

UNLOCKING SCOTLAND'S POTENTIAL:

PROMOTING FAIRER ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION



national union of students scotland

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1. INTRODUCTION



NUS Scotland has worked for many years to tackle injustice and unfairness in our education system and in our wider society. Arguably it is the reason for our existence. Fair access to education is about ensuring that it is only the potential of an individual to succeed, and never their background or circumstances that determines what opportunities are open to them in education. It is this fair access that has been our underlying principle throughout our opposition to tuition fees, our work to improve student support, to improve support for part-time students and student parents, to protect and increase college and university places, to keep our institutions open to international students and to improve student retention. Our aim is not only to ensure that background is no barrier to entering our higher education institutions, but also that it is no barrier to success at these institutions or in our workplaces – that an individual's talents are the only determinant of how far they can go in our education system and our society.

Scotland has a proud tradition which values highly the transformative power of education, one which informs our egalitarian approach today but which has also provided the platform for our success as a nation throughout history. Scotland is home to some of the world's finest universities and has a strong record on industrial invention and innovation, and of ensuring higher education is a vehicle for social mobility. As devolution has led to diverging education policies across the nations of the UK, Scotland, often with cross-

party consensus, has remained true to these egalitarian principles and placed a high priority on education, abolishing tuition fees for Scottish and EU students, protecting educational opportunities, protecting the EMA and college bursaries and increasing public investment in universities. However, Scotland's record on widening access remains stubbornly poor.

NUS Scotland has worked alongside policymakers and the sector to build on these principles and create a fairer education system for Scotland's students. This report comes two years after our last major research publication, *Still in the Red*. In it we examined the shortcomings of the student finance system, finding significant numbers of students struggling with debt and financial concerns, with worrying impacts on their studies. Following this there is now widespread recognition across the sector, and the Scottish Parliament, of the need for significant improvements to student support, and we are hopeful that this will be translated into real changes from next year.

Yet despite these achievements, there are still fundamental injustices in access to education that we need to come together collectively to tackle. In particular, we have made little perceptible progress over the last few years in increasing the numbers of Scottish students from deprived backgrounds who make it to university, especially our oldest institutions. At the same time, part-time students still face upfront fees, there are still barriers to postgraduate study, students from the rest of the UK face a raw deal in Scotland

and we have considerable concerns about the access implications of the raft of changes being undertaken in the college sector. However, with many of the fundamental building blocks in place – no undergraduate fees, adequate financial support and public funding – we believe we have the perfect opportunity, and a huge responsibility, to make progress on fair access to higher education, from schools, colleges and from workplace returners, and it is for this reason that we have brought together this report on widening access.

The report will look at where Scotland stands in relation to fair access to education and how we got here. It will look at the common reasons proposed and assumptions held as to why our rates of widening access are as they are – looking at school performance, societal factors, the aspirations of people from deprived backgrounds, and the activity already undertaken by universities to widen access. Finally, the report looks at recommendations for action to improve access to higher education in Scotland.

The topic of widening access can often be contentious. In bringing together this report we hope to develop a consensus across the political divide, across the sector, and across Scotland on widening access. We believe that far from being a form of social engineering, or an act of charity, widening access is actually a way of ensuring our precious opportunities in education are distributed to those with the most potential, and the greatest likelihood of performing well. In essence, ensuring fair access is about developing a genuine meritocracy, and about ensuring that as a nation we succeed in fully harnessing the potential of Scotland's people.

Few would disagree with this goal. The debate arises when it comes to putting this into practice in our institutions. For example, we believe we need to look beyond our traditional methods of selecting applicants on attainment, and instead identify talent by looking to new and innovative ways to gauge potential. This may mean looking beyond applicants' grades and to the context of their education. It may mean differential offers or universities offering routes for applicants to top up their school grades, allowing those who have

shown the greatest potential to achieve – as distinct from the greatest attainment – the opportunity to go on to higher education. This may mean many other practical activities which may initially prove controversial, but are nevertheless the right thing to do, given the importance of our aim.

We are not suggesting that the solution to this problem lies only with our universities. Creating fair access to education is not something which any one group in our education sector, or even our society, can do alone. Artificial divisions between our schools, colleges and universities must be tackled if we are to be effective in widening access. Similarly we must not separate our higher education institutions from the communities which surround them. Too often individuals and communities within geographical reach of our universities are the furthest from their doors. We believe our universities are uniquely placed to support wider efforts to improve access, not in isolation, and not solving all of society's ills on their own, but in partnership with the wider sector and those around them.

We should be honest that this report focuses on the issues of access to undergraduate higher education for Scottish domiciled students. However, we fully recognise that this is not, and cannot, be where our discussions and our work on access end. NUS Scotland does not exist to safeguard only the interests of Scottish students, and so neither should, we believe, agencies such as the Scottish Funding Council. Rather we should all work to secure the education system which is best for all students seeking to study at Scottish institutions. As such, while this report marks the start of a concerted campaign to increase access for the most deprived potential Scottish undergraduate students, in the coming weeks and months we will be following this up with work which is focused on students from outwith Scotland, on those leaving care, on those with protected characteristics, on those who wish to study at higher levels, on the professions, and on protecting the vital access role that colleges in Scotland play.

There are still those who believe that our education system is facing the spectre of diminishing returns, or

indeed surpassed this long ago. That our society has no requirement for additional graduates and consequently no need to widen access in the ways we envisage. It remains our view, however, that Scotland can, and must, continue to invest in education and to offer more opportunities to all those with the talent, ability and potential to take advantage of these opportunities and succeed. In an increasingly competitive globalised world and with a generation of young people facing some harsh economic and environmental realities, the idea that we could be over-educated as a society has never seemed more ludicrous. Moreover, beyond purely economic considerations, research has shown that societies with more highly educated populations – and particularly more graduates – are healthier, more engaged in democratic processes, and more productive.

Fundamentally, we believe that the time for tinkering at the edges of access is over. If we believe that our society is best served by an education system in which the most talented people are sought out and supported to achieve their full potential, not only within that education system but beyond, then we must create one; a genuine meritocracy where old biases and preconceptions have no role and an individual's success is determined by their ability and ambition and nothing else. We believe fair access to our higher education institutions is the key to achieving this. Moreover, we believe this is an agenda that we can all unite around and we hope this report can act as the catalyst.

It is for all these reasons that I am proud to introduce this report to you, and to start the process of building political and civic consensus on the need for greater, fairer, access to education.



Robin Parker, NUS Scotland President

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



NUS Scotland's commitment to a fair and equitable education system is at the core of everything we do. Yet, despite concerted efforts since devolution from successive Scottish Governments and our higher education sector, despite a number of campaign successes for NUS Scotland on both education and student funding, there remains a significant injustice in our system around access to university.

People from Scotland's most deprived communities remain significantly underrepresented in our higher education institutions and it seems an individual's background still plays a role in determining how far they go in education and how successful they are. Building on Scotland's egalitarian traditions in education, and progress already made on removing key financial barriers, we have now a key opportunity and an important responsibility to make real progress on fair access to university.

We have brought together this report to consider where we are, and how this point was reached, looking at rates of access, how these are linked to issues of retention and graduation, and the role of colleges and articulation. We look at the extent to which issues in wider society, and in our school system, can impact upon access. We also look at current activity aimed at widening access to consider what works and what may be less successful.

Ultimately we look at the case for widening access, considering why fair access should be valued so highly. We find that not only is it the right thing to do but that, far from lowering standards, it can promote excellence in our universities at the same time. Finally, we make key recommendations, for institutions and national action, to achieve what we would like to ultimately see in Scotland – a university population which is a fair reflection of our society.

WIDENING ACCESS – WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Scotland continues to have the poorest rate of access to university in the whole of the UK for students from poorer backgrounds. While there has been progress in higher education participation in recent years, this has primarily been as a result of increased numbers in college higher education, where 23.3% of students are from the most deprived communities, compared to just 11.6% in universities. Access figures are even worse for young students (compared to mature students) from these backgrounds, who make up just 8.6% of students at our universities.

Moreover, there are huge discrepancies between institutions, for example, 25.4% of students entering UWS in 2010/11 came from the 20% most deprived areas, compared to just 2.7% at St. Andrews – which equates to

just 13 students. At our more selective institutions, there continues to be significant disparity in access, with over 16 students from the least deprived backgrounds for every one from the most deprived.

While progress is being made, it is very slow. In the last five years, the proportion of students in our universities from the 20% most deprived backgrounds has increased by just 1% to 11.6%. At this rate, it would take over 40 years to reach a figure of 20%, to make our universities reflective of our society.

RETENTION

Scotland also performs the worst in the UK in terms of retention, with a sector wide drop-out rate of 9.4%. It is also the most deprived – those most at risk of never entering a university – who equally are at greatest risk of dropping out. On average, retention rates for the 20% most deprived students are 7.2% lower than those for students overall. Yet despite this, there are encouraging signs that this is by no means destined to be the case, with a number of institutions showing that retention among the most deprived students need not be less than for all students as a whole. For example, at Edinburgh University, the drop-out gap between most and least deprived is only 3.6% over a three year average, compared to St Andrews, where it is 11.4%.

ARTICULATION

Colleges play a huge role in supporting students from the most deprived backgrounds into higher education, by providing Higher National qualifications and opportunities to articulate into degree-level study. Indeed, 22% of students articulating in to university from college come from the 20% most deprived backgrounds. Despite this, there is still work to be done to support wider articulation, as, out of 5,572 articulating students, 2,769 (or 49.7%) repeat at least one year of study.

Many believe that the increased likelihood of students from deprived backgrounds to drop out of university is compounded for those articulating from college. However, this is not backed up by the figures, which show that in all but one of the regional articulation hubs,

retention rates for those articulating into university from college are higher for the most deprived students than students overall.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

It is clear that there is no single factor to explain the poor rates of access to our universities. Many believe deprivation, student attainment at school, or a lack of aspiration to be insurmountable factors which prevent students from poorer backgrounds entering higher education, whatever action our universities take. However, our analysis shows that this is not necessarily the case. Looking at statistics by Scottish Parliament constituencies, areas with vastly differing deprivation levels, for example Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse (with 45.5% from the most deprived backgrounds) and Motherwell and Wishaw (with just 2.2%) send roughly the same proportion of students on to higher education (35% and 33.2% respectively). It is also not the case that schools with higher proportions of students from poorer and more deprived backgrounds send fewer students on to university – a number of schools with significant numbers of students from the most deprived 20% of the population (known as SIMD20 students) and students in receipt of free school meals are in the top 10% for progression to higher education.

At the same time, while school attainment may be lower in more deprived areas, it remains the case that significantly more students from these areas are getting the grades required for entry to university than are actually entering (15.35% get three Highers or more, yet just 9.1% of young entrants to university are from the most deprived backgrounds). Equally, attainment has been narrowing markedly over the last five years between the most deprived and least deprived school pupils. Furthermore, research conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that aspirations among those from more deprived backgrounds are high and also realistic – what is missing is support for these young people to fulfil these aspirations.

CURRENT WIDENING ACCESS ACTIVITY IN SCOTLAND

Across Scotland there are already great examples of activities aimed at widening access. The SFC supports the Schools for Higher Education Programme, which

carries out a range of work to increase staying-on rates and progression to higher education among those at low-progression schools. This work includes the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), which creates and advises on access opportunities for higher education, and Access to the Professions (A2P) which works to increase the numbers of deprived students entering professional courses. Individual institutions also carry out their own widening access activity, including awareness-raising programmes and summer schools.

There is evidence that these initiatives are making a difference, however, looking across all the schemes it is apparent that with increased, and more targeted, investment and activity, these could have a much greater impact. For example, we would argue that some programmes have too broad a focus and could make more of a difference by focusing more closely on those students in most need. In other programmes, there are significant drop-offs in terms of the pupils who participate, and these could have greater impact by following through with these pupils to ensure they reach a positive destination.

THE CASE FOR WIDENING ACCESS

Looking at case studies from four respected higher education institutions in England – the Universities of Bristol, Birmingham, Leeds and London – it is clear that efforts to widen access can help universities find talented students they would otherwise miss out on. Providing differential offers, such as lower entry requirements for those from low performing schools or routes for applicants to top-up school grades, can actually improve the marks that a university's students achieve, contrary to fears of lowering standards or 'dumbing down'. In each of these case studies, the outcomes for those admitted through differential offers and/or access programmes were comparable to those admitted through 'traditional' means, and in some cases, even better, showing that widening access is key to promoting excellence in our higher education institutions.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

Looking at the case studies which show that progress on access is not only achievable but key to getting the most

talented students into our institutions, we believe that it is entirely possible to increase representation of the most deprived to a far fairer level, without huge increases or displacement of current students. To achieve a more equitable situation, where, for example, 17.5% of students at Scottish universities come from the most deprived backgrounds, would require only an average 1.6% increase per year across the sector, over three years, with those with the furthest to go on widening access agreeing to do the most. Based on our illustrative modelling, at St. Andrews, for example, this would require only an additional 36 students from these backgrounds, based on current numbers. Moreover, to achieve the long term end goal of 20% representation of the 20% most deprived would only require a 7.3% increase on current student numbers – a target we believe to be ambitious and achievable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve this goal we have a number of recommendations, both for the Scottish Government and institutions themselves.

