Widening Access to Scottish Higher Education: Unresolved Issues and Future Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

The Scottish White Paper on independence (Scottish Government, 2013) highlighted the importance of higher education to Scotland’s economy and society, noting growing divergence in social and education policy north and south of the Border. The White Paper argued that ‘free education for those able to benefit is a core part of Scotland’s educational tradition and the values that underpin our educational system. One of the major achievements of devolved government in Scotland has been to restore this right to Scottish domiciled undergraduate students’ (Scottish Government, 2013, p.198). This approach was contrasted with that of the Westminster Government, which ‘has pursued an increasingly market-driven approach to higher education, increasing tuition fees for undergraduate students to up to £9,000 per year’ (ibid.).

Despite the Scottish Government’s frequent affirmation of its commitment to social justice principles, there has of late been a recognition of the need for firmer action to tackle the social class gap in higher education participation, reflecting wider social inequalities in Scotland. In a recent policy statement, Angela Constance, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, commented: ‘... a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should have no less a chance of entering higher education than a child born in one of our least deprived. We want every child – whatever their background – to have an equal chance of attending university’. In order to identify the action needed to ensure that 20% of university students are drawn from the most socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods, a Commission on Widening Access chaired by Dame Ruth Silver was set up by the Scottish Government in 2015, reporting in 2016.

The following sections provide an overview of the policy context and key issues in the debate on widening access to higher education in Scotland. This is followed by an overview of the papers in this special issue, which highlight the complex problems which need to be addressed in order to achieve a fairer higher education system.
DEFINING WHAT COUNTS AS FAIRNESS IN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the challenges in the field of widening access to higher education is defining clearly how fair access should be understood and measured. As noted by Riddell and Minty (this special issue), within policy statements on the topic there is constant slippage between a version of social justice rooted in an equal opportunities discourse, and a rather more radical version rooted in an equal outcomes discourse. Equal opportunities approaches are based on the idea that public services such as education and health should be open to all, but that social outcomes are likely to vary because of individual differences in abilities, interests and choices. Equal outcomes approaches, on the other hand, are based on the premise that, within key social institutions, group disproportionalities in participation or outcomes should be treated as indicative of systemic discrimination (Phillips, 2004). This, of course, does not preclude individuals making choices according to their own values and preferences. A major theme of this special issue is the need for much greater clarity about what is meant by social justice in higher education, underpinned by a clearer understanding of what might constitute a socially just society.

WIDENING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: THE POST-WAR POLICY CONTEXT

Since the Second World War in western democracies, there has been a strong belief that achieving equality of educational opportunity is essential to the maintenance of social cohesion and economic performance (David, 2008; Trench, 2009). In the post-war years, whilst there were gradual moves to extend the period of compulsory education, higher education remained an elite system, including only 4% of the population. The Robbins Report, published in 1963, reflected the belief that all who were qualified by ‘ability and attainment’ should be entitled to a place in higher education, supported by a national system of grants. The recommendations for university expansion were accepted by the UK Government and a wave of new universities was established, leading to an increased participation rate of about 12% by 1980. The next period of higher education expansion took place in the 1990s, following the abolition of the binary divide between the universities and polytechnics in England and central institutions in Scotland. By the mid-1990s, about 32% of 17-30 year olds across the UK had experienced some form of higher education and by 2005, this proportion had reached 42%. However, as underlined in this special issue, higher education in Scotland, as well as the rest of the UK and Europe, remains a socially selective and institutionally stratified system.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND DEVOLUTION

Between 1919 and 1989, UK universities were all funded directly by the University Grants Committee, which also allocated student numbers. During the 1990s, despite emerging differences in the allocation of research funds and the use of colleges as higher education providers in Scotland, there continued to be strong similarities across the systems. The Dearing report of 1997 recommended
that the rapid expansion of higher education should be funded in part by students themselves, with the state continuing to play a major role in university funding. Following the report, measures to introduce a cost-sharing approach were introduced across the UK.

Policy differences began to emerge in the home nations following administrative devolution in 1992, when the funding councils established in each jurisdiction adopted responsibility for resource distribution (Gallacher and Raffe, 2012; Riddell, et al., 2015). There was a growing focus on undergraduate student funding, with increasingly divergent (and complex) approaches adopted in the four nations, as summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Undergraduate student support in the United Kingdom before and after devolution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1945–7</td>
<td>First national legislation empowering local authorities and Ministers to support students in higher education. Greater provision of national and local state scholarships ensured many students received grants and had full fees paid, but no absolute entitlement. Separate primary legislation for Scotland and Northern Ireland, both showing some variation in the detailed approach, including more emphasis in Scotland on studying locally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961–2</td>
<td>Following the Anderson Committee report, the introduction of full payment of fees (partially subject to means-testing until 1977) and means-tested grants, as an automatic entitlement on the award of a university place for the first time in any part of the UK. Separate primary legislation, regulations and administrative arrangements for Scotland and for Northern Ireland, but student entitlements essentially the same as for England and Wales.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Introduction of student loans to supplement living cost grants across the UK. 'Mortgage-style' repayment with only link to earnings the ability to seek 12 months' suspension of repayments.</td>
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<td>1998–9</td>
<td>Means-tested fee payment of up to £1,000 introduced across the UK. No liability below £23,000; full liability from £30,000. Grants reduced, loan entitlements increased and extended at higher incomes. Loans become 'income-contingent', payable at 9% of all earnings over a threshold, initially £10,000.</td>
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<td>1999–00</td>
<td>Grants abolished completely across all of UK and replaced with higher loans.</td>
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<td>2000–1</td>
<td>Fee payments abolished for Scottish students studying in Scotland. £1,000 fee continues for all other students in the UK.</td>
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<td>2001–2</td>
<td>Introduction in Scotland of post-graduation payment (the 'graduate endowment') of £2,000, supported by income-contingent loan. National means-tested grants reintroduced for young Scottish students, up to £2,000. Institutionally-administered grants introduced for Scottish mature students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002–3</td>
<td>In Wales and Northern Ireland, means-tested grants re-introduced (for young and mature students) of up to £1,500.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004–5</td>
<td>In England, means-tested grants re-introduced (for young and mature students) of up to £1,000.</td>
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<td>2006–7</td>
<td>In England and Northern Ireland, variable fees of up to £3,000 introduced, with dedicated income-contingent fee loan. Grant maximum increased to £2,765. No change to fee arrangements in Wales. Income-contingent fee loan made available for Scottish and Welsh students studying in rest of UK. Annual fee payable by students from rest of UK in Scotland increased to £1,700 (£2,700 for medicine).</td>
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<td>2007–8</td>
<td>Graduate endowment abolished in Scotland. In Wales, £3,000 fee introduced backed by income contingent loan, but with an additional non-means-tested grant towards fees of £1,845 to all Welsh students studying in Wales, reducing de facto fee liability. Grants increased to a maximum of £2,700.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010–1</td>
<td>Fee grant abolished in Wales and means-tested maintenance grant increased to £5,000. National means tested grant re-introduced in Scotland for mature students, up to £1,000.</td>
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<td>2012–3</td>
<td>In England, variable fees of up £9,000 introduced, as before with dedicated income-contingent loan. Loan repayment threshold increased to £21,000 and loan interest rates increased. Grants increased to £3,250. In Wales, variable fees of £9,000 also introduced, but with a dedicated fee grant covering all fee costs over £3,465 for Welsh students studying in any part of the UK, effectively capping fees at that level. Maximum grant raised to £5,161. New loan rules adopted, as for England. In Scotland, variable fees with no legal maximum introduced for students from rest of the UK; loan increased to £9,000 for Scottish students in rest of UK; free tuition retained for Scots in Scotland. In Northern Ireland, fees capped at £3,465 for Northern Irish students in Northern Ireland, maximum fee loan increased to £9,000 for NI students in rest of UK. Variable fees of up to £9,000 introduced for students from rest of the UK.</td>
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<td>2013–4</td>
<td>Maximum grant for young students reduced from £2,640 to £1,750 in Scotland and mature student grant reduced to £750 and income threshold for grant reduced; tapered system replaced with steps. Minimum loan increased from £940 to £4,500.</td>
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As noted in the introduction, there was a strong political narrative in Scotland that free undergraduate tuition would automatically produce a more egalitarian system. However, much higher participation rates of students from socially advantaged backgrounds, particularly in the most selective institutions, suggests that the greatest beneficiaries of the free tuition policy have been the most affluent (see Hunter Blackburn, this special issue). Indeed, Hunter Blackburn’s analysis shows that students from middle class families in Scotland leave
university with the least debt of any group in the UK, since they do not incur tuition fees if studying in Scotland and are likely to receive help with maintenance costs from their parents, thus avoiding maintenance loans. In other parts of the UK, students from all social backgrounds are likely to take out loans to cover tuition fees (albeit assisted by government support in Wales and Northern Ireland), but the poorest students are likely to receive relatively generous grants and bursaries to offset living costs. Hunter Blackburn argues that although overall levels of student debt are lower in Scotland compared with other parts of the UK, Scotland has the least redistributive system of the four nations (Hunter Blackburn, 2015).

WIDENING ACCESS POLICY AND STRATEGY

Significant differences have also emerged in approaches to widening access across the four nations. Statutory underpinning of a widening access regulatory framework was instituted in Scotland under the terms of the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013. By way of contrast, the Office for Fair Access in England was established somewhat earlier under the terms of the Higher Education Act 2004, due to fears that higher tuition fees would deter students from poorer backgrounds. As noted by Weedon in this special issue, there are ongoing debates about the effectiveness of public sector audit as a means of achieving more socially just systems. Critics claim that this type of managerialism promotes public mistrust in social institutions, minimal institutional compliance and various types of gaming strategies such as ‘cherry picking’ clients, in this case, competing with other institutions to recruit highly qualified candidates from areas of social deprivation. Proponents of the use of performance indicators and targets, by way of contrast, suggest that these may be used to focus institutional energy on key social objectives and encouraging progress to be monitored over time against pre-specified criteria.

Of course, as noted by Riddell et al (2013), widening access initiatives in Scotland and the rest of the UK have a long history. Recognising the problem of unequal access, universities have devoted much time and energy to recruitment programmes aimed at young people from non-traditional backgrounds. These have included outreach programmes such as buddy schemes and summer schools. Contextualised admissions policies have also been developed, although, as noted by Minty (this special issue) these have not always been clearly explained to the general public or to young people themselves. Rather less effort has been devoted to the development of retention strategies (for further discussion see Cree, this special issue). A major problem in this area has been the proliferation of small scale initiatives run by individual institutions which are very difficult to evaluate (Riddell, et al, 2013).

A further issue concerns the groups which should be targeted by widening access policies and the performance indicators which should be used. There has been a major focus in Scotland and the rest of the UK on increasing participation by students from socially deprived backgrounds. However, as demonstrated by Weedon and Lasselle (this special issue), there is a danger that the particular barriers facing other groups, such as disabled students and those from rural
areas, are ignored. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Weedon, there is a need for inter-sectional analysis to identify cumulative disadvantage (and advantage).

THE ROLE OF COLLEGES IN WIDENING ACCESS

Whilst there are many similarities in approaches to widening access across the UK, a central difference between Scotland and Northern Ireland on the one hand and Wales and England on the other is the greater role assigned to colleges. In 2009–10, just over 18% of higher education students in Scotland and Northern Ireland were studying sub-degree programmes at a college, compared with 5% in England and 1% in Wales (Bruce, 2012). Colleges have traditionally been effective in recruiting students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and offering more flexible routes, including articulation into the last two years of a university degree programme (Gallacher, 2009). Following the allocation of additional funds by the Scottish Government, there has been an increase in the number of students moving from college into the last two years of a university programme, increasing from 3,019 in 2011–12 to 3,469 in 2012–13 (Universities Scotland, 2014). Overall, according to Scottish Funding Council data, about 47% of HN students in Scotland progress to degree level study at university, although only 22% of these are awarded full credit.

Although Scottish colleges have been much more successful than universities in recruiting young people from low-income backgrounds, Gallacher (2014) has drawn attention to the downsides of such provision. As is the case in the US community college system, there is a danger that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are diverted into low-status programmes which disadvantage them in the labour market. Articulation routes are typically from college to post-92 institutions, limiting access to high-status courses and routes into certain professions such as law and medicine. In addition, the type of teaching and learning which takes place in some college sub-degree programmes is based on developing practical and vocational skills, and students may struggle with the pedagogical and assessment demands of a university degree.

SOCIAL DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

One of the recurring debates on widening access concerns the locus of responsibility (or blame) for socially unequal participation. In both Scotland and the rest of the UK, it is evident that social differences in levels of school attainment play a major part in determining which students are able to gain a place in which type of institution. In terms of obtaining basic level qualifications, few social differences are apparent. But become much more pronounced in the later stages of schooling. As shown in figure 3, young people from the most socially advantaged neighbourhoods are twice as likely to obtain at least one subject at SQF 6 (one Scottish Higher) compared with those from the most deprived neighbourhoods. This would suggest that there is a need to target resources on schools and pupils in deprived neighbourhoods. However, Sosu and Ellis (2014) noted that policy documents often fail to mention anti-poverty strategies and Scottish local authorities distribute a very low proportion (about 5%) of their budget in relation to social deprivation, with overall no clear link
between deprivation and per-pupil expenditure. It is therefore unsurprising that Scottish children from more privileged backgrounds have significantly higher levels of attainment compared with those from more deprived areas. It is also the case that schools in deprived areas may struggle to provide a full academic curriculum or may encourage children to take vocational subjects at an early age. As a result, students from less advantaged backgrounds may be denied a place in a selective university on the grounds of not having an appropriate range of subjects.

FIGURE 1: ATTAINMENT BY SCOTTISH INDEX OF MULTIPLE DEPRIVATION, 2013-14

![Percentage of school leavers by attainment at SCQF level 4 to 6 or better, by SIMD, 2013/14](image)

Source: Scottish Government 2015.

SECTORAL DIFFERENCES IN RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Whilst the Scottish Government continues to emphasise the importance of widening access, it is evident that budgetary allocations across education sectors do not always support these goals. In Scotland, higher education receives relatively generous funding compared with other sectors. Whilst £1 billion was allocated to higher education teaching and research in 2012-13, college and pre-schools sectors received much less generous funding (£0.3 billion and £0.45 billion respectively). A report on school education published by Audit Scotland in 2014 noted that in 2012/13, £3.8 billion was spent on Scottish primary and secondary schools, 68% of which was on staff costs. According to Audit Scotland, councils’ spending on education fell by 5% in real terms between 2010/11 and 2012/13 as a result of employing fewer staff. Over this timescale, university funding was maintained in real terms. It would appear that, at a time of
public sector austerity, the Scottish Government has protected the funding of universities, whilst reducing services in colleges, schools and pre-school education. Future discussion of the best means of improving participation rates of under-represented groups in higher education must focus not just on widening access initiatives aimed at older pupils, but also on budgetary allocation decisions across all education sectors.

**Figure 2: Scottish Government funding for different educational sectors in Scotland, 2012–13**

![Pie chart showing funding distribution]

**THE PAPERS**

The issues outlined above are reflected in the various papers which form part of this special issue. The first paper, by Sheila Riddell, reviews understandings of social justice and equality, before analysing patterns and trends in higher education participation. Evidence from official statistics is contrasted with the perceptions of key policy actors, revealing tensions between competing interest groups within the Scottish system. The issue of equity in student finance across the UK is picked up in Lucy Hunter Blackburn's paper, which questions the extent to which the Scottish system is indeed ‘the fairest of them all’. Young
people’s perceptions of student funding is the central topic of the article by Sarah Minty. Based on interviews with Scottish pupils, most of whom were hoping to go to university, her analysis suggests that the majority of young people subscribed to a meritocratic version of fairness but were suspicious of more radical moves to equalise access for different social groups.

Elisabet Weedon’s paper on participation and outcomes of disabled students points to the need for inter-sectional analysis, focusing on the association between type of impairment and socio-economic background. A weakness of the current regulatory system, she suggests, is that social groups are regarded as insulated and discrete, whereas life chances are shaped by many facets of individual and group identity. Lasselle’s paper draws attention to another important aspect of access to higher education in Scotland, namely the barriers to participation experienced by those living in remote rural areas. Whilst young people in these locations are unlikely to live in areas of multiple deprivation, they may experience financial and emotional difficulties as a result of significant distances between university/college and home. Finally, Cree, Christie and Tett report on the outcomes of a widening access initiative in an ancient university, making an important contribution to the rather sparse literature on retention and post-university outcomes. Students admitted to the university with higher national rather than traditional school qualifications were interviewed ten years after starting their course. Great emphasis was placed on the development of supportive relationships with individuals from similar backgrounds and with sympathetic staff. Cree and colleagues suggest that this is an important finding in the light of the growing regulation and standardisation of university experience.

REFERENCES


