government and attention to wider economic and social structures, and onto young people themselves. In one example, an interviewee suggested that if a young person attends a 'bad' school, it is up to their family to move to a better one.

If you know that you are in a bad school, that it's not going to get you anywhere, it's up to you to change it in my opinion. If you want to do good in life, you've got to make your own choices and go for it.

[Jane, SIMD 3, Aberdeenshire]

Jane's family had actually moved from England to Scotland partly to enable them to benefit from free tuition, so her view is understandable. But it is also symptomatic of the ways in which the onus placed on individuals tends to ignore the social and economic factors which might make such a move difficult or impossible. Most young people saw the process of gaining a degree in individual and instrumental terms, emphasising the private rather than the public benefits (Minty, 2015). While such an approach might be expected in England with high fees, it is perhaps surprising that this view was also evident in Scotland,

especially as the Scottish Government takes the position that higher education should be seen as a public good.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO FAIR ACCESS

In contrast to the views outlined above, those from the least and most deprived backgrounds were more frequently of the belief that access to HE is unequal and that those from more advantaged backgrounds have a better chance of getting into university. Some argued that while access should be equal in theory, in reality where you come from and where you go to school matters, and working hard was not considered enough to overcome these barriers. School attended was considered to have the biggest impact on inequalities in accessing higher education, especially in terms of attainment rates which interviewees suggested varied by school, and in particular by type of school.

Well I mean people from more affluent areas and better schools are more likely to get the exam results. So people from less well-off areas are gonna have to work harder to get there. And it's to get to the same place really. So it would be more difficult. So people from affluent areas would have an easier time getting there I think.

[Neil, SIMD 1, Glasgow]

Attainment was seen as a key factor in determining which universities students could apply to, and some pupils noted that high entrance grades meant that more prestigious institutions remained 'out of their league'. Interviewees contrasted the different educational experiences of state and private school pupils. Private school pupils were deemed to have more opportunities to access elite institutions due to having attended schools with better facilities and discipline; smaller classes; an expectation from teachers, parents and pupils that they would go to university; and more contacts and networks – particularly for courses like Medicine. Young people studying in schools in less affluent areas noted that their choice of Advanced Highers – qualifications favoured by the more prestigious Scottish universities - was limited.

Young people also spoke of how neighbourhood and family background can impact on access to higher education. Those living in some of the least affluent areas of Glasgow spoke of the stigma they felt from being labelled as 'deprived', suggesting that people, including university admissions officers, perhaps looked down on them because of this. It raises the question as to the extent to which such labels serve to assist in the redistribution of wealth or whether they actually serve to reproduce social inequalities by stigmatising the people who live there.

Sometimes I think [access is equal] but I think they're like quite prejudiced towards people with bad backgrounds. They're not as wealthy as what they could be. And if their parents don't have good jobs, if they've not got a good education or anything. And if they came from schools like this, like this is just a public school, so there's always gonna be like a separation between public and private schools.

[Gill, SIMD 1, Glasgow]

It is not surprising that those who lived in the least affluent areas of Scotland were more aware of inequalities than their peers who lived in areas with medium

levels of deprivation (SIMD 2 to 4) who viewed access as being much more equal. What is perhaps surprising is that interviewees from the most affluent parts of Scotland (SIMD 5) also recognised the role that social background plays in determining access to higher education. Independent school pupils pointed to their relative advantages in terms of school facilities and resources, and some also recognised the part that their parents' educational qualifications played. Clara said that young people whose parents have not been to university are 'already at a disadvantage' because 'if your parents haven't gone to university then it makes it more of a sort of mystifying process'. Nearly all interviewees from the least affluent areas were first generation entrants, and many noted that they had few people they could talk to regarding higher education.

Finally, the cost of going to university was also seen as acting as a barrier to equal access to university by those from the least and most deprived areas. Young people emphasised that higher education is not 'free' despite free tuition, pointing to the additional living costs of going to university.

Not necessarily [access isn't equal]. I think people that live in better-standard-of-living-areas have got more of a chance of going to university 'cause I feel like they've got the financial ability to go on and further their studies. For example, in England if they've got more money they can just pay the tuition fees and get in straight away with good qualifications. So it's harder for people that live in deprived areas.

[Steven, SIMD 1, Glasgow]

This was particularly the case for students from SIMD 1 and 2 (the least affluent 40%), for whom fears about debt influenced whether and where they decided to continue their studies. Nearly all the students from less affluent areas planned to live at home, study locally and work part-time in order to reduce the need for student loans. Such decisions can limit subject choice and potentially future careers, as well as impact on the wider student experience (Minty, 2015). For these students, student debt incurred to cover living costs is increasingly a widening access issue despite free tuition.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS OF THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS AND CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS POLICIES

Issues relating to admissions were frequently raised in our interviews. Some interviewees complained of a 'bias towards the rich', arguing that university admissions officers may favour applicants from private schools over those from state schools and from poorer backgrounds.

I think if they had to make a decision and it was a pupil from a public [state] school or a pupil from a private school with the same grades they would, I think they would favour the pupil from the private school every time.

(Connor, SIMD 2, Fife)

Other interviewees suggested that such favouritism was most prominent in the more selective ancient¹ universities, and argued that admissions officers should not be able to see where an applicant is from in order to avoid applicants being judged on the basis of their background. UCAS recently announced that applications will now be 'name blind' so as to remove unconscious bias on the basis of ethnicity; however, information about where an applicant lives and school attended will remain. Part of the rationale for keeping some information is so that this contextual data can be considered in admissions decisions aimed at redressing inequalities on the basis of socio-economic and educational background.

Some interviewees were already aware of contextual admissions policies (though they did not know that is what they are called). This was the case amongst pupils in the most and least deprived areas, i.e. those who would be most likely to benefit from contextual admissions and those who in some cases may have believed they had the most to lose. Those from schools in more rural areas or smaller towns were least aware of the policy.

Interviewees eligible for widening participation programmes described contextual admissions as a 'safety net' which could help take the pressure off when applying to university. These policies were said to help 'level the field' and ensure more equal representation across various social backgrounds at university. It was also seen as a means of compensating pupils attending schools with a low range of subjects offered, particularly at Advanced Higher level.

It is interesting that independent school interviewees were fairly supportive of contextual admissions, recognising their own relative advantage over those in the state sector. Such views were mirrored by pupils in the state system. A pupil from Fife argued that state school pupils tend to have to work harder to reach the same goals. Despite not having heard of contextual admissions, Abdul was able to identify the basis for the policy.

Personally I think a non-private school's actually better 'cause in a private school you're like, they've got that structure there for you. They make you learn, like have extra sessions to learn. But then at uni nobody's there to push you, you have to do it yourself. Then if you've been at a normal school you've already had to push yourself, so that's natural to you.

[Abdul, SIMD 2, Fife]

While some interviewees recognised how contextual admissions could be used to make the system fairer and agreed with the premise of the policy, others tended to ultimately find fault with it on the grounds of 'fairness'. This was again centred on the concept of equality of procedure, with the belief that the 'fairest' way to treat university applications is for everyone to be treated the same. Pupils variously described contextual admissions as a form of discrimination or a 'hand out', and suggested that it was 'patronising'. Some interviewees who would likely

¹ The ancient universities are the University of Aberdeen, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow and the University of St Andrews.

benefit from contextual admissions as they lived in the least affluent 40% resented the idea, implying an element of stigmatisation:

They shouldn't lower grades for poorer students because at the end of the day we've all got the same brain capability.

[Megan, SIMD 1, Glasgow]

Young people worried that richer pupils or those from private schools would lose out on places 'because of their background'. Again, such views hark back to the idea of hard work and an emphasis on meritocratic ability taking precedence over ideas of fairness seeking to address equality of outcomes.

I think there is good points and bad points against. I think the good point is that it does give these kids a chance to further their education but then I think maybe what happens if there is somebody that's from an affluent area that has just worked just as hard as them, but they're maybe missing out on that place because someone's got lower grades than them but they're getting put in. So I think there's an element of that. But other than that I think that is actually quite good. [...] But I know that I would be annoyed if I missed out on my place in uni because someone from a not-good-area got in over me. And that might sound quite horrible but I feel that I've worked so hard and I think if they're getting in over me I think that wouldn't be fair.

[James, SIMD 2, South Lanarkshire]

Some interviewees pointed to the critical views of their parents, particularly those in high achieving state schools who were concerned that well qualified students may lose their place at the expense of those who were allowed to 'drop' their entrance grades. Some also suggested that admitting applicants on the basis of lower entrance grades may disadvantage students once they were at university. In state schools with strong rates of participation in HE, interviewees expressed frustration at the way some pupils, believed to be from more well-off backgrounds, were perceived to have 'played the system'. This generated a degree of bad feeling towards widening participation programmes and contextual admissions policies amongst some interviewees.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined the views of a sub-section of young people in Scotland with regard to the fairness of the Scottish higher education system. The majority of young people interviewed hoped to go to university, and had the interviews been conducted with the entire cohort, different views of fairness might have emerged. In general, young people believed that the system was fair since free tuition meant that universities were, at least in theory, accessible to all. They did not appear to have a sense of the way in which educational outcomes in Scotland, as in other parts of the UK, are strongly associated with social class. The Scottish system was contrasted with that south of the Border, where it was believed students from poorer backgrounds would be deterred by higher fees. Some young people did not appear to understand that higher education was free at the point of delivery in the rest of the UK, and that loans taken out to cover fees were repayable over time on an income contingent basis. Irrespective of social background, pupils believed that young people could make the grade by

dint of hard work and determination. Structural factors affecting higher education access were only appreciated by those with direct experience either of economic hardship or privilege.

Some young people were aware that universities may vary their admission offers depending on a young person's background. While many supported the rationale behind such offers, they were suspicious as to how this might work in practice. Allowing young people from low participation neighbourhoods to enter universities with lower grades was regarded as unfair, since there was a danger of disadvantaging other young people.

In conceptualising equal access and fairness, most young people thought in terms of procedural fairness and equality of opportunity alongside individual competitive achievement. The meritocratic version of fairness espoused by many interviewees might be viewed within the Scottish tradition of democratic intellectualism, a history which the Scottish Government has been keen to tap into by differentiating Scottish higher education policy from that of the rest of the UK. The Scottish Government has actively promoted the narrative that universal free tuition is the fairest option, ignoring the fact that higher education is not a universal service, since access is strongly associated with social class. Public attitudes in England and Scotland, however, are surprisingly similar, with around two-thirds of respondents in both countries believing that some students or their families should make a contribution towards the cost of tuition, depending on their financial circumstances (Ormston and Paterson, 2014; ScotCen, 2013).

Among those who believed that access to HE is equal, the key argument was that it is up to individuals to work hard. These young people accepted the idea that an individual's life chances are determined by dedication and ability rather than wider economic and social factors. The Commission on Widening Access (2015) has argued for the need to 're-balance' the focus of widening access work away from individual deficit and onto the education system. Yet young people in this study appear to have absorbed the message of individual deficit, attributing school failure to young people's lack of ability and aspiration, rather than recognising the power of social and economic barriers. This ultimately forces disadvantaged young people to take responsibility for something over which they will have little control (Biressi and Nunn, 2013). Given the emphasis placed by the Scottish Government on higher education as a public good it is notable that young Scots held such instrumental views focusing on the private benefits of a publically funded system.

There is a danger that unequal access to economic, social and cultural capital may be ignored within this concept of fairness based on equality of procedure and opportunity. Contextual admissions policies, which might go some way to promoting equality of outcome, were regarded as tilting the balance too far in the direction of those from poorer backgrounds, to the disadvantage of everybody else. This points to a mismatch between the views of young people and institutions working to widen access to higher education. There is a need for improved transparency and communication with regards to contextual admissions and social justice issues more widely, to assist schools and their pupils to understand how such policies work and to avoid feelings of stigmatisation.

At the time of writing, there are signs that Scotland is beginning to adopt a more critical stance in relation to access to higher education. Progress in widening access cannot be achieved through equality of opportunity or procedure alone. If Scotland is to make improvements in terms of widening access this can only be achieved alongside support for equal outcomes.

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APPENDIX: TABLE 1 OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Research Stage	School	% school leavers going to HE ***	% eligible for free school meals	No. of interviewees	Gender		No. of BME pupils	No. of pupils in each SIMD quintile**					No. of pupils whose parents have been to university			No. planning to study at...			
					M	F		1	2	3	4	5	*	Neither parent	One or more parent	*	Home	Away	DK
Interviews filmed for DVD	Edinburgh 1	18%	27%	3	1	2	1	1	2	1	3	2	1	3	3	0	0	0	
	Edinburgh 2	67%	4%	8	2	6	1	1	2	5	1	5	2	8	0	0	0		
	Independent School	Unknown	Unknown	11	7	4		3	8										
	Fife 1	18%	28%	11	7	4	1	2	6	1	1	1	1	5	4	2	5	1	
	Fife 2	20%	34%	9	4	5		1	7	1		8	1	4	3	3	4	1	
	FE College	N/A	N/A	8	4	4		3	2	1	2	2	1	8	2	2	9	1	
	Glasgow 1	21%	40%	10	7	3	2	9	3	1	1	7	3	3	9	8	1	6	
	Glasgow 2	20%	48%	15	6	9	2	6	1	2	2	7	3	3	8	8	1	6	
	Western Isles	32%	9%	6	2	4		2	4	1	2	9	4	2	4	6	1	6	
	West Lothian	27%	24%	8	1	7	1	1	2	3	3	2	5	2	3	4	1	1	
In-depth interviews	Aberdeenshire	29%	9%	14	3	11		7	5	2	8	6	1	7	7	4	2		
	East Lothian	58%	5%	8	1	7		3	5	3	5	5	8	8	8	1	1		
	South Lanarkshire	34%	24%	10	5	5		3	2	3	1	6	4	9	9	1	1		
Totals			121	50	71	6	19	22	21	20	23	16	51	41	29	43	49	11	18

* Denotes missing data.

** SIMD is the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. The lower the quintile the higher the level of deprivation.

*** Note that for Scotland, this figure comes from the school leaver destination statistics for each school. The Scottish average is 36% of school leavers who go to higher education.