In particular, we would urge the Scottish Government to:

1. Introduce enforceable widening access outcome agreements
2. Uncap university places for SIMD20 students
3. Develop a national widening access and retention student volunteer programme
4. Create an independent national unit to safeguard access

And we would call on all institutions in Scotland to:

5. Sign up to a public commitment to widen access in Scotland
6. Adopt and scale-up best practice widening access activities
7. Ensure every area in Scotland has significant, and free, bridging provision (summer schools, access courses) to look for academic potential beyond school grades
8. Adopt alternative and/or parallel admissions processes which support access
9. Undertake proactive talent spotting among local schools and colleges
10. Take action to improve retention work in Scotland

11. Work to widen access to post-study opportunities
12. Strengthen widening access partnerships between colleges and universities

CONCLUSION

We have a key opportunity to make real progress on fair access. It is right to end the injustice in our system which means that an individual's background may matter more to their educational progress and achievements than their

talent, but it is also right to ensure that we are making the most of our world-class institutions by opening them up to those with the greatest ability. By allowing old biases to persist we risk missing out on unlocking individuals' true potential and Scotland's true potential, a great loss to our institutions and our nation but an even greater loss for those individuals. We hope that our Parliament, our Government and our sector can unite around the goal of fair access and that this report can help to set that ball rolling.

3. THE SCOTTISH LANDSCAPE – WHERE ARE WE?



I. ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

SUMMARY

In this section we examine institutional and national trends in participation for the most deprived in our society. We show that Scotland has the poorest rates for widening access and retention (at university level) in the whole of the UK. While there has been progress in recent years, this has been as a result of increased participation in college HE level study, where 23.3% of students are from the most deprived communities, compared to 11.6% in universities. Moreover, there are huge discrepancies in participation by the most deprived between institutions, which stands at 25.4% at UWS compared to just 2.7% at St. Andrews (equating to just 13 students). Our older institutions, where there are over 16 of the least deprived students for every one from the most deprived communities, continue to perform poorly.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Scotland performs badly in comparison to the rest of the UK in relation to widening access and drop-out. When measured by the number of entrants from lower socio-economic groups (NS-SEC 4-7), Scotland has the poorest record. At the same time our drop-out rates

between first year and second year at university are the worst too, with almost one in ten students dropping out after first year, higher than any other nation in the UK, as shown here in Table 1.

TABLE 1 - WIDENING ACCESS AND DROP-OUT RATES FOR SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES 2010/11

	All student non-continuation	Young FT entrants from NS-SEC 4 - 7
England	8.4	30.7
Wales	9.0	31.0
Scotland	9.4	27.2
Northern Ireland	8.3	39.4
UK	8.6	30.6

Source: HESA

This clearly shows the need for action in Scotland on not only widening access to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds but also in retaining students until completion of their degree, through reduced drop out.

While socio-economic classification is a useful measure of access by those from lower income backgrounds, the Scottish Government measures the number

of individuals from the most deprived 20% of the population (defined by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) and known as SIMD20 or MD20¹) who progress to higher education.

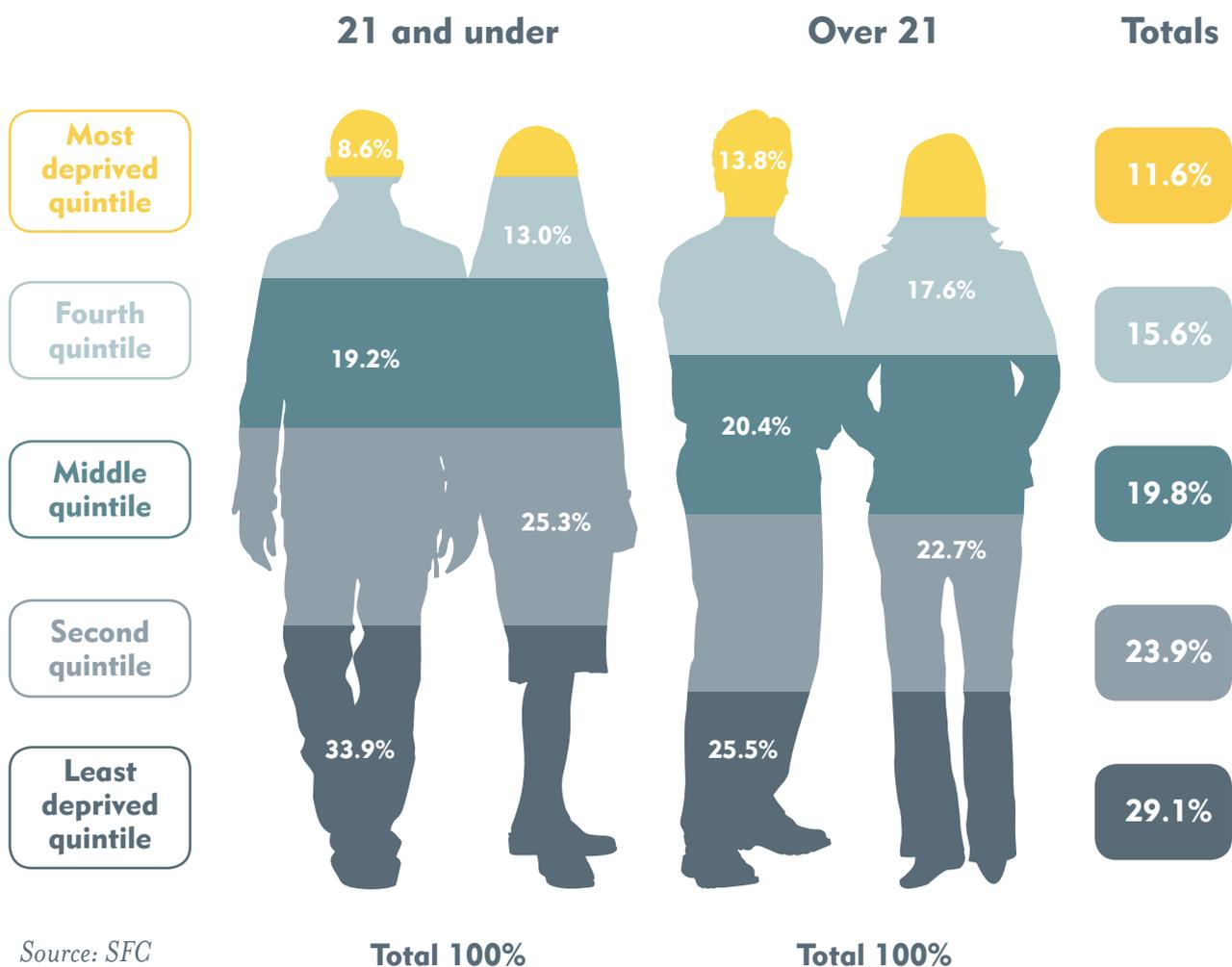
As Figure 1 shows, when looking at university population in isolation we see only 11.6% of students were from the 20% most deprived backgrounds, and within this further inequalities are uncovered when we examine university participation by age, with young SIMD20

students making up an even lower percentage of all young students – just 8.6%.

WIDENING ACCESS BY UNIVERSITY

These UK-level and Scottish-level statistics are useful in comparing Scotland with other nations in the UK, and also in comparing the university sector within Scotland. At the same time, these national level statistics hide large disparities between individual institutions in Scotland.

FIGURE 1 - SCOTTISH DOMICILED STUDENTS AT SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES, BY AGE AND DEPRIVATION, 2010/11

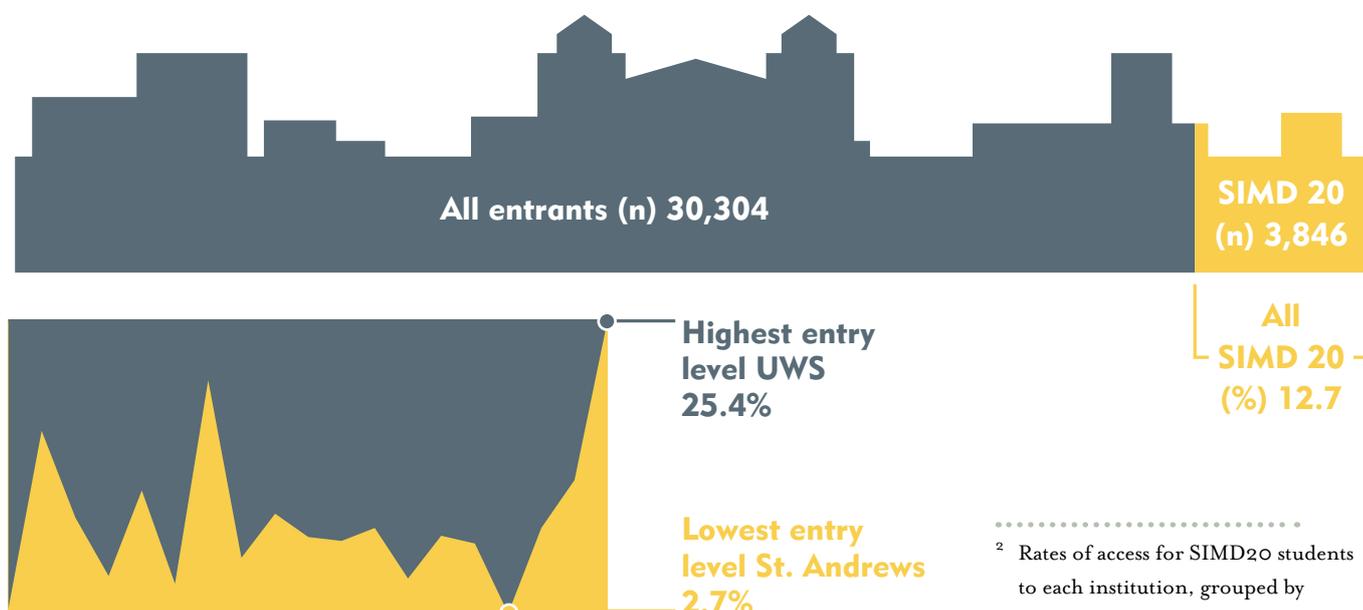


¹ The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation is the standard measure of deprivation in Scotland. It identifies small area concentrations of deprivation across all of Scotland in a consistent way, based on 7 individual domains. For more information, see <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/SIMD>

TABLE 2 - SCOTTISH DOMICILED ENTRANTS TO FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE COURSES AT SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES, BY DEPRIVATION LEVEL, 2010/11²

	All entrants (n)	SIMD 20 (n)	All SIMD 20 (%)	Young SIMD 20 (%)
Aberdeen	1,625	51	3.1	2.4
Abertay Dundee	1,529	257	16.8	12.3
Dundee	1,925	195	10.1	7.6
ECA	143	8	5.6	2.2
Edinburgh Napier	2,121	258	12.2	8.2
Edinburgh	1,808	91	5.0	3.1
Glasgow Caledonian	2,819	584	20.7	14.9
GSA	186	13	7.0	5
Glasgow	2,906	303	10.4	8
Heriot-Watt	900	77	8.6	7.7
UHI	2,018	167	8.3	4.9
Queen Margaret	547	51	9.3	7.3
Robert Gordon	1,902	102	5.4	4
RCS	126	11	8.7	5.3
SAC	479	39	8.1	6.1
St Andrews	477	13	2.7	2.9
Stirling	1,714	160	9.3	7.8
Strathclyde	2,675	349	13.0	10.7
UWS	4,404	1,117	25.4	20.3
Total	30,304	3,846	12.7	9.1

Source: NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request to SFC, 2011



² Rates of access for SIMD20 students to each institution, grouped by mission group, over the past five years can be found in Annexe 2.

To find out the record of individual institutions we submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). Table 2 on the previous page shows the number of entrants (as opposed to all full-time students) at each university in Scotland (in absolute and percentage terms).

The table reveals shocking disparities, particularly among the so-called 'Ancient' universities. For example, at the University of St Andrews, only 13 entrants in 2010/11 were from the 20% most-deprived backgrounds, representing just 2.7% of all their Scottish-domiciled entrants. The other Ancient universities in Scotland did little better with Aberdeen and Edinburgh taking in just 51 and 91 students from the most deprived backgrounds (3.1% and 5% of Scottish domiciled intake, respectively). While Dundee and Glasgow universities do better, they still perform under the national average.

At the other end of the spectrum, newer institutions like Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of the West of Scotland have high numbers of entrants from the most deprived backgrounds with 1,701 entrants between them from the 20% most deprived backgrounds, representing 20.7% and 25.4% of their intakes respectively.

UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES OF ACCESS

Fundamentally, as we have shown above, the numbers of entrants to many universities across Scotland (and too often our most prestigious ones) from the most deprived backgrounds are worryingly low. Indeed, across many institutions a student's chances of being recruited are far diminished, as shown in Figure 2, and this is exacerbated at levels of extreme deprivation (and, conversely, particular affluence).

The graphic opposite shows total entrance figures of those in the bottom and top 10% of deprivation and it paints a picture of significant inequality of opportunity across the sector. At St Andrews, for example, for every one student

FIGURE 2 - RATIOS OF ACCESS BY INSTITUTION TYPE AND DEPRIVATION³



³ Ratios of access between least and most deprived for individual Scottish universities can be found in Annexe 3.

Source: NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request to SFC

recruited from the 10% most deprived backgrounds, 28 students from the least 10% deprived backgrounds were recruited. This compares extremely unfavourably to the sector where, overall, for every student recruited from the most deprived background, 2.5 students from the least deprived backgrounds were recruited.

Clearly, in a society which places a real emphasis on the importance of social mobility, this is an untenable situation. Equally, it is one, that has remained unchanged for much of the past.

TRENDS OVER TIME IN DEPRIVATION AND UNIVERSITY ACCESS AT A NATIONAL LEVEL

ALL HIGHER EDUCATION

It is clear that colleges, who deliver higher education provision through higher national qualifications (HNQs), do very well at attracting students from the most deprived areas into higher education. Indeed, in the last academic year for which figures are available (2010/11) Table 4 shows us that they recruited 23.32% of their students from a SIMD20 background, compared to just 7.26% at our Ancient universities.

Focussing on universities alone, we see a less positive record. As shown in Table 3, universities have improved

in this area over the last six years, however this has been only an incremental increase from 10.6% of students coming from the 20% most deprived backgrounds in 2005/06, to 11.6% in 2010/11.

TABLE 3 - MOST DEPRIVED SCOTTISH-DOMICILED STUDENTS AT SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES, BY AGE, 2005-2011

		Most deprived quintile
2005-06	21 and under	8.2%
	Over 21	12.2%
	Total	10.6%
2006-07	21 and under	8.4%
	Over 21	12.7%
	Total	10.9%
2007-08	21 and under	8.5%
	Over 21	13.1%
	Total	11.2%
2008-09	21 and under	8.5%
	Over 21	13.7%
	Total	11.5%
2009-10	21 and under	8.6%
	Over 21	13.4%
	Total	11.3%
2010-11	21 and under	8.6%
	Over 21	13.8%
	Total	11.6%

Source: SFC, Learning for All 2012

TABLE 4 - PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION, BY INSTITUTION TYPE AND DEPRIVATION, 2010/11

	Least deprived quintile	Second quintile	Middle quintile	Fourth quintile	Most deprived quintile
Scottish ancient universities	38%	25%	17%	12%	7.26%
Scottish old universities	30%	24%	19%	15%	11.07%
Scottish new universities	26%	22%	19%	18%	15.57%
Open University in Scotland	22%	24%	22%	18%	13.74%
Other Scottish universities	18%	28%	29%	18%	7.46%
Scottish colleges	17%	18%	20%	22%	23.32%
Scotland	27%	23%	20%	17%	13.76%

Source: SFC, Learning for All 2012

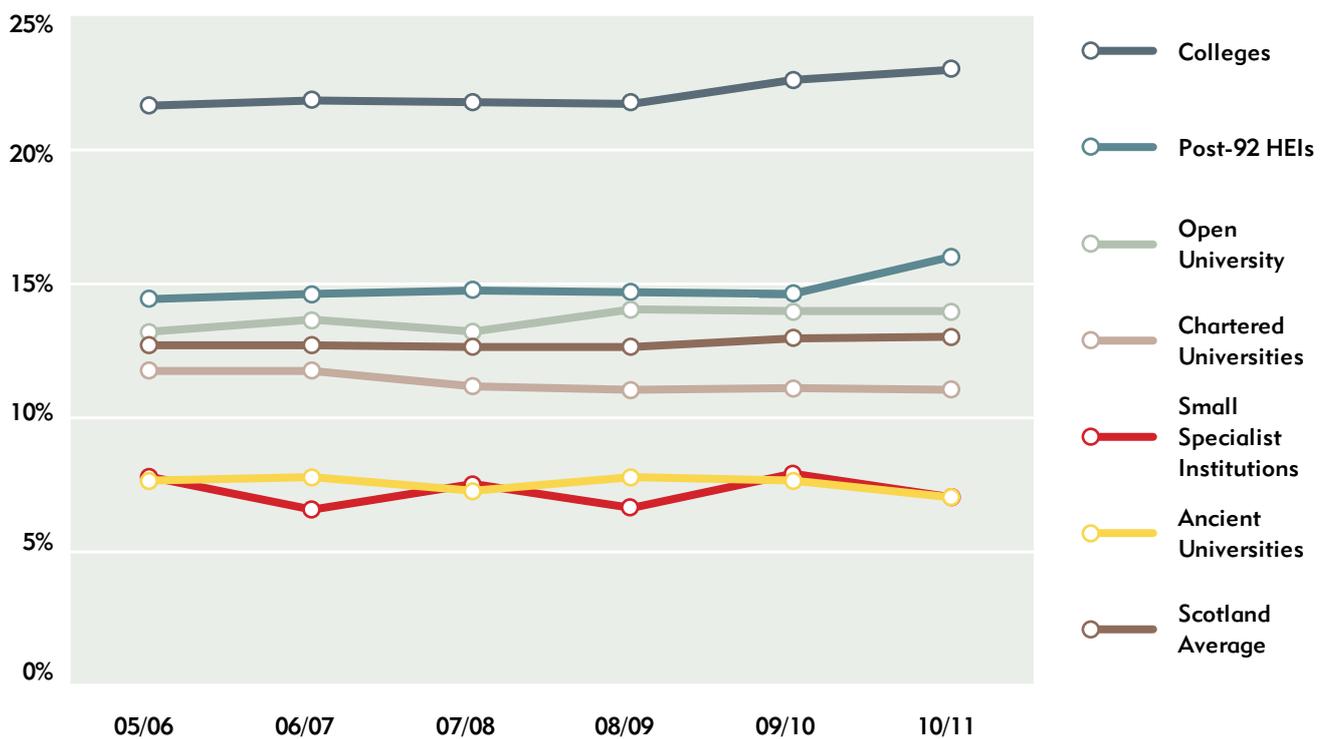
Since the abolition of the Graduate Endowment in 2006 it is clear that access to university has improved, but given that this improvement has increased the numbers of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds by just 1% over the last five years, it is at such a slow pace that it would take over 40 years for universities to take in 20% of their students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds.

Furthermore, this progress among universities overall hides the fact that there have been significant advances by some and little progress by others. Figure 3, below, shows all Scottish-domiciled entrants from deprived backgrounds (most deprived 20%) to Scottish higher education over the past decade, according to institution type⁴:

As can be seen, some institutions like Post-92 HEIs and the Open University have made steady progress, while others, such as the Ancient universities, have made little if any.

We will see later in this report that the Ancients' poor record can not be explained either by changes in the grades achieved by Scottish pupils, or the aspiration of SIMD20 pupils, and instead could mean Edinburgh, Aberdeen and St Andrews (together with the other Ancients) are missing out on some of our most talented students, who are either attracted elsewhere, to other institutions, or are lost to higher education altogether – a huge personal waste to the individuals concerned but also a waste of our country's resources.

FIGURE 3 - SCOTTISH DOMICILED ENTRANTS FROM MOST DEPRIVED 20% AREAS TO HE, BY INSTITUTION TYPE



Source: Scottish Government, *Destinations of Leavers, 2011*

⁴ Institution types are: Ancients: Aberdeen, St. Andrews, Dundee, Edinburgh, and Glasgow; Chartered: Strathclyde, Stirling, and Heriot-Watt; Small & Specialist: Edinburgh College of Art, Glasgow School of Art, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and Scottish Agricultural College; Post-92: Glasgow Caledonian, Abertay, Napier, UHI, Queen Margaret, Robert Gordon, and UWS

II. RETENTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

SUMMARY

In this section we explore both institutional and national trends relating to retention, where Scotland again performs the most poorly in the UK, with a sector wide drop-out rate of 9.4%. We show how too often it is the most deprived – those most at risk of never entering a university – who equally are at greatest risk of dropping out, with an average gap of 7.2% in retention figures. Yet despite this, there are encouraging signs that this is by no means destined to be the case, with a number of institutions showing that retention among SIMD20 students need not be lower than students overall. For example, at St Andrews the drop-out gap between most and least deprived is 11.4% over a three year average, compared to Edinburgh where it is 3.6%. We believe this would point to institutional activity, rather than background, being the key to equalising and improving retention.

As outlined earlier, Scotland has the worst rate of retention in the whole of the UK (at university level), when measured by progression from first year to second year of university, as shown here in Table 5.

However, we wanted to look behind these statistics to see how we have got to where we are in terms of retention, to look at which students are most at risk and equally which institutions are performing above and below Scotland's average.

As with measuring access, the standard measure of retention of the most deprived students in Scotland is SIMD, which is the measure employed from here on in.

TABLE 5 - DROP-OUT RATES FOR SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES 2010/11

All student non-continuation	
England	8.4
Wales	9
Scotland	9.4
Northern Ireland	8.3
UK average	8.6

Source: HESA

TRENDS OVER TIME – RETENTION, INCLUDING RETENTION OF THE MOST DEPRIVED STUDENTS

Looking at retention rates over time for all students and for those from the most deprived backgrounds, Table 6 below shows a generally improving retention rate over the last few years, perhaps as the economic downturn hit, meaning fewer opportunities were available to students outside of studying. However, at the same time, it shows a consistently poorer record among our institutions at retaining those from the most deprived backgrounds.

Table 6 below and Figure 4 over the page show the retention of students by deprivation over the last five years across Scottish universities.

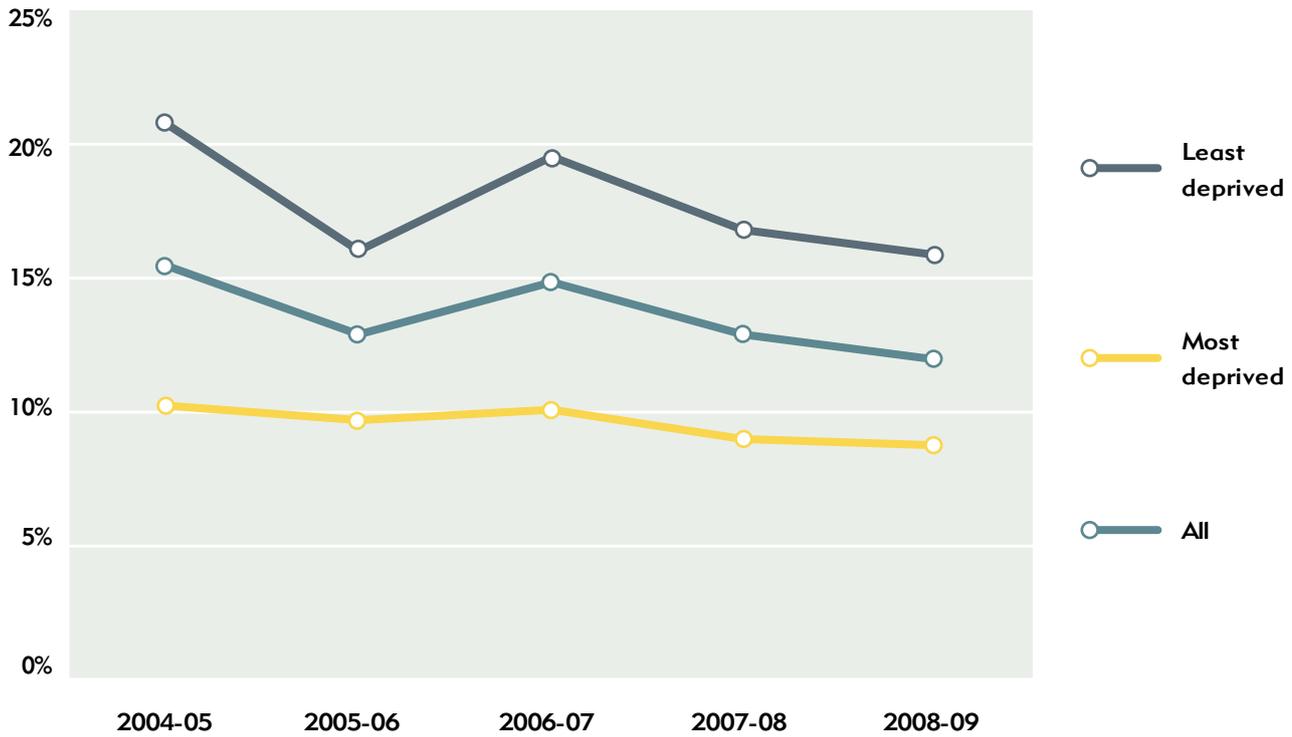
Figure 4 clearly shows progress in terms of reducing drop-out overall but also in terms of the gap in retention between all students and the most deprived students. Indeed, retention rates amongst different groups have followed broadly the same trajectory when considered separately, as can be seen above with the slight rise in drop-out across all students in 2006/07.

TABLE 6 - YEAR OF ENTRANTS AND PERCENTAGE DROPPING OUT THE FOLLOWING YEAR, BY DEPRIVATION

	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Least deprived	10.2%	9.7%	10.1%	9.0%	8.7%
Most deprived	20.8%	16.0%	19.5%	16.8%	15.9%
All	15.5%	12.9%	14.8%	12.9%	11.9%

Source: SFC, Learning for All

FIGURE 4 - YEAR OF ENTRANTS AND PERCENTAGE DROPPING OUT THE FOLLOWING YEAR, BY DEPRIVATION



Source: SFC, *Learning for All*

We could conclude that this is due to improvements in student support in the last few years - knowing that it is the most deprived who are liable to struggle financially and as such have to drop out. With potential changes to student support for 2013/14 we would expect this to improve even more.

While it is encouraging that the gap has been reduced, the fact remains that there still is a gap, and one which appears to be predicated on social background. In 2008/09, the gap between retention rates for the most deprived students and least deprived was 7.2%. As stated previously, drop-out has decreased in most years. However, the decrease has been broadly uniform across all groups, meaning that it has not necessarily been due to dedicated support for students from the most deprived backgrounds.

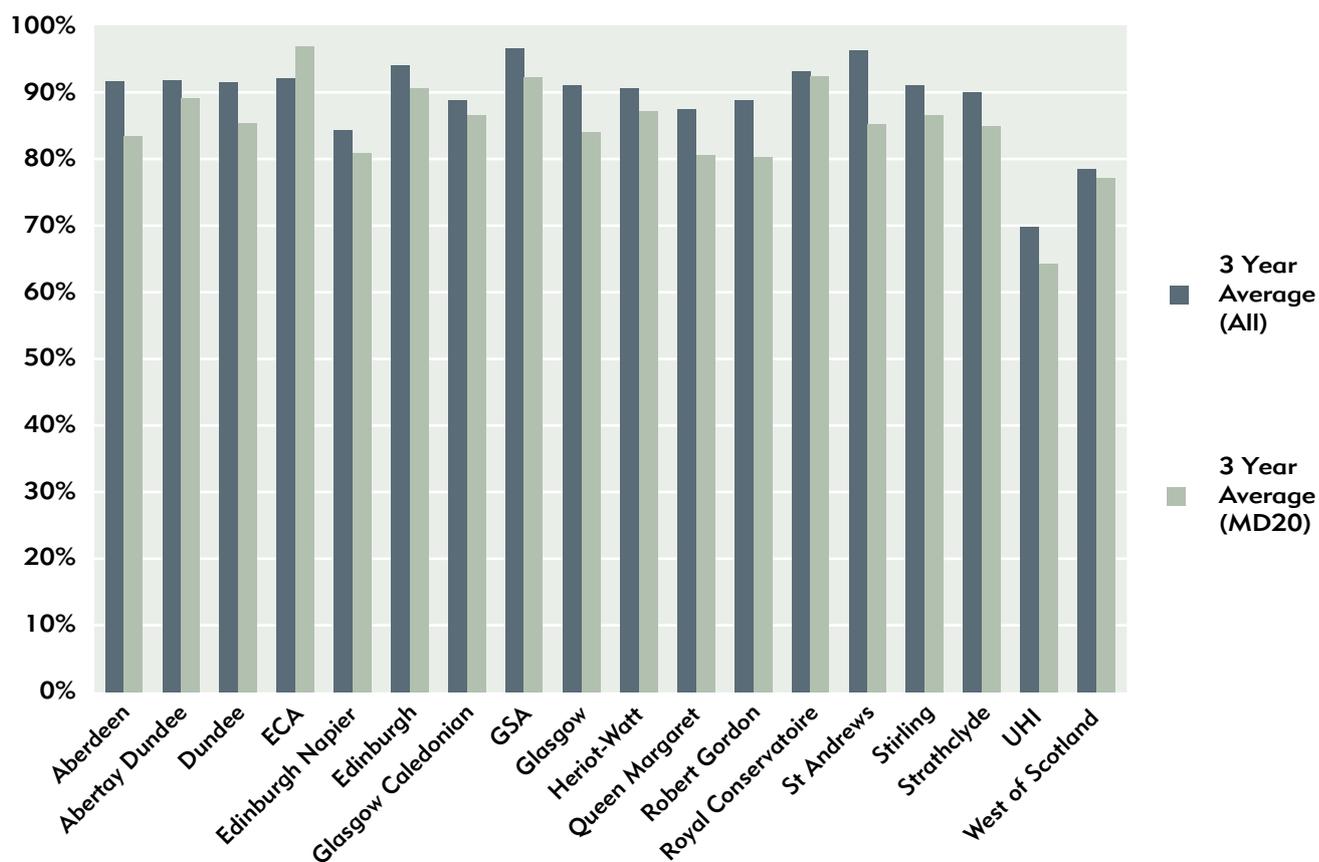
However, before the conclusion is drawn that retention is by definition worse among students from the most deprived areas, we looked at the differences between

institutions. Looking at the difference between retention rates for all students, and retention rates for those from the most deprived backgrounds we see an interesting, and mixed, picture. Figure 5 charts the differences in retention of those students from the most deprived backgrounds against all students at each institution, over a three year average.

Across the whole of Scotland, the average difference, over this three year period, in retention between students from the most deprived backgrounds and all students is just 5%. While it is obviously still concerning that a student is more likely to drop out if they come from a deprived background, we do not believe it is symptomatic of the picture often painted by detractors of widening access, chiefly that these students drop out in much larger numbers.

At some institutions, a student from a deprived background is markedly more likely to drop out than another student (for example, a difference of 11.4%

FIGURE 5 - THREE YEAR INSTITUTIONAL AVERAGE RETENTION RATES, BY DEPRIVATION STATUS⁵



Source: NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request to SFC

over the period at St. Andrews, or using the example of a newer university, at Robert Gordon a difference of 8.7%). However, at other institutions the difference is much less marked between overall drop-out rates and drop-out rates among the most deprived students, such as the University of the West of Scotland (UWS), where the difference is 1.4% - albeit with a high overall drop-out rate - or an ancient such as Edinburgh, where the difference is 3.6%.

What is interesting is that while intake does go some way to determining retention rates there are a number of institutions who buck this trend. There are some institutions that retain their most deprived students far better than others. Interestingly, these institutions are not defined by their reputation, or by their student

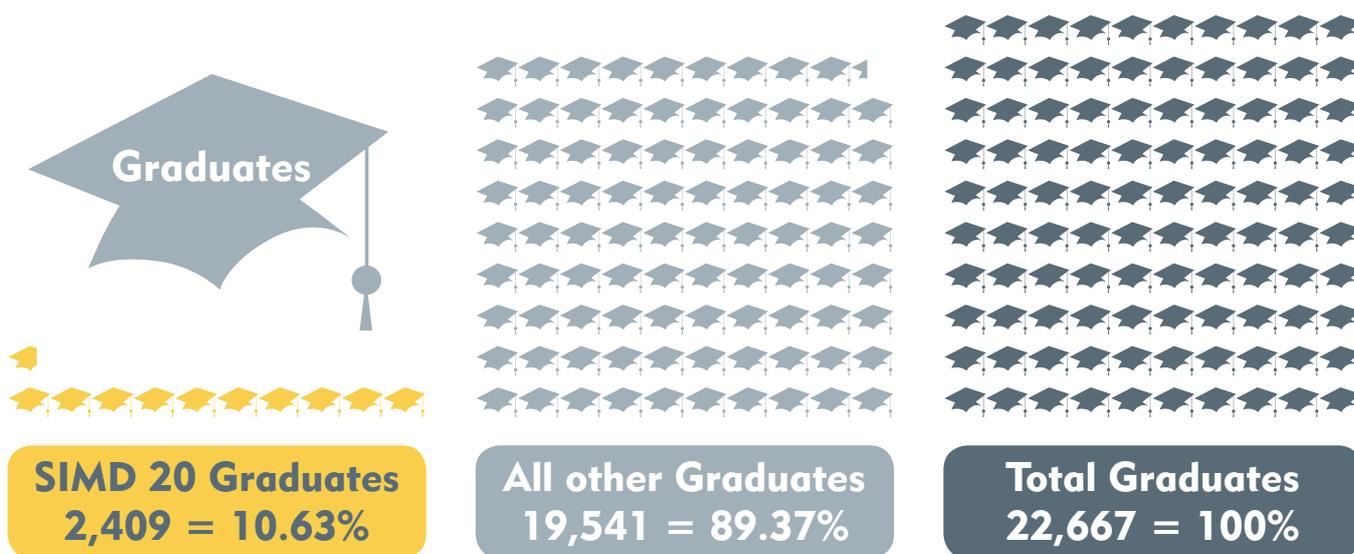
intake, pointing towards other factors such as pastoral support services, or programmes specifically addressed at retention. Therefore, as we will argue later, there is a case for dedicated and targeted work to improve retention for the most deprived entrants in order to achieve greater parity in retention rates between these students and students overall.

AN OVERALL VIEW OF ACCESS AND RETENTION

For NUS Scotland, retention is a key factor in any discussion around access because it is not simply good enough for institutions to get students through the doors; they must then make an equal effort to keep them there. We may see increased access, but if this does not carry through to an equalisation of graduation rates then we must question what we have actually achieved, and at what cost, both to the economy but also to the individual and to wider society.

⁵ Retention rates over the last three years, for SIMD20 by institutional grouping, and a 3-year average full institution list by SIMD students and all-students can be found in Annexe 4.

FIGURE 6 - SCOTTISH DOMICILED GRADUATES FROM SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES, SIMD 20 AND OTHERS 2010/11⁶



Source: NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request to SFC

Unsurprisingly (given our examination of access trends) the number of graduates from deprived backgrounds is worryingly low. It is our fundamental belief that we must ensure that any future work on access is joined up with efforts relating to retention and ongoing support, to ensure that once a student enters a university, they are equally likely to graduate from there, regardless of their background.

just as successful as those who come through via a more traditional educational path, and in all but one regional hub retention rates are higher for the most deprived students than all other students. Despite this, there are still concerns around wider articulation, as, out of 5,572 articulating students, 2,769 (or 49.7%) repeat at least one year of study.

III. ARTICULATION FROM COLLEGE TO UNIVERSITY

SUMMARY

In this section we examine the success of articulation from college to university in supporting students from the most deprived backgrounds in to university. We show that colleges are a great vehicle for increasing access, with 22% of articulating students coming from the most deprived backgrounds. Equally, students who are supported in to university through this route can be

As noted above, Scotland's colleges make a significant contribution to the numbers of students from deprived backgrounds undertaking higher education, via HNCs and HNDs. Not only does this serve to ensure that these students are able to access higher education in the first instance, but it equally provides a gateway for these same students to then access degrees, via articulation and entry with advanced standing⁷ to university. However despite these opportunities, Scotland's record on access to university higher education for students from these backgrounds remains poor, indicating a disconnect between the two sectors which merits consideration as part of this report.

⁶ A full list of graduation rates by institution and deprivation can be found in Annexe 5.

⁷ Advanced standing is when students are able to enter university in the second or third year of a degree course.

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) recognises HNCs and HNDs as comparable qualifications to the first and second years of university. Provided the subject matches (to at least some extent) there is therefore no reason why college students articulating to university with these qualifications should be required to start again in the first year of a degree. A frustration for NUS Scotland, from the students' perspective, and among public bodies from the funders' perspective, has been the relatively low numbers of students that have been able to take up the opportunity

to move from college to university without duplicating years of study (in terms of the SCQF levels).

The table below shows the numbers of students with HNC/D qualifications going on to full-time university undergraduate degrees, and the year of study in which they entered.

Out of 17,775 students qualifying with a HNC/D in 2009/10, just 5,572 then went on to enter an HEI on a full-time basis, with only 2,803 of these articulating

TABLE 7 - SCOTTISH-DOMICILED ENTRANTS TO FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE COURSES AT SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES, 2010/11, BY THOSE WITH HIGHER NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

Level of study /Highest qualification on entry	Year of course				Total
	One	Two	Three	Other years	
First degree					
HND or Diploma of HE	644	541	1,397	3	2,585
HNC or Certificate of HE	1,792	692	32	1	2,517
<i>Total</i>	2,436	1,233	1,429	4	5,102
Other undergraduate qualification					
HND or Diploma of HE	50	25	43	-	118
HNC or Certificate of HE	283	69	-	-	352
<i>Total</i>	333	94	43	-	470
Overall Total	2,769	1,327	1,472	4	5,572
Total HNC/HND entrants, 2010/11			5,572		
Total HNC/HND Qualifiers, 2009/10			17,775		

Year one: 2,769

Year two: 1,327

Year three: 1,472

Other years: 4

Total: 5,572

**HNC/HND
entrants
2010/11**



Sources: Scottish Government and NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request to SFC

students entering in second or third year. This shows that 2,769 (or 49.7%) of articulating students with an HNC or HND who move onto full-time study do not do so with advanced standing, therefore potentially duplicating years of study. What the statistics are unable to capture are the numbers who may have considered articulation following an HNC or HND, only to be deterred by a lack of opportunity to progress with advanced standing. Nevertheless, what this shows is significant numbers of students with the requisite qualification who do not progress to university level study.

Of course we recognise that many students will undertake HNC or HND study as a stand-alone qualification in order to get the skills or experience needed for their chosen job or interest. It may also be the case that HNC/HND students continue their studies part-time and are excluded from these figures. However, it does seem that there is a great deal of untapped potential in our colleges which could act as a great recruiting pool for our universities, and that in seeking to widen access to university this is a key area for improvement.

TABLE 8 - COLLEGE TO UNIVERSITY ARTICULATION RATES, BY REGIONAL HUB AND DEPRIVATION STATUS

	North East		
	MD20	All others	Total
Advanced standing/articulating students (number)	25	231	256
Advanced standing/articulating students (percentage)	9.8	90.2	100.0
	Tayside & Fife		
	MD20	All others	Total
Advanced standing/articulating students (number)	56	192	248
Advanced standing/articulating students (percentage)	22.6	77.4	100.0
	Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife, and Borders		
	MD20	All others	Total
Advanced standing/articulating students (number)	98	502	600
Advanced standing/articulating students (percentage)	16.3	83.7	100.0
	Greater Glasgow		
	MD20	All others	Total
Advanced standing/articulating students (number)	110	316	426
Advanced standing/articulating students (percentage)	25.8	74.2	100.0
	South West		
	MD20	All others	Total
Advanced standing/articulating students (number)	279	754	1033
Advanced standing/articulating students (percentage)	27.0	73.0	100.0
	All Scotland		
	MD20	All others	Total
Total advanced standing/articulating students	568	1995	2563
Percentage	22.2	77.8	100.0

Source: Scottish Funding Council Access and Inclusion Committee

WIDENING ACCESS AND ARTICULATION

Table 8 shows articulation from colleges to universities, from each of the 'articulation hubs' in Scotland⁸ for students moving to university and starting at second or third year.

Across Scotland, of those who articulate into university from college, 22.2% are from the 20% most deprived communities, which is very similar to the 23% of entrants to college HE provision from the same communities, showing little drop off between students from different backgrounds within those students who articulate. Equally, and very importantly for widening access, this 22.2% far exceeds the overall rate of SIMD20 entrants to university, which is 12.7%. This highlights just how important college can be in providing an opportunity as a first choice or second chance to attend university for those who do come from these backgrounds.

RETENTION AND ARTICULATION

While articulation is often a vital route into education for many – as evidenced by the high numbers undertaking it – often there is a perception that these students, given they have not entered through 'traditional' routes, pose a greater risk to retention rates at the university. In Table 9, below, for the same period, we show the retention of articulating students at university, by deprivation status, within each hub.

As can be seen, contrary to fears that students who articulate are at a greater risk of dropping out – exacerbated by deprivation status – the retention rates of the most deprived and the remainder of students compare extremely favourably. Indeed, in two of the five hubs, retention rates for the most deprived students are better, and in one they are exactly the same. In addition, in all but one of the hubs, retention rates for articulating students exceed the average for retention seen across Scotland (90.6%).

TABLE 9 - RETENTION OF ARTICULATING STUDENTS, BY REGIONAL HUB AND DEPRIVATION STATUS

North East	MD20 students	All other students
Students retained (number)	24	213
Students retained (percentage)	96%	92%
Tayside & Fife	MD20 students	All other students
Students retained (number)	47	162
Students retained (percentage)	84%	84%
Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife, and Borders	MD20 students	All other students
Students retained (number)	93	469
Students retained (percentage)	95%	93%
Greater Glasgow	MD20 students	All other students
Students retained (number)	106	305
Students retained (percentage)	96%	97%
South West	MD20 students	All other students
Students retained (number)	270	718
Students retained (percentage)	97%	95%

Source: Scottish Funding Council Access and Inclusion Committee

⁸ There are five of these hubs, funded by the Scottish Funding Council, which aim to ensure greater collaboration between colleges and universities and increase articulation, on a regional basis.

It is clear that articulation is a fantastic vehicle for ensuring increased participation in higher education by those from our most deprived communities, and equally that it need not compromise standards, or lead to greater drop-out.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that Scotland's widening access and drop-out record is poor in comparison to the rest of the UK, and we have looked at trends within our sector. Retention rates and widening access rates have been making progress, albeit very slowly, but this progress has been particularly concentrated in colleges and new universities, with the Ancient universities barely having progressed at all.

However, the numbers of college students who undertake HE and move on to university to get a degree is small, and relatively stable, and those that move to university with advanced standing are smaller still in number. Equally, we know that retention rates are on average poorer from those students from the most deprived backgrounds, but that some institutions are far better than others at retaining their most deprived students.

So this is where we are, but the real underlying question is why? And furthermore, what should we, or are we, going to do about it? The next section of the report will look at potential reasons why our widening access and retention rates are as they are.

4. WHY ARE WE THERE?



SUMMARY

It is clear that there are many complex and interrelated factors which may explain why our universities do poorly in terms of recruiting students from the most deprived backgrounds. Indeed, some argue that our failures in widening access can not be attributed to the universities themselves but that the problem lies in much deeper societal factors or inadequacies in our school system. While we have sympathy with some of these arguments there are still encouraging signs that this need not be the case. There are many schools and areas with high deprivation which still manage to send significant numbers of people on to higher education, and links between poverty and access may not be as strong as many believe. At the same time, it is clear that pupils from poorer backgrounds have not only the aspiration to participate in higher education but are also meeting the academic requirements. Indeed, 15.35% of the most deprived pupils achieve three Highers or more, yet just 9.1% actually progress to university. Together these findings mean there is much which can be achieved in widening access at the university level.

While this report considers how and why our higher education sector should work to create fairer access to university in Scotland, there are those who feel the problem is so deeply ingrained in our society, or earlier in the lives of individuals from poorer backgrounds, that there is little which can be done by our higher education institutions. We wanted to investigate these issues further to see to what extent this is indeed the case.

I. DEPRIVATION, ATTAINMENT AND PROGRESSION

It is clear that individuals from the most deprived backgrounds are less likely to go on to higher education than those from the least deprived – it is the whole reason for this report. Statistics on the destination of school leavers show the most deprived pupils are half as likely to go to higher education, and over 50% more likely to be unemployed and seeking a job.

TABLE 10 - PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL LEAVERS FROM PUBLICLY FUNDED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SCOTLAND BY DESTINATION CATEGORY AND SIMD DECILE, 2010/11⁹

Destination	Most Deprived	Least deprived	All
Higher Education	18.2	57.35	35.8
Further Education	34.5	18.3	27.1
Training	11.7	1.65	5.6
Employment	16.3	16.6	19.3
Voluntary Work	0.35	0.65	0.5
Activity Agreement	1.15	*	0.5
Unemployed Seeking	15.35	4.65	9.6
Unemployed Not Seeking	2.05	0.6	1.2
Unknown	0.5	*	0.3
Positive Destinations	82.2	94.55	88.9
Total Leavers (=100%)	11,082	10,602	54,070

Source: Scottish Government, Destinations of leavers

⁹ Numbers less than 5 are suppressed for data protection reasons.

Looking at the statistics, it may then appear as though deprivation levels are what determine an individual's chances – that it is inevitable that those from deprived backgrounds will be less likely to go on to university, whatever action institutions may take. To investigate this, we looked at each Scottish Parliament constituency, comparing their proportion of school pupils in S1 to S4 from the 20% most deprived backgrounds, to their numbers of school pupils progressing to higher education.¹⁰ We wanted to see the communities in Scotland that were most disadvantaged in terms of access to higher education, and if there was a clear link from their deprivation levels.

We found a significant difference between the top and bottom constituency in terms of progression to higher education, with Eastwood in East Renfrewshire sending 68% of school leavers on to HE compared to only 24.9% from the Glasgow Provan constituency. At the same time, Eastwood had no pupils from the most deprived backgrounds, while Glasgow Provan had one of the largest proportions of pupils from these backgrounds (over half the school population, at 56.4%).

TABLE 11 - TOP TWO AND BOTTOM TWO CONSTITUENCIES BY SCHOOL PUPIL PROGRESSION RATES TO HE

Constituency	Entrants to HE (%)	Proportion of S1 to S4 in SIMD20
Eastwood	68.0	0.0
Edinburgh Southern	52.2	0.6
Banffshire and Buchan Coast	26	7.4
Glasgow Provan	24.9	56.4

Source: NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request to SFC

This would seem to confirm the above hypothesis and suggest an inevitability to our poor access rates – the more deprived an area, the less likely an individual from that area is to get into higher education. However, in reading further into the statistics, this does not hold true across the board.

¹⁰ A full breakdown of entrants to higher education and proportion of pupils in SIMD 20, by Scottish Parliament constituency and region can be found in Annexe 6.

Table 12 below shows two constituencies in the same Scottish Parliament region. The constituencies have significantly different deprivation levels, yet both have around average rates of progression to HE, 35% and 33.2% respectively. This shows that the link is not a straightforward one of higher proportions of deprivation meaning lower numbers progressing to HE and that there are other factors at work.

TABLE 12 - COMPARISON OF CONSTITUENCY ENTRANTS TO HE AND PROPORTION OF S1 TO S4 IN SIMD20

Constituency	Entrants to HE (%)	Proportion of S1 to S4 in SIMD20
Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse	35	45.5
Motherwell and Wishaw	33.2	2.2

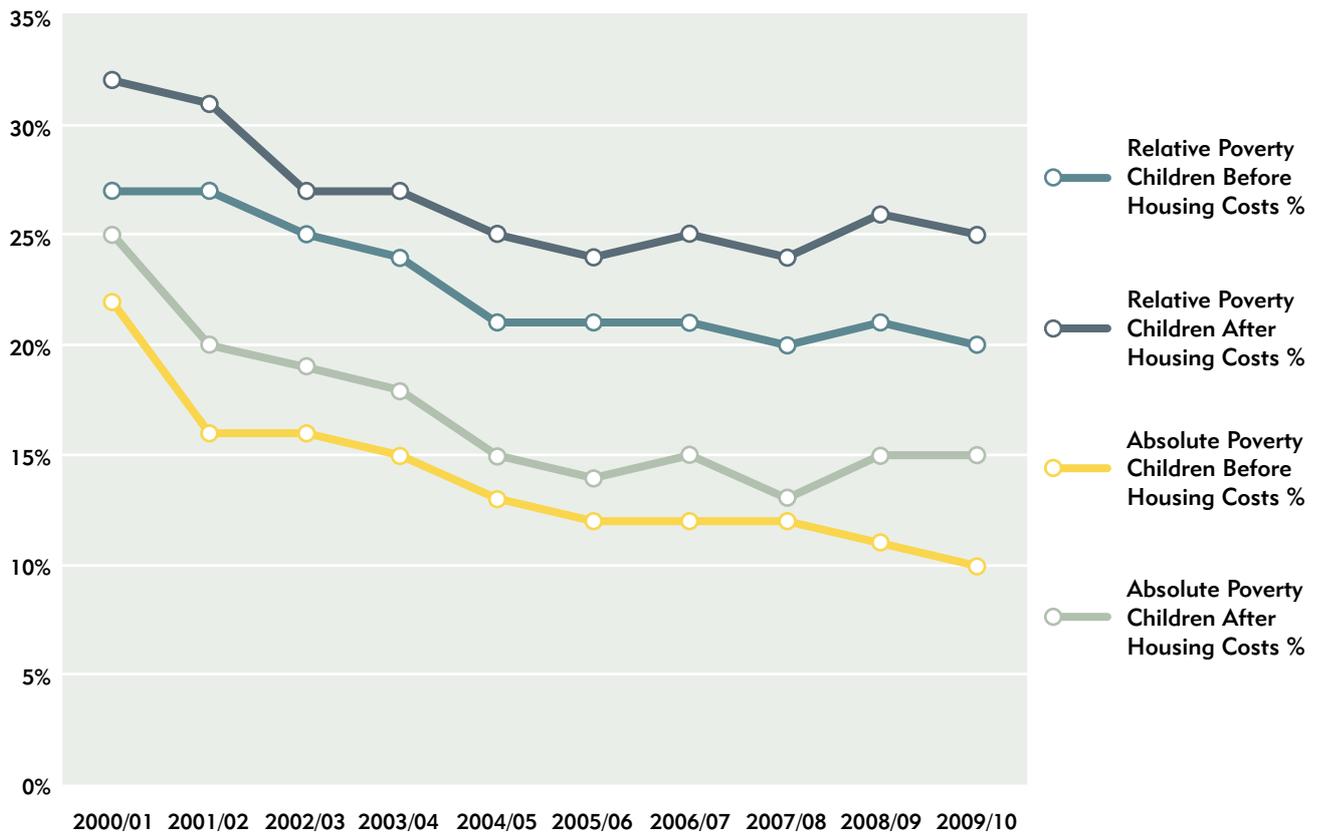
Source: NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request to SFC

II. DEPRIVATION AND PROGRESSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION: NATIONAL PICTURE

Equally, at the national level, there is evidence which suggests the link between deprivation and access to university is not so clear. Figure 7, below, shows the percentage of children in Scotland living in poverty in the post-devolution period. While it shows poverty to be incredibly high within Scotland by any standard, it also shows poverty has decreased over the last 10 years across four different measures.

Over the same period, rates of access to university have remained poor and relatively static. If Scotland's poverty levels directly dictate our poor widening access rates, then we would expect to see improvements in widening access, perhaps after a time lag, in relation to decreases in poverty rates. As this has not been the case, it would suggest, alongside the constituency level figures, that poverty and deprivation are not the only reason we have poor rates of widening access.

FIGURE 7 - PERCENTAGE OF SCOTTISH CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY¹¹



Source: Scottish Government

SCHOOLS AND PROGRESSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

It is also suggested that problems in our school system determine poor rates of access to higher education – that schools with higher proportions of pupils from more deprived backgrounds will do less well at supporting pupils to go on to higher education.

To look more closely at this issue, we submitted a Freedom of Information request to ask every publicly funded secondary school in Scotland what percentage of their leavers went on to higher education, what proportion of their students (S1 – S4) were from an SIMD20 background, and what proportion of their pupils qualified for free school meals (FSM, as an indicator of the income of pupils’ families).

Table 13 shows the top 10 publicly-funded secondary schools in Scotland by rates of progression to HE (both college and university).¹²

As can be seen, most of the schools in the top 10 are those with low proportions of pupils from the most deprived areas in Scotland and low proportions of pupils from low income households (measured by FSM registration). Equally, as can be seen from the full table in Annexe 3, many of those with the poorest progression rates to HE have the highest rates of deprivation or pupils eligible for free school meals. However, Boclair Academy, in East Dunbartonshire seems to break this trend to some extent, showing very high progression rates to HE with a significant (albeit minority) proportion of pupils from deprived areas.

¹¹ Relative poverty is defined as living on below 60% of the median UK income in the same year; absolute poverty as living on below 60% of inflation adjusted median income.

¹² A full list of destinations of leavers from publicly funded Scottish schools can be found in Annexe 9.

Boclair Academy is by no means an exception. The table below shows four schools who rank in the top 10% of 370 schools for progression to HE (at the time of this data being taken) which also have significant numbers of SIMD20 and FSM pupils, and nine schools that perform very well even with large proportions of pupils from deprived or low income backgrounds. In particular, looking at Notre Dame High School in Inverclyde, Cumnock Academy in East Ayrshire, and Notre Dame High School in Glasgow, in which around half of the S1 – S4 population is from the most deprived areas and over a fifth are from households who qualify for free school meals, around half of leavers progress to higher education, far outstripping many schools with low rates of deprivation and pupils eligible for free school meals.

The preceding could be down to a number of different factors, beyond the scope of this report. For example, the effect of independent schools in parts of Scotland

could have an impact, together with the methodology for calculating the SIMD. However, as can be seen from the full annexed table, this is by no means an anomaly, showing that it can not be assumed that schools with higher concentrations of pupils from the most deprived areas perform more poorly in supporting pupils to progress to HE – as a factor it does not by itself explain Scotland’s poor rates of access to university.

INSUFFICIENT STUDENTS FROM THE MOST DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES

Another theory for poor rates of access to our universities is that there simply aren’t sufficient numbers of potential students from poorer backgrounds, and that this is particularly the case in certain areas. However, statistics at the Scottish parliamentary region level (see Table 15) show that in each region, the number of SIMD20 school pupils exceeds the number of SIMD20 university entrants, showing a drop off in participation.

TABLE 13 - TOP 10 SCOTTISH SECONDARY SCHOOLS, RANKED BY PROGRESSION TO HE

HE Progression Rank	School Name	Local Authority	Total Leavers (n)	Higher Education (%)	S1 - S4 Pupils from MD20 (%)	School population registered for FSM (%)
1	Jordanhill School	Grant Maintained	99	77	3.1	1.9
2	St Ninian’s High School	East Renfrewshire	284	74	7.1	6.9
3	Cults Academy	Aberdeen City	156	67	*	2.1
3	Williamwood High School	East Renfrewshire	275	67	0.8	3.8
3	Mearns Castle High School	East Renfrewshire	251	67	1.1	6.7
6	Aberdeen Grammar School	Aberdeen City	184	65	7.1	4.1
7	Banchory Academy	Aberdeenshire	161	64	0.0	3.7
7	Boroughmuir High School	Edinburgh City	165	64	1.0	5.6
7	Boclair Academy	East Dunbartonshire	155	64	15.7	7.1
10	Bearsden Academy	East Dunbartonshire	216	63	4.0	4.7

Source: NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request to SFC

TABLE 14 - HIGH DEPRIVATION/LOW INCOME SCOTTISH SECONDARY SCHOOLS, RANKED BY PROGRESSION TO HE

Rank	School Name	Local authority	Total Leavers (n)	HE (%)	S1 - S4 from MD20 (%)	Registered for FSM in 2011 census (%)
18	Hyndland Secondary School	Glasgow City	178	56	24.1	13.1
19	Belmont Academy	South Ayrshire	235	55	22.5	15.4
26	Dalziel High School	North Lanarkshire	188	52	22.6	9.2
34	St Ambrose High School	North Lanarkshire	219	50	29.9	10.8
39	Queen Margaret Academy	South Ayrshire	136	49	23.1	20.9
43	Balwearie High School	Fife	284	48	21.6	14.3
55	Notre Dame High School	Inverclyde	160	46	50.5	23.2
61	Notre Dame High School	Glasgow City	140	45	43	29.6
77	Cumnock Academy	East Ayrshire	163	42	47.1	20.4

Source: Scottish Government and NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request

TABLE 15 - UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATION BY SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY REGION AND DEPRIVATION

Region	Proportion of SIMD20 HE Entrants (%)	S1 to S4 school population in SIMD20 (%)
Central Scotland	14.6	22.4
Glasgow	38.0	50.8
Highlands & Islands	5.7	8.4
Lothian	8.9	16.4
Mid Scotland & Fife	7.4	15.8
North East Scotland	11.7	22.3
South Scotland	8.7	13.7
West Scotland	18.2	24.3

Source: NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request

We recognise that not every school pupil will want, or be able, to progress to university. However, we believe that these statistics show there are sufficient numbers in our schools to make progress on fair access. It also

highlights the need – as we will explore further in the recommendations – for targeted outreach and talent-spotting work to be undertaken by a range of stakeholders, including universities themselves.

ATTAINMENT AND PROGRESSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

It is often assumed that pupils from deprived backgrounds are denied places at university as they are not getting the grades required while at school. In effect, that their schools are failing them and there is little universities can do to compensate. We looked at the attainment of school leavers by deprivation. Table 16 charts school leavers in each deprivation decile by their highest qualification, only including those who attain grades A – C in either Highers or Advanced Highers.

The table shows that while it is indeed true to say that those from poorer backgrounds leave with fewer qualifications than those from the least deprived, there are large numbers of pupils from the 20% most deprived backgrounds gaining sufficient grades to enter university directly.

TABLE 16 - HIGHEST LEVEL OF SCHOOL LEAVER SCQF QUALIFICATIONS, BY DEPRIVATION, 2009/10

	SIMD20	All
Number of leavers	11,089	54,011
1-2 Highers (%)	11.9	13.8
3-4 Highers (%)	6.0	10.2
5+ Highers (%)	4.5	10.2
1-2 Advanced Highers (%)	4.6	14.3
3+ Advanced Highers (%)	0.25	2.0
Qualified leavers (%)	15.35	36.7

Source: Scottish Government

On grades alone, we can see that 15.35% of the 20% most deprived receive at least three Highers, which should be sufficient to progress to university, but which compares unfavourably to the 9.1% of young SIMD20 students who actually enter university the following academic year (2010/11) from this cohort. At the same time, 9.35% of those pupils in SIMD20 received five Highers or better, again comparing unfavourably with the 6.3% of entrants from SIMD20 backgrounds entering Scotland's Ancient universities, who would require such leaving standards as a minimum.

ATTAINMENT OVER TIME

Equally, looking at attainment over time we see that the gap between the most deprived students and all other

students has narrowed. We looked at the statistics available over time for S4 attainment¹³ for the last five years and it shows that over this time, the gap in attainment between the most deprived and the least deprived has narrowed, with the average tariff score for the most deprived improving by 10.8% compared to improvements of 3.1% for the least deprived. However, while these improvements have been taking place, we have seen no corresponding improvement in access for the most deprived.¹⁴

III. THE ROLE OF ASPIRATIONS

Alongside societal factors and school attainment, 'poverty of aspiration' is often cited as a key barrier to widening access. The logic follows that universities can do little to promote fair access if individuals are not applying to study with them in the first place. The next section, on current widening access activity, will look at what institutional initiatives are undertaken to 'raise aspirations'. However, before looking in more detail at these initiatives, it is instructive to look at the existing evidence on this issue.

It is clear that deprivation and school attainment are negatively linked, with those from more deprived areas less likely to do well at school. Often, the assumption is made that a factor in this lower attainment is lower

TABLE 17 - AVERAGE S4 TARIFF SCORE BY DEPRIVATION BACKGROUND, 2004-2010

	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Percentage increase
SIMD20	125	128	128	129	134	139	10.8
Least deprived	216	216	216	220	223	223	3.1
All pupils	170	172	171	174	179	181	6.8

Source: Scottish Government¹⁵

¹³ Highest qualification statistics were not available over time.

¹⁴ Scottish Government, *Summary statistics for attainment, leaver destinations and school meals*, No. 1: 2011 Edition: Attainment. Available here: <http://bit.ly/JwnAcM>

aspiration whether in terms of the pupil, the family, the school or the community. The theory here is that individuals, families and communities from more deprived areas have less drive to succeed and value educational success less than people from other, less deprived areas. As we have outlined above, school attainment among the most deprived has been increasing and rates of those attaining three Highers or above far outstrip the numbers going on to university. Does lack of aspiration, rather than other factors, explain this drop off between grades achieved and progression to university? The evidence would suggest not.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has undertaken a great deal of work on aspiration, attainment and progression to university.

Its November report, 'The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attitudes and aspirations'¹⁵ has informed much of its work in this area. The research is worth reading in its own right, however, two of its findings are particularly relevant for this report:

- Aspirations in terms of getting work, or going to university, are high among young people, and contradict assumptions that those from disadvantaged backgrounds hold low aspirations. Equally importantly, these were predominantly realistic aspirations.
- It is not enough to have high aspirations – young people also need to be able to navigate their way through to fulfilling these. Many young people, and their parents, face structural and informational barriers to ensuring aspirations can be realised.

This work is backed up by statistics on the numbers of applications received by institutions in Scotland from people from the most deprived backgrounds. It seems, from early investigation, that applications from those

from the poorest backgrounds outstrip the numbers who are accepted. If institutions are receiving sufficient applications from those from the most deprived backgrounds in Scotland, then their ability to increase numbers of SIMD20 students will be greater.

The JRF has since built on this work, culminating in a final report which summarised all of the existing research in its education and poverty strand¹⁶ looking at what should be done, and where there was evidence of success in terms of interventions on widening access. The findings again showed that there was little evidence that aspirations were necessarily unequal, determined by social class or that they were a determinant in attainment at school, or progression to university. Most worryingly, the reports found little evidence the interventions currently undertaken by government or institutions had any effect on attainment or progression, either because there was no impact or because little evidence had been collected.

Instead, the JRF recommends moving away from aspiration-raising work towards work to remove the barriers preventing those from poorer backgrounds from fulfilling their aspirations. These could be cost barriers or, more often, information barriers, a lack of advice or guidance in choosing subjects, education or career paths. In addition, the JRF recommended focussing on supporting parental involvement in children's education and argued that activities could be focussed in this area, particularly on the 13 – 15 year old age group, where there is evidence of impact.

It is for these reasons that we believe universities have a fundamental role to play in supporting the realisation of aspirations through widening access work, as we will go on to explain in greater detail.

¹⁵ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2011 *The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attitudes and aspirations* <http://www.jrf.Aorg.uk/sites/files/jrf/young-people-education-attitudes-full.pdf>

¹⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012, *The role of aspirations, attitudes and behaviour in closing the educational attainment gap*. Available at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/aspirations-attitudes-educational-attainment-roundup>

CONCLUSION

In this section of the report we have examined wider issues which are often cited as key factors preventing those from more deprived backgrounds entering our universities, which many feel are barriers to the success of any access initiatives in higher education.

However, looking at the data on deprivation in our communities and in our schools, and its impact on the numbers of individuals progressing to education, it is clear that this is not the deciding factor many have believed it to be – communities and schools with very different levels of deprivation have been shown to send similar proportions of young people on to higher education, and vice versa. Moreover, if poverty levels are such a key determinant of access to higher education, we would expect that recent reductions in poverty across all measures would have had an impact on access, which has not been the case.

At the same time, a lack of attainment or aspiration is also not a sufficient explanation for the problem. It is clear that aspirations among those from disadvantaged backgrounds are high and realistic and there is a significant pool of school leavers with the grades required for university – including for the most competitive institutions – who are not currently entering any university.

We believe these results are really positive for widening access. It is clear that while there are factors affecting access which are of course outwith the control of our higher education sector, there are not insurmountable problems, and there is real scope to make progress. In the following section we examine current access activity at a national and institutional level.

5. CURRENT WIDENING ACCESS ACTIVITY IN SCOTLAND



SUMMARY

In this section we examine current institutional activities aimed at creating fairer access, looking at programmes and initiatives which universities undertake to increase outreach and access, both individually and in partnership. These are broken down into activities which are national and those which are undertaken by universities themselves. In each case, there are examples of great practice, yet also signs that with more targeted (and increased) investment, all of these activities could have much greater impact, and encourage more students into higher education.

I. NATIONAL INITIATIVES

(A) SCHOOLS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME (SHEP)

Following on from the Scottish Funding Council's decision to cease funding the previous wider access forums from the end of 2010/11, a new national programme was developed on a regional basis, providing targeted funding for schools, colleges and universities to work more closely together to increase progression into higher education (at both colleges and universities).

The overarching national aims of the programme are to:

- Increase staying-on rates and progression rates to higher education, both in college and university
- Support pupils to fulfil their potential
- Increase awareness and opportunities of higher education at college and university
- Provide advice, information and encouragement¹⁷

In order to achieve these aims, funding is allocated on a regional basis to four regions: the south-east (LEAPS); the north (ASPIRE North); the west (FOCUS West); and Fife and Tayside (Lift Off). Each of these regions is led by a host institution, and chaired by a partner institution, and consists of schools, colleges and universities within that region.

The work of each region is undertaken within a local context, but in accordance with national guidelines. Each region is expected to work with target schools within their relevant local authorities, with the overall aim of increasing progression to higher education from those schools (over and above a regionally set three year average baseline), and equally raising awareness of higher education amongst the target school population, and working in partnership to increase staying-on rates.

¹⁷ From the LEAPS website at <http://www.leapsonline.org/shep.html>

Below we look in more detail at examples of institutional activity which happens under the banner of SHEP.

(B) SCOTTISH WIDER ACCESS PROGRAMME (SWAP)

SWAP, which has been in operation since 1988 and is currently funded by institutional subscription with additional support from the SFC, is a regional partnership programme between colleges and universities which aims to increase the number of adults entering higher education from deprived backgrounds and with few or no qualifications. Since its inception SWAP has supported 27,000 adults to enter higher education.

SWAP acts as a broker between colleges and universities, ensuring opportunities for access are available, and preparing students for these opportunities, but not undertaking delivery, which is left to colleges and universities. Typically, SWAP will ensure colleges have access programmes in a variety of fields (normally a year in duration) which then lead on to a guaranteed degree place at a partner university, subject to successful completion. Additionally, SWAP offers an advice function to the same adults, on their options and possibilities for accessing higher education.

(C) ACCESS TO THE PROFESSIONS (A2P)

A2P is an ongoing SFC funded project which aims to increase representation in the professions subjects at Scotland's most highly selective universities by students from SIMD40 backgrounds. In this instance the subjects identified are medicine, law, economics, architecture, and art and design. The project was established as a result of increasingly low numbers from such backgrounds entering these subjects, and at these universities, despite emerging evidence that there were suitably qualified potential students.

Just under £1.8m has been allocated over the period 2010/11 – 2012/13 to Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee, Glasgow and St Andrews universities, along with Glasgow School of Art and the specialist art colleges within the University of Dundee, the University of Edinburgh and Robert Gordon University.

As well as aiming to increase numbers of deprived students undertaking these subjects, it is hoped that the

funding will also contribute to trickle-down effects on the schools involved, improving general work around applications and acceptances, outwith the targets set.

II. INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVITIES

At present across Scotland, most universities undertake some access and outreach activity, from pre-application aspiration-raising work, to summer schools designed to support non-traditional students after they have applied. While the evidence points to some success at each university that undertakes this work, it is a disparate picture across the sector, with some more successful than others and some undertaking far more widening access and outreach activity than others.

We submitted an FOI request to every university in Scotland, asking them about the widening access activity they carried out and the form this activity took.

There is clearly a variety of work being undertaken by institutions across Scotland of differing size and scope. Some universities are clearly undertaking a great deal of awareness-raising activity, mainly focussed on low-progression schools in their area. LEAPS (Lothians Equal Access Partnership for Schools) for example, which brings Edinburgh's four universities together, reached 11,623 school pupils between S2 and S5 last year alone, far outstripping other work. The University of Glasgow, through FOCUS West, reached 1,216 pupils in S5 and S6 through the Top-up Programme, designed to provide information and skills for going to university. However, other institutions do little of this work themselves, relying on the four widening access partnerships in Scotland to undertake this, along with other forms of widening access work.

However, we were most interested in tangible impact, in terms of the numbers of students entering institutions following their work on widening access. For most work, there seems to be a large drop-off between those that take part in institutions' widening access activity and those that actually enter the institution. This is not a

criticism in itself, but we would certainly want to ensure that activities are focussed on delivering the impact we desire – students from SIMD20 backgrounds successfully recruited and retained by Scottish universities. As highlighted by the recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports referred to in the previous section, there has been a lack of evidence brought forward to make the case for the kind of activity currently undertaken, or to analyse the impact of this.

Equally, the activities across Scotland are not necessarily targeted at the same group of students, and not necessarily targeted at the most deprived school pupils. Some institutions have focussed their activity on the bottom 40% in terms of deprivation, or on those from low-progression schools, and there seems to be different thresholds in use as to what constitutes a low-progression school for these purposes. We would like to see a more standardised approach across Scotland so that our whole sector is focussed on the same group[s] of prospective students, therefore securing maximum impact.

As we will detail later in this report, access programmes are shown to have the greatest benefit where there is a clear pathway and intended outcome, i.e. that student participation in an institutional programme has the potential to increase their chances of a place at that institution. Again, on the basis of evidence, the picture is a mixed one in Scotland. In some instances, programmes are designed simply to provide prospective students with a picture of university life, potentially raising aspirations, but then go no further, and have little ability to measure impact. In others, programmes are available only to those who have already received a place, with no pre-application or outreach support. It is our view that outreach and access should be a comprehensive activity, which takes place right from pre-application stages, through to pre-entry, and carries on through to link-up with existing induction and retention activities. As one method of increasing participation, we believe that universities should ensure that there are clear links and pathways through all the activities they do.

Looking at the University of Glasgow's work on widening access, it is clear that there is beneficial and

successful work being undertaken. The University offers a summer school to pupils from low-progression schools in the local area and to those from deprived postcodes. This can provide information or assurance to those who have places at Glasgow, but more importantly can offer an alternative route to those, within these criteria, who have been borderline unsuccessful in their application to study at Glasgow. The summer school offers a taste of first year level study and if applicants demonstrate an ability to succeed at this level, they can be offered a place.

In 2010, the University of Glasgow Summer School had 235 participants of which 113 went on to be accepted by the University. The following year, there was a drop in numbers, but similar proportions went on to study at Glasgow. It is not possible to know how many of these participants would have otherwise been unsuccessful in their application to Glasgow, but it shows the potential success of this type of activity.

The LEAPS programme offers a similar summer school, which is open to pupils from low-progression schools with one or more offers to attend university. The school takes place prior to pupils receiving their final results, and consists of a seven week study programme offering first year level study and information about studying at university level. In 2010/11, 165 people took part in the summer school, with 24 of these people going on to study at Edinburgh. Again, it is difficult to tell if these people would have gone on to study at the University of Edinburgh without the intervention of the summer school, but it is clear that Edinburgh has found a model that works in a variety of ways.

By expanding this activity, and focussing it on more specific groups of students, and on those who would otherwise not get a place, institutions can greatly increase their pool of qualified SIMD20 students, building on what we know already works. This way, universities can concentrate on those applicants with the talent, moving away from attainment and towards potential as the principle for making decisions on admissions.

III. THE ROLE OF LEAGUE TABLES

Rightly or wrongly, many potential students, and their parents, will look to university league tables when deciding on potential universities, as a measure of reputation and excellence. It could be argued, however, that the make-up of such league tables can act as a disincentive to some widening access activity. The majority of mainstream and highly regarded (domestic) rankings, such as *The Times* and *Guardian*, take account of entry tariffs as one metric within the overall 'teaching' band that they then use to rate institutions. In essence, this means that institutions with tougher entry requirements will score more highly. The end result is that those institutions that provide differential offers (which are not accounted for in the majority of tables) could see their standing drop, and, as Professor Chris Brink – Vice Chancellor of Newcastle University – says, "In a higher education environment where reputation is sometimes seen as hinging on newspaper league tables, this argument cannot be dismissed lightly".¹⁸

Professor Brink's experience at Newcastle is one which backs this up. Their alternative admissions programme at Newcastle offers a reduced entry requirement to pupils from deprived backgrounds – if this did not exist it would increase their league table ranking by 10 places. However, as he goes on to state in a strong defence of widening access, the argument around standards is one best tackled head on, and accepted so as to provide opportunities for those who genuinely deserve them.

An interesting variation to this entry requirement information is provided in the *Guardian* league table, which includes a 'value added' metric. This looks at

students' entry tariffs to each university, and calculates their likelihood of achieving different degree outcomes, i.e. first class, 2:1, etc. The 'value added' score measures the difference between these probable outcomes and their actual outcomes, meaning higher scores are given to those universities who take in students with lower tariff scores who then go on to do equally as well, or better, than those admitted with higher tariff scores. We believe this is a much more progressive system, which rewards genuine efforts to increase access.

CONCLUSION

The preceding section has highlighted a lot of excellent examples of good practice within the Scottish sector in efforts and initiatives to increase university access for traditionally underrepresented pupils. The main conclusion to be drawn from the results of the FOI request is that there is successful work being carried out by institutions in Scotland, and good practice already out there. To improve access, therefore, much of the focus of institutions should be about building on what they are already doing, and most importantly, expanding it. Moreover, this should be activity which provides a coherent route into higher education, and done in partnership, both with surrounding universities, but equally local authorities, schools, and colleges.

Having looked at current widening access activities in Scotland, the final section of the report will deal with how we improve, and where we go from here. We examine what a more representative sector would look like, and what it would take to achieve it, and set out a number of recommendations, at a national level but equally those we believe that institutions should consider. First, we examine the case for widening access.

¹⁸ Brink, C, 2009, in *Higher Education Management and Policy*, Volume 21/1, p 25, *Standards will drop – and other fears about the equality agenda in higher education*

6. THE CASE FOR WIDENING ACCESS



We have looked closely at our record on widening access and retention (including articulation from college to university), comparing Scotland overall to the rest of the UK and looking at comparisons between institutions in Scotland. We have seen that, as a whole, we are left behind by the rest of the UK and that within our higher education sector there are particular institutions that could do much better. We have looked at attainment and aspiration, showing that there seems to be untapped potential among people from the most deprived backgrounds, and we have looked at the widening access activities universities currently undertake and what success they have had to date.

The report to this point has been about tracking where we are and why we are here. It seems clear that there are social and school factors which influence our widening access and retention rates. However, school attainment has been increasing among pupils from the most deprived backgrounds, and the numbers of these pupils achieving the necessary grades for admission to university noticeably outstrips the numbers actually admitted.

Equally, in terms of social factors, child poverty has decreased markedly over the last decade (albeit becoming static over recent years) with no subsequent increase in access to university, indicating that poverty is not as strongly linked to access as some may suggest.

Moreover, looking at different Scottish Parliament constituencies, in particular their populations in the most deprived 20%, you can see there are wildly varying rates of progression to HE. If two constituencies with similar SIMD20 populations have such different rates of progression to higher education, then it is clear that social factors alone cannot explain our low rates of widening access.

It is therefore clear that we cannot explain our widening access rates by levels of social inequality or by poor school performance alone. It is for this reason that we looked at the current activity undertaken by universities to widen access. Having considered this, it is clear that within the national widening access activity (like SHEP, SWAP and Access to the Professions) and the universities' own activity, there is a great deal of good practice. However, particularly among universities' own activity there is a great deal of variation in the desired impacts of the work (raising awareness activity, through to summer schools at point of entry) and also differences in the people targeted (whether this is the first in family to go to university, those from low progression schools, SIMD40 or SIMD20). It seems clear that aligning the purposes and the targeted groups across Scotland could be a good first step and could maximise the impact we all desire – to enable talented people to go to university who may not, without intervention, have the opportunity.

However, a key question we have not answered is why? Why work to widen access at all? Is it a bad thing that Scotland has the lowest rates of widening access and retention in the UK?

We do not want to see widening access rates improve for altruistic or charitable reasons. This is not about asking universities to go beyond their core work to make up for failures in our schools or wider society – after all we have shown that it is not a failure that lies entirely at society or the school system’s door. To us this is not about social engineering. Equally, this is not about lowering standards, or ‘dumbing down’ our universities, in order to artificially boost the number of students from poorer backgrounds.

Instead, we want to see improved access as we believe there are people with potential that are currently missing out on university. We believe that by moving away from looking solely at an applicant’s attainment and instead to looking at their academic potential – their ability to get a good degree, not what school grades they have – we can prevent this unnecessary waste of opportunity. When seen in this light, widening access is about ensuring institutions choose the best applicant, with the most potential to succeed. It is therefore not a threat to standards but a means of raising standards by selecting the highest quality candidates possible.

We want to see a higher education sector where access and success are based on genuine merit, so that it is those with the greatest academic potential who are given the precious opportunity of a place at university or college. It is our contention that there are large numbers of people with the talent, with the aspiration, and with the qualifications, that are missing out on a place at university, due to inaction or misplaced action by universities.

If we can improve our access rates, bringing those talented people into our institutions who are currently missing out on higher education, despite having the potential to succeed, this will be of huge benefit to our education sector, our country and our economy, ensuring that an individual’s talent not their school or background determines how far in education they can go.

We looked at a number of universities in the rest of the UK who had undertaken research into the impact of their widening access activity and into the outcomes of their students from the most deprived backgrounds. Below we look in greater detail at their work and investigate whether their research does indeed support our premise – that widening access is the key to unlocking Scotland’s potential, promoting excellence in our higher education institutions.

CASE STUDY 1: UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL – LOOKING BEYOND A CANDIDATE’S GRADES

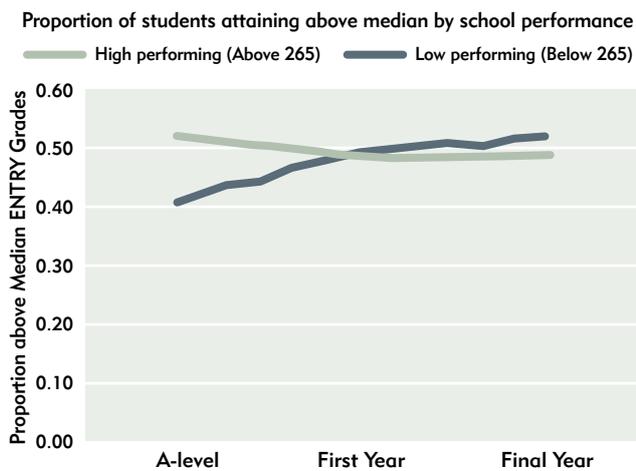
In 1999, in a bid to shake off its elitist image (at the time only Oxbridge surpassed it in terms of proportion of private school entrants), the University of Bristol moved to implement a robust strategy for widening access, part of which was a move towards contextualising and differentiating¹⁹ its admissions, a strategy which was not well received at the time. As part of this move, the University not only recruited students through contextual processes (and at times provided differential offers), but also tracked them throughout their studies.

A team at Bristol, led by Dr Tony Hoare, the Director of the University of Bristol Widening Participation Research Cluster, used this tracking data for three cohorts of students, examining their performance pre-entry and up until graduation, and their exit qualifications, i.e. degree outcomes.²⁰ In essence they looked at how those accepted with lower grades into the University performed throughout their degree, including their final degree award. The table below compares students’ school attainment (divided into students from low performing and high performing schools) to their attainment while at the University.

¹⁹ See recommendations for a wider explanation of contextual and differential admissions

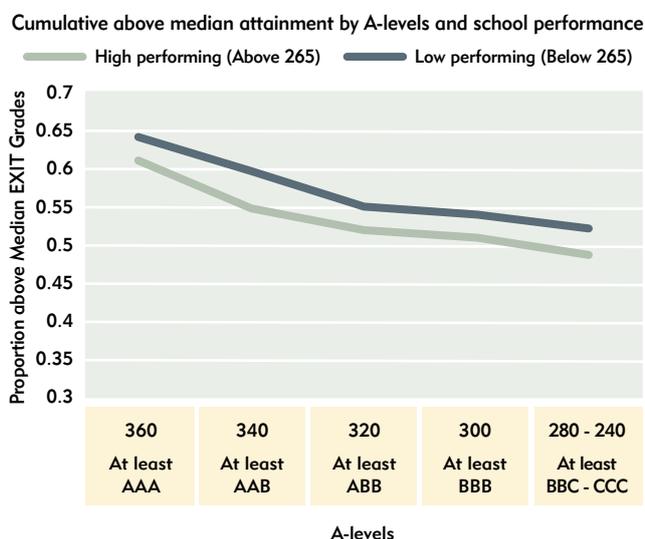
²⁰ Hoare, A and Johnston, R, 2010, in *Studies in Higher Education, Widening access through admissions policy*. Available here: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academicregistry/raa/wpur-office/wprc/hoare-johnston.pdf>

FIGURE 8 - PERFORMANCE AT A-LEVEL, FIRST YEAR, AND FINAL YEAR BY SCHOOL BACKGROUND



The above table shows the progression from school, and through university, for two groups of students - the dark blue line measures the outcomes of those students who came from the lowest performing schools and the light blue the highest. As can be seen, when the students are tracked across their studies, the lowest performing school students first catch up to their higher performing school counterparts, and then outstrip them, obtaining on average better degree classifications. This shows that those admitted into the University of Bristol with lower grades, from low performing schools, actually achieved better marks at university than those admitted with higher marks from high performing schools.

FIGURE 9 - DEGREE OUTCOMES, BY SCHOOL BACKGROUND AND A-LEVEL PERFORMANCE



Again, what the above shows us is that students from lower performing schools outperform those from high performing ones, and moreover, this is a trend that holds true across all A-level tariff groups. Bristol concluded that, in terms of contextualising admissions and providing differential offers, these final-year results were higher by a margin that would justify admitting such students with between one to two grades lower (for typical AAA offers) and three grades lower (for ABB offers).

This clearly shows that the University of Bristol has been able to recruit students with greater than average academic potential from pupils with lower grades, from low-progression schools, who would not have otherwise been able to go to Bristol. Furthermore, it shows that grades are by no means the only, or the best, determinant of academic potential.

CASE STUDY 2: ACCESS TO THE PROFESSIONS, ST GEORGE'S MEDICAL SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

We also wanted to look at widening access in the context of access to the professions, due to the noticeably different requirements that professional courses have. Below we consider one such example; St. George's Medical School, a part of the University of London.

As part of their efforts to increase access by those from disadvantaged backgrounds, St. George's operates what they term an 'adjusted criteria programme'.²¹ This programme assesses applicants by comparing them within their educational context (i.e. the results of their peers) as opposed to the national average. Applicants to St. George's generally require (as a minimum) two As and a B grade in their A-levels to be invited for an interview. However, applicants who perform 60% above the average for their school, where the school average is CDD or below, are guaranteed an interview (and it is

²¹ Sutton Trust, 2009, *Innovative University Admissions Worldwide: A Percent Scheme for the UK?* Available here: <http://www.suttontrust.com/research/innovative-university-admissions-worldwide/>

important to note that the interviewer does not know the background of those being interviewed).

A first review of early results was announced by St. George's in 2008, looking at attainment by those who had been accepted on to the scheme since its inception in 2002.²² The results showed that those gaining entry through traditional means scored on average 65.9% in first year finals, compared to an average score 65.41% by those admitted under the adjusted criteria programme – not even a 1% difference between the two, despite the lower entry requirements.

Similar results for entry to professional degrees by students admitted with lower requirements according to background have been seen at Newcastle University and Kings College London.²³

Again, this shows that if academic potential, and genuine merit, is to be the key principle guiding who gets a university place and who does not, then looking beyond grades alone can allow universities to widen access and maintain, if not increase, the attainment of their graduates.

CASE STUDY 3: ACCESS TO LEEDS

As stated previously, we believe that access initiatives work best when there are clear links between each aspect of pre-application through to entry, and the Access to Leeds (A2L) programme is a prime example of how this can work well.

A2L is an alternative admission scheme designed to attract students with potential, but not necessarily current attainment in school level qualifications. To be considered for an A2L application, students must meet two or more of a number of criteria related to potential lower participation in HE, including: being in receipt

²² More information here on St George's here: <http://www.sgul.ac.uk/media/news-archive/2008/widening-participation>

²³ Brink, C, 2009, in Higher Education Management and Policy, Volume 21/1, p 25

of free school meals; being the first in their family to apply to HE; living in a low progression area; attending a school which performs below the national average for GCSE results; and living or growing up in care.

In addition to submitting a direct A2L application, students who apply through UCAS may also be flagged up for consideration through the university's contextual admissions system, and also provided with an A2L offer. A2L applicants receiving an offer receive two: the standard university offer and an alternative offer of up to two grades below the standard entry requirement. In order to be admitted with the A2L offer, students are required to participate in and pass an A2L programme consisting of personal essays and subject-specific assignments, both of which are designed to determine ability.

According to the university's most recent Access Agreement submitted to OFFA²⁴ the programme has been a great success, with students admitted under A2L having comparable progression and outcomes with those admitted through traditional means. The university now intends to increase applications received via A2L from the current 670 to 1,000.

CASE STUDY 4: THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

The University of Birmingham runs an Access to Birmingham (A2B) programme which again has achieved positive results. A2B was set up in 2000 to encourage talented people from non-traditional backgrounds to study at the University. It works with partner schools and colleges to target those from lower income, low-progression backgrounds. It offers an alternative application route whereby applicants from these backgrounds potentially receive a UCAS offer and a lower A2B offer on condition of successfully undertaking the A2B module. To pass the module, applicants need to undertake academic coursework

²⁴ Available from the OFFA here: <http://www.offa.org.uk/access-agreements/searchresult/?inst=University%20of%20Leeds>

relevant to the course applied for, visit the University on an open day or student shadow day, and undertake an online study-skills module.

The scheme has been a great success with outcomes for A2B students close to or exceeding those who entered the university through the standard route. In 2010, 236 students successfully entered the University through this route, representing 4.5% of the intake. In 2011, 99% of A2B graduates received a 2:2 or above, compared to 97% on average, and 68% gained a 2:1 or first award. Retention rates were higher, marginally, for A2B students than average rates, showing that A2B offers positive outcomes, not only for attainment but also tackling drop-out.

For graduate level employment, 68% of A2B students over a four-year average were in graduate level employment following graduation compared to 71.5% on average. This could well be helped by the Gateway Bursary offered by the University of Birmingham to A2B students (and others such as disabled students, care leavers, or lone parents) to enable them to undertake a work placement or volunteering opportunity that they would otherwise be unable to afford.

CONCLUSION

These four case studies show that widening access can help universities find talented students they would otherwise miss out on, and that offering differential offers – a lower entry requirement for those from low performing schools – can, far from lowering quality or ‘dumbing down’, actually improve the marks that a university’s students achieve. The four case studies are also incredibly instructive as they show four differing

options for widening access activity, all of which have proven to be successful at achieving widening access and academic excellence:

1. Differential offers – offering a lower entry requirement for applicants from lower performing schools.
2. Talent spotting – offering admission interviews to those applicants who do not achieve the required grades but have performed 60% above their school’s median attainment.
3. A parallel widening access admissions system – alongside UCAS admissions, offering an in-house widening access admissions system which targets people from deprived backgrounds, offering lower admissions criteria on the proviso of the completion of pre-entry academic coursework.
4. A focus on retention and employability, ensuring that widening access is not only about getting students through the door of the university but also about keeping them there through to a successful graduation and beyond.

The case studies above show that there is good practice out there that we know works to widen access. Moreover, we know that students from more deprived backgrounds or ‘lower performing’ schools, even when offered lower entry requirements, can outperform entrants with higher grades from ‘better’ schools. In this way, improving access can bring the most talented students into our universities and boost the attainment of our graduates, rather than being any kind of threat to excellence.

The next section will outline what we believe we should be aiming for when it comes to fair access in Scotland.

7. A ROAD MAP FOR ACCESS



SUMMARY

We have looked at current rates of access and at potential societal and school barriers together with attainment and aspiration among people from the 20% most deprived communities. We have also considered improving access by looking beyond grades, following best practice from the rest of the UK in which universities consider academic potential. Universities like Bristol, Leeds and London have shown that widening access is not some kind of charitable or altruistic act – it is an act that can increase the quality of candidates, target students with the most academic potential, and ultimately promote excellence in our universities.

Taking all of this into account, the key question remains, what do we hope to achieve? What should our goal be for widening access? This section will outline the outcome that we hope to see for our higher education sector, to promote widening access hand in hand with promoting excellence. We show that to move from the current 12.7% to a far more equitable 17.5% representation at Scottish universities of the most deprived in our society would require just a 1.6% increase per year, over three years.

HOW MANY MORE?

We believe that the current levels of participation among the most deprived are too low and that we are missing out on some of our most talented students, with the most academic potential. Ultimately we want to see a Scotland where those that access higher education are a reflection of society, and where access to education is determined by an individual's talent not by their background. In 2010/11, only 12.7% of Scottish-domiciled entrants to university in Scotland were from the 20% most deprived communities.

Our ultimate aim is to see participation among the bottom fifth in our society rise to 20%, to ensure that when we hold a mirