Scottish higher education and social justice: tensions between data and discourse

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ABSTRACT
This paper considers the extent to which higher education in Scotland may be seen as a socially just system. The paper begins with a discussion of recent literature on the nature of social justice, drawing on the writing of Fraser (2005), Phillips (2004) and Sen (1992). Phillips’ argument that social justice must be understood in terms of equality of group outcomes, and not just equality of opportunity, is noted. Administrative data are used to explore social differences in higher education participation rates, which are linked to social differences in school attainment. The social priorities implicit in the allocation of the education budget by sector are discussed. The paper then explores policy makers’ understanding of fairness and their views of Scottish Government policy. Key informants in the most selective institutions were strongly supportive of universal free tuition, whilst those in colleges and post-92 universities were more critical, suggesting that budgetary priorities should be reviewed in order to channel more funds to schools and colleges. The paper concludes by suggesting that there is a need for a more critical and nuanced debate on the type of social justice which is sought within higher education, the ways in which progress should be measured and the initiatives which are likely to foster a more socially just system of higher education in Scotland.

INTRODUCTION
This paper examines the extent to which Scottish higher education may be regarded as a socially just system, drawing on evidence from administrative data and the views of key informants. Social justice is taken to refer to the way in which ‘the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a society’ (Miller, 1999, p. 1) and, following Rawls (1971), social justice is regarded as synonymous with fairness. There are ongoing debates with regard to the criteria which should be used to judge the degree of social justice within specific social systems. Whilst politicians of all complexions support the principle
of equal educational opportunities, endorsement of an equal outcomes approach is much rarer. These concepts are discussed more fully below.

Since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, and particularly during the run-up to the referendum on independence in September 2014, the Scottish Government emphasised the superiority of social entitlements north of the Border, pointing to universal benefits in the form of free prescriptions, personal care and university tuition. The White Paper on Scottish independence (Scottish Government, 2013) highlighted education as a prime example of Scotland’s commitment to social justice, equality and citizenship. Social class differences in educational attainment were acknowledged, but these were seen as a symptom of poverty attributable to UK economic policy, which an independent Scotland would be able to address. Higher education was seen as a beacon of Scotland’s distinctive approach to social policy, predicated on ‘the ability to learn rather than the ability to pay’. The absence of undergraduate tuition fees payable by Scottish-domiciled students, it was argued, guaranteed fair access to higher education for all citizens. The Scottish system was favourably contrasted with the ‘marketised’ system in England, where, it was argued, access to higher education depended on family background and resources.

More recently, the Scottish Government appears to have been less sanguine about the fairness of the nation’s higher education system. The interim report of the Commission on Widening Access, published in November 2015, noted the scale of inequality in Scottish higher education and argued that this ‘is unfair, damaging and unsustainable. Scotland has a moral, social and economic duty to achieve equality of access.’ (Commission on Widening Access, p. 8). In order to tackle endemic inequality, the report suggested the need for ‘a clear national vision of what the ultimate goal of access activity is and a coherent national strategy for how that vision is to be achieved’. These statements are in marked contrast with the views of Scottish higher education reflected in the White Paper of 2013, which are described above.

In this paper, I first summarise some of the ways in which social justice has been understood by social theorists and suggest how these understandings may be used as a lens to critique the distributional principles underpinning Scottish higher education. Data are presented on social class differences in higher education and school attainment, and the social priorities reflected in the sectoral allocation of the education budget. The views of Scottish policy makers in relation to the fairness of the system are presented, and it is noted that perceptions of fairness are associated with individuals’ institutional location. The paper concludes with a discussion of changing perceptions within Scotland with regard to the fairness of higher education and the measures which may be required in the future to achieve more socially just outcomes.

COMPETING UNDERSTANDINGS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Debates on what is required to secure social justice tend to rest on understandings of the underlying sources of injustice. For many years, social justice was seen in terms of patterns of resource distribution (Harvey, 1992), with social inequalities created and sustained by the unfair allocation of social and
economic goods. Efforts to rectify these injustices informed the development of welfare states across Europe in the post-war period. Recent research has documented the way in which social class intersects with other social characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, disability and age in the distribution of wealth, income, participation in the labour market and educational qualifications (Hills, et al., 2010). Researchers emphasise that inequalities in one sphere of social policy carry over to other spheres, so that, for example, poverty can be implicated in poor educational and labour market outcomes.

During the 1980s, social justice began to be understood in terms of the varying degrees of social recognition and respect accorded to different social groups (Young, 1990). The new politics of recognition or identity suggested that social justice could only be achieved if equal value were placed on the culture and lifestyle of different social groups. Honneth (1995), for example, argued that injustices of recognition existed independently of economic inequality. For example, members of the gay community might be relatively well off economically, but might experience disrespect as a result of discriminatory attitudes. Alongside the politics of identity, there was also a growing focus on the politics of representation or presence (Phillips, 1995). It was argued that social justice depended on the fair representation of all groups in key social institutions, occupations and systems of governance.

As social justice came to be seen in an increasingly multi-dimensional manner, debates arose as to which aspects should be prioritised for political action. Fraser (2005) argued for a tri-partite conceptualisation in terms of (re)distribution, recognition and representation. Rather than seeing different aspects of social justice as in opposition to each other, she argued that they were inter-connected, so that inequality in one area, for example, in access to economic resources, was likely to lead to unfairness in terms of social respect and political representation. This paper focuses specifically on distribution and representation, reflected in access to educational qualifications, the distribution of funding across different sectors and participation in different types of higher education institution. However, it is evident that distributional injustice inevitably leads to injustices in recognition and political representation.

There are also ongoing debates about the criteria which should be used to judge the social justice of particular systems, including higher education (Gray, 2000). These debates are often couched in terms of different versions of equality, which may be characterised as either strong or weak. Weak versions of equality tend to use the language of equality of opportunity, suggesting that efforts should be made to ensure that children start life on a ‘level playing field’, acknowledging that because of different talents, interests and preferences, individual paths are likely to diverge over time. Sen’s capabilities theory (Sen, 1992), a branch of welfare economics, might be regarded as broadly aligned with an equal opportunities approach, since the broad aim is to create a society in which people are able to achieve the ‘doings’ and ‘beings’ which they have reason to value. Individual agency and the diversity of values are recognised, so that emphasis is placed on facilitating opportunity and choice, rather than securing equal group outcomes. By way of contrast, Phillips (2004) argued that the focus of social justice policies should be on ensuring equality of outcomes for
different social groups, whilst recognising that individual differences and preferences are likely to persist and should be respected. She suggests that ‘invocations of ‘difference’ should be treated with caution when they are employed to explain the positioning of social groups within the social division of labour or the distribution of income and wealth; and that group disparities are better regarded as a prima facie indication that opportunities are not yet equal’. (Phillips, 2004, p. 22). The importance of focusing on equality of outcome for social groups (but not individuals) is highly relevant to all areas of education, since qualifications have become more, rather than less, salient to life chances in an increasingly credentialised labour market.

In the light of Phillips’ argument, it is interesting to note that the interim report of the Scottish Government’s Commission on Widening Access tends to use the language of equality of access, although the precise meaning of this term is not defined. For example, the Scottish Government’s vision of a ‘fairer, more equal Scotland’ is represented in terms of eradicating ‘the present social inequality in higher education, so that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should, 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’. (Commission on Widening Access, 2015, p. 5). The report suggests that there is a need for greater commonality in approaches to widening access across Scotland, but there is a lack of clarity about what might count as fair participation by different social groups. Whilst there is considerable emphasis on the use of a common set of benchmarks and indicators, the way in which these metrics might be used to assess degrees of social justice is unclear.

RESEARCH METHODS
This paper draws on data gathered as part of the ESRC-funded project Higher Education in Scotland, the Devolution Settlement and the Referendum on Independence (ES/K00705X/1), conducted by researchers at the University of Edinburgh between March 2013 and July 2014. The project was part of the ESRC’s Future of the UK and Scotland Programme and included the following elements:

- a policy review examining the on-going effects of administrative and parliamentary devolution on higher education in Scotland and the other UK nations
- an analysis of HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) data to investigate the social characteristics of the student body in different types of institutions across the UK and the impact of devolution on cross-border student flows;
- key informant interviews with a range of Scottish, UK and international policy makers to highlight understandings of present and future higher education policy;
- interviews with young people in schools in Scotland and England to explore their views of current higher education policy.

In this paper, in order to assess the fairness of Scottish higher education, HESA data are used to analyse social differences in higher education participation rates overall, and in different types of higher education institution.
Findings based on analysis of official statistics are contrasted with the views of key informants. Further details of these data sources are provided below.

**ANALYSIS OF DATA FROM THE HIGHER EDUCATION STATISTICS AGENCY FROM 1996-2012**

This strand of the study compared the patterns and trends among students domiciled in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, who entered university in 1996, 2004, 2010, 2011 or 2012. Data supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) on full-time undergraduate students in their first year of study in UK higher education institutions in each of these years was analysed. The analysis explored patterns for entrants of all ages to full-time first-degree programmes, as well as young people aged under 21.

**POLICY MAKER INTERVIEWS**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifty policy makers from Scotland and the rest of the UK, as well as a small number of interviews with participants from Europe and the US. Respondents were all involved in shaping higher education policy in different ways. Some respondents were senior managers, academics or researchers in higher and further education and others had served on committees related to higher education policy. Leaders of staff and student unions, as well as members of regulatory bodies were also interviewed (see Table 1 for further details). The analysis sought to reflect the perspectives of individuals playing an active role in shaping higher education policy at national and local level, but should not be seen as fully representative of views across the sector.

Each interviewee was contacted personally and half of the interviews were conducted face to face, with the other half conducted by telephone. In two cases, two people from the same organisation were interviewed together, since they were able to comment on HE policy from slightly different angles. The interviews were recorded and each interview lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and 30 minutes. They were all transcribed and the transcripts were returned to those interviewees who had requested a copy to check for accuracy. The main areas explored in the interviews were: policy formation and core values of higher education; university and/or college governance; interest group influence; student funding; cross border flows of students; widening access; international and postgraduate students; policy futures and systemic stability. Interviewees were asked to focus initially on their own jurisdiction and then to reflect on the relationship between it and the rest of the UK and Europe. In this paper, I focus on the views of Scottish policy makers. In general, generic identifiers have been used. However, the person who was Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong at the time of the research gave permission to be identified in this way.
Table 1: Overview of key informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University senior academic</th>
<th>University senior manager</th>
<th>College manager</th>
<th>University lobby group</th>
<th>HE related organisation</th>
<th>Civil servant/politician</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-92</td>
<td>Post-92</td>
<td>Pre-92</td>
<td>Post-92</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Republic of Ireland</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>Malta</td>
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<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

RATES OF PARTICIPATION IN SCOTLAND AND THE REST OF THE UK

In this section, I briefly summarise data on rates of university participation by jurisdiction. As noted by Iannelli (2011), rising higher education entry rates are likely to promote participation by students from poorer backgrounds, particularly when there is already very high participation by young people from middle class families. Table 2 illustrates the number of acceptances and entry rates of 18 year olds between 2010 and 2013, the period covering the rise in tuition fees affecting undergraduates in all jurisdictions, apart from Scottish domiciled students studying in Scotland. In 2013, Northern Ireland had the highest 18 year old university entry rate (36.2%), followed by England (30.3%), Wales (26.6%) and Scotland (24.2%). Between 2010 and 2013, 18 year old university entry rates increased in all countries apart from Scotland, with a particularly marked growth in Northern Ireland. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland (but not Scotland), there was a slight fall in participation in 2012 following the introduction of higher fees, followed by an increase in 2013. The cap on student numbers in England will be lifted in 2016, and it will be interesting to see whether this further boosts participation, particularly of under-represented groups, in this jurisdiction. By way of contrast, the number of university places in Scotland is controlled by the Government, with the expansion of university places circumscribed by available funding.

Table 2: Number of university acceptances and entry rates of 18 year olds to end of cycle, by country of domicile. (Source: Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2014.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2013 v 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>England</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptances</td>
<td>359,005</td>
<td>367,150</td>
<td>342,755</td>
<td>367,900</td>
<td>2.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 year-old entry rate</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scotland</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptances</td>
<td>32,250</td>
<td>30,800</td>
<td>30,900</td>
<td>31,495</td>
<td>-2.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 year-old entry rate</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wales</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptances</td>
<td>18,670</td>
<td>18,325</td>
<td>19,305</td>
<td>19,665</td>
<td>5.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 year-old entry rate</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northern Ireland</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptances</td>
<td>13,505</td>
<td>13,790</td>
<td>13,285</td>
<td>14,555</td>
<td>7.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 year-old entry rate</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that the Scottish data do not cover all those entering higher education, since, compared with England, a higher proportion of Scottish young people, particularly those from deprived areas, undertake sub-degree programmes in colleges. Scottish Funding Council statistics show that about 17% of all higher education in Scotland is undertaken in college rather than university. It should be noted, however, that only a third of young people taking higher national qualifications in college subsequently transfer to the final two years of a university degree programme, almost always in the post-92 sector. Gallacher (2014) has drawn attention to both the pros and cons of using colleges as major providers of higher education. On the one hand, colleges are often located within poorer communities and may be regarded as more friendly and accessible than traditional universities. From the government’s point of view, college higher education is cheaper than university provision, making it easier to expand. On the other hand, the minority of students who progress into the final two years of a university degree often have difficulty adapting to the teaching and assessment demands of a university course. Gallacher noted that those from the least advantaged neighbourhoods are over-represented in colleges, making up about a quarter of the total number of students on higher national programmes, and under-represented in ancient universities, making up about 8% of the undergraduate population. Drawing on Phillips’ arguments for the need to view resource distribution through the lens of proportionality, this suggests a major social justice deficit.

**SOCIAL DIFFERENCES IN PARTICIPATION RATES IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF INSTITUTION**

Despite the growth of the higher education sector over the past two and a half decades and the increase in places for students from under-represented groups, there are still marked social disparities in entry rates. Statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that in 2013-14, as a proportion of all Scottish-
domiciled full-time first degree entrants to Scottish higher education institutions, 13.7% were from the 20% most deprived areas, whilst 29.2% were from the 20% least deprived areas. If university populations were to reflect the Scottish population, one would expect to find equal proportions of students from each SIMD (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) quintile within the student body.

**Figure 1: University attended by student background: Scotland**

![Chart showing the percentage of students from different social backgrounds attending various types of higher education institutions in Scotland. The chart indicates that students from independent schools are more likely to attend ancient universities, while state school students are more likely to attend post-92 institutions.](chart.png)

There continue to be marked differences in the type of institution attended by students from different social backgrounds (see Figures 1 and 2). In Scotland, 55% of university entrants from independent schools gained a place in an ancient university, compared with 25% of state school entrants. By way of contrast, in England 43% of independent school entrants gained a place in a Russell Group university, compared with about 22% of state school entrants. In both countries, state school students are much more likely to attend a post-92 institution than those from independent schools. Similar social differentiation is evident when measures of social class based on parental occupation are used, so that in both England and Scotland, those from a higher managerial/professional background are almost twice as likely to go to an ancient/Russell group university as those from a working class background.
Croxford and Raffe (2013) analysed social class differences of the student body within different types of institutions in Scotland and England between 1996 and 2010. Their broad finding was that in both jurisdictions the social class characteristics of the student body in particular types of university were stable over time, with the most selective institutions continuing to recruit their students predominantly from more socially advantaged backgrounds.

**FIGURE 2: UNIVERSITY ATTENDED BY STUDENT BACKGROUND: ENGLAND**

Having reviewed participation rates and student characteristics in different types of institution, I now provide an overview of the perspectives of different actors within the Scottish higher education community in relation to student funding and the distribution of higher education places.

**SCOTTISH POLICY MAKERS’ VIEWS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

*Undergraduate tuition fees*

Scottish policy makers recognised that different approaches to undergraduate student funding represented one of the most significant areas of policy divergence across the UK:
I think I would characterise the divergence in higher education policy as probably the most extreme difference in citizen entitlement across borders.

[Manager, Universities Scotland]

Among our interviewees, there were two broad positions on tuition fees, with interviewees from the Scottish Government, trades unions (University and College Union and Unison), the National Union of Students and the ancient universities pointing out the advantages of free undergraduate tuition, whilst interviewees from the post-92 universities and colleges pointed out its disadvantages. In the following paragraphs, each of these positions is discussed.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning strongly defended government policy:

I’m absolutely convinced it [free tuition] is the right thing to do. I came into office in December 2009 with the intention of ensuring that that took place. It required quite a lot of persuasion of our own civil servants and others. I believe its benefits are shown and have been shown also in the relationships that developed. (…) I think whatever criticisms Universities Scotland might make of the government they don’t make criticism about funding, but we recognised that if we’re going to do this we had to do it properly. University students in Scotland are universally in favour of this as being a positive thing and I think once we see its full benefit over a full cohort we will realise how important this is. So no, I’m absolutely convinced we’ve done right here.

[Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning]

He believed that the policy, and the consequent division of the education budget, was socially and economically defensible:

The Scottish Government makes a decision about what it spends and it makes its own priorities. In actual fact this costs us, our total budget for higher education in Scotland is just over £1 billion. Now if you compare that to the health service, which is spending £12.5 – £13 billion in Scotland at the present moment, if you look at school education which is about £5 – £5.5 billion, college education’s just over £0.5 billion, yes, it is a sensible investment. We believe that it’s a societal good and the sector produces enormous profits and benefits – it’s the third largest sector in our economy, the multiplier is pretty good for us. So in all those circumstances, yes of course. It’s the choice we made and it’s a choice I have never heard from any of my Cabinet colleagues the slightest suggestion that we should not do this and there wouldn’t be now.

[Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning]

Amongst the other politicians we spoke to, the Green Party spokesperson said that her party was entirely in favour of free tuition:

(…) the Scottish Government are determined that it [participation in higher education] will be based on your ability to benefit and not on your ability to pay. (…) There does seem to be a national determination that higher education should be free because it would just be such a tragedy if a lot of people were unable to realise their potential because of the thought of being saddled with debt for decades after they finish studying.

[Green Party spokesperson]
Spokespeople for the other political parties (Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative) all cast doubt on the long term sustainability of free personal tuition. Whilst the Labour and Liberal Democrat interviewees believed that a graduate tax might be preferable, the Conservative Party respondent supported the English income contingent loan scheme.

The NUS, UCU and Unison were strongly committed to free undergraduate tuition, but expressed disappointment that universities had not made further progress on widening access:

We largely support the ‘free’ tuition at the higher education level. We think that that is the right approach although we do recognise it hasn’t achieved what we’d like to achieve which is better access for those from disadvantaged communities to university. So we don’t think it’s a panacea or a silver bullet to that issue. We think we have to do much more in that area, but it is nonetheless right in our view that access to education is free at the point of use.

[Unison Scotland official]

Senior managers in ancient universities similarly offered a strong defence of free tuition on the grounds that this policy would ultimately lead to higher rates of participation by those from poorer backgrounds:

I think in the long term [free tuition] will promote access. It will promote more inclusivity and fairness. (...) I think in the long run what we’re doing in Scotland is sustainable and what they’re doing in England isn’t. I think the funding system that is going to crash against the buffers and just be revealed to be unworkable is the English one. That’s because of the way they’ve handled the student loan and the student debt. And they are suddenly going to find themselves with a massive government debt because they will move to, ‘Oh gosh fifty percent aren’t going to repay or whatever but we’ve doled out all these loans on the basis that twenty five percent or thirty percent would repay’. So I just think the Scottish way of doing it is better. (...) And I think ten years from now we will see that in England they made a massive mistake when they introduced the £9,000 fees.

[Senior manager, ancient university]

Interviewees from the ancient universities believed that the level of funding for Scottish universities relative to other education sectors, was appropriate given the importance of the sector to the Scottish economy:

It [the policy of free undergraduate tuition] is sustainable so long as the Government is prepared to make difficult decisions. And at the end of the day this is very simply just an allocation of resource. And the Scottish Government at the moment is prepared to say that it wishes to fund higher education as a free good. And therefore not to fund other things. This is entirely sustainable as long as the Scottish Government maintains a commitment that it wishes to prioritise higher education for the benefit of the Scottish economy.

[Senior manager, ancient university]

As noted above, critics of the Government’s tuition policy were generally from post-92 universities and the college sector. One of the main criticisms was that free undergraduate tuition did not automatically promote participation by students
from less advantaged backgrounds and, because of social patterns of participation, focussed resources on already advantaged groups:

So from my perspective, I actually do believe that those who can afford to make a contribution to higher education should do so. And that those who can’t shouldn’t. And that everyone should be admitted regardless of their ability to pay. But my fear is that a free higher education actually in practice amounts to a redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich. And is therefore counter-productive in social terms.

[Senior manager, post-92 university]

Another senior manager in a post-92 institution maintained that the Scottish Government’s stance on tuition fees was driven, at least in part, by the political goal of differentiating themselves from the Westminster Government:

Do I believe fundamentally that the SNP in their heart of hearts are completely committed in their hearts and souls to free higher education till the rocks melt with the sun? No I don’t, but I think that that has become actually a very useful defining position for them and a political thing for them. The groundwork for which was laid earlier on.

[Senior manager, post 92 university]

He also pointed out that, because this had become a totemic issue, it would be very difficult for any party to change position:

It’ll be so difficult for any Scottish Government to introduce fees that they will not do so until a spending review too late. And that means three years at least and maybe more of Scottish universities actually being underfunded in comparison with their English counterparts.

[Senior manager, post 92 university]

The Universities Scotland interviewee, reflecting the views of the sector as a whole, explained that the majority of university managers were not opposed in principle to some form of student contribution and believed that the issue of tuition fees in Scotland was ‘dormant’ rather than permanently resolved:

We said in principle in the run up to the 2011 election, and this remains the case, that we do not have a principled objection to [a graduate contribution]. We said at that stage that given the pressure on the public finances, that if public finance alone could not protect both excellence and inclusion, then you would need to look at a balance that kept public funding at the core but supplemented it with some level of graduate contribution. I think what we were talking about at that stage was something more like the old English model. But we weren’t (…) setting out some sort of graduate contribution as what we wanted. We were saying if you can’t afford it from public money you need to do that. And so that essentially remains our position. But given that we’re in the extraordinary situation at the moment that actually the public money has been stumped up during the worst financial crisis, then it’s a dead issue for now. Or a dormant issue for now more accurately.

[Senior Manager, Universities Scotland]

Senior managers in colleges were very sceptical about the social and economic benefits of free tuition, believing that this policy had contributed to the long-term
under-funding of the college sector. They also felt that the policy was driven by political rather than redistributive goals:

[The rhetoric was that] the stones would melt in the sun in Sauchiehall Street before they would impose fees. And that was a bit of rhetoric which I think was designed for public consumption which is, ‘We are Scottish, we value education. Those philistines in England don’t’. Sorry, that’s my gloss on it! But that was making a policy distinction for public consumption very clear.

[Senior Manager, Scottish College]

WIDENING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

Unsurprisingly, all interviewees supported the principle of widening access, seeing it as a cornerstone of equality of educational opportunity. However, despite free tuition, it was recognised that the problem of unequal access had not been successfully addressed. Commenting on the Scottish system in relation to widening access, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning blamed university recalcitrance:

It’s not a perfect system but we know worldwide that there is difficulty in widening access to higher education and we know that it is a persistent problem. It’s not solved by creating financial barriers, an extension of that thought is that you put the financial barriers in place and things become better. It’s solved by taking specific actions and steps many of which we have begun to take in the post-16 Bill, giving legislative force to widening access, the widening access outcome agreements. I’ve moved a long way on this argument. Four years ago I would have said that I thought this was an argument that we could win by voluntary persuasion of the universities. I now believe that we should have very strong powers available to us to allow widening access to take place. But widening access will not be improved by imposing student fees which is the extension of the argument you’ve got. We’re almost looking at two different sets of problems.

[Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning]

The Labour spokesperson was also critical of the rate of progress on widening access, but believed that the problem was systemic rather than attributable to universities alone. She described access for under-represented students as:

Really poor. I think it’s really poor. I think that we also put too much emphasis on universities to address widening access. I think if we’re serious about tackling it as a problem we need to look at it as an issue right across the entire education system but also to do with wider factors around poverty and inequality which are about hopes and aspirations, the culture in which you are brought up, the ambitions of your parents, what your teachers tell you at school (…)

[Labour Party spokesperson]

University managers were also willing to acknowledge the problem of unequal access, but believed that progress was being made and that the fault did not lie entirely with universities:

Our university has been, over the last twelve years, steadily improving its position in the order of two thirds of a percent a year. And we have a range of tools. Summer schools, mentoring, Pathways to the Professions, outreach initiatives, the football
one, a whole lot of things that have been steadily improving the situation. It’s not been improving as rapidly as I would have liked to have seen. But there’s no question it’s improving. And obviously the use of contextual information, it’s improving in response to the policy work we have done.

[Senior manager, ancient university]

(…) if you look at the data on access, they’re not great actually. And a lot of Scottish universities clearly perform badly in relation to that. The question is however, what are the causes of that effect? Is it the universities performing badly or is the system not allowing them to recruit in the way they do? (…) The question is, whose fault is that? Who needs to change what they’re doing? And probably the answer to that is a mixture of things. I think universities probably do need to make more of an effort. They need to engage more, for example, with that particular target population, that much younger age. If you are looking at access schemes that are really targeting kids, sixteen and upwards, you’re too late. By that time the die is long cast and then people who you really ought to be attracting are no longer eligible to come in. So you really need to start at the primary level. Right at the first bit of schooling you need to be there. And I think universities are still not actually very good at that.

[Senior manager, post-92 university]

Senior managers in colleges, by way of contrast, were highly critical of universities because of their perceived lack of focus on widening access, their tendency to shift the blame on to other parts of the education system and their lack of accountability:

(…) further education colleges [are about] transformative education, transformative experiences. I don’t think FE can be beaten on that. And it has struck me that historically there’s been a tendency for universities to suit themselves and they tend to, when it comes to things like articulation and credit transfer and advanced standing and some of them talk a particularly fine game and then when you look at the evidence it seems to suggest that, by and large, they are for people from a particular background (…) I don’t think it’s really changed that much and I know they’ll say, ‘Oh it’s nothing to do with us Guv. It’s all to do with schools are not producing enough kids from these areas with the right profiles’, blah de blah de blah. So yeah I think the [university] sector’s got a bit of a swagger about it, a bit of a conceit even.

[Senior manager, Scottish college]

REGULATION OF WIDENING ACCESS

As noted above, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning defended the Government’s decision to introduce legislation regulating universities’ widening access activities. By way of contrast, university respondents were critical of measures within the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 which placed a statutory obligation on universities to seek approval from the Scottish Funding Council for their widening access outcome agreements. A senior manager in an ancient university stated:

I think they [outcome agreements] are ineffective and pointless. I don’t think the people who are doing it are motivated by a very direct command and control [view of the world]. I think it’s more they have some not very coherent notion of how universities would be if they were otherwise. And so obviously an imposed or a
semi-imposed code of governance, outcome agreements, whatever else they are, they are a reduction in autonomy.

[Senior manager, ancient university]

**METRICS OF SOCIAL DEPRIVATION**

Some senior managers of ancient universities were critical of the metrics used by the Government to assess progress in relation to widening access:

I do have a problem with the definition of widening participation (...) The definition of widening participation is completely based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. That is an index which by its very nature is heavily biased towards urban areas. There are almost no postcodes of a deprived nature in rural areas. Therefore [XX] and [XX] universities are heavily disadvantaged despite the fact that a lot of effort is put into low progression schools and to support people being the first generation to go to university from their family. And to those who have low household incomes. And therefore for some universities it is almost impossible to get high numbers.

[Senior manager, ancient university]

This view contrasted with that of another principal of an ancient university, who felt that some universities were simply culturally unattractive to students from poorer backgrounds:

(...) we’re also finding more SIMD40 students coming from around Scotland to us. So I think it’s not just about geography it’s partly also about culture, it’s where would these students feel comfortable. And one of the things about it, it’s partly about the programmes you run to attract more SIMD40 students but it’s also partly about the culture, where they want to study. Do they want to study in a large civic institution that’s embedded in a city where we have 28% or perhaps rising towards 30% of SIMD40 students so they don’t feel as if they’re in a private school or whatever? And we’ve been positioning ourselves as a university that way, we are saying we are an international university but one that’s embedded within the civic fabric of a city like [XX] and a country like Scotland. And that’s our USP and that’s what we play on.

[Senior manager, ancient university]

To summarise, opinion was divided with regard to the merits of the Scottish Government’s policy on free tuition. Senior managers from the ancient universities and respondents from student and staff representative bodies (NUS, Unison, UCU) tended to defend the policy and the division of the education budget which flowed from it. Post-92 university and college managers were critical, on the grounds that the policy was not redistributive and did not appear to have promoted widening access. Whilst all respondents supported the principle of widening access, there were disagreements with regard to the source of the problem, with the Scottish Government and colleges blaming universities, whilst the older universities were more likely to identify a systemic problem rooted in the educational attainment gap at school level. Ancient universities, particularly those with rural hinterlands, were also highly critical of government attempts to establish a widening access regulatory framework and of the metrics used to assess university inclusivity.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I began this paper by reviewing current understandings of social justice and the ways in which the justice inherent in particular social institutions should be judged. In line with Phillips' argument, it was suggested that where there are disproportionalities in outcomes of particular social groups, then systemic injustice should be assumed. Data on participation rates of different groups in universities, particularly in the most selective institutions, underlines the extent of disproportionality that continues to exist, despite a small growth in participation by those from less advantaged backgrounds across the UK. Interviews with members of the Scottish higher education policy community suggested a mis-recognition of the problem. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and senior managers in ancient universities assumed that the Scottish system of free tuition for Scottish-domiciled undergraduates would automatically lead to fairer representation of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. They were clearly unaware of the evidence which shows that university participation in Scotland continues to be organised along social class lines, reproducing rather than disrupting social inequalities in the labour market and in the wider distribution of wealth. Misunderstandings of the funding system in other parts of the UK were also evident, with some interviewees believing that Scotland is unique in providing a higher education system which is free at the point of delivery. It has been argued that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland prefer to take sub-degree programmes at college rather than university degrees. However, to return to Phillips' argument ‘the problem with invocations of cultural difference is that they risk re-cycling tired stereotypes about cultural groups, and often rely on a ‘package picture of cultures’ that underestimates the porosity of cultural boundaries and overestimates the homogeneity of each cultural group’ (2004, p. 16). Clearly a much better informed debate is needed within Scotland with regard to the nature of disproportional participation in different types of higher education, and the type of social justice which is sought.

REFERENCES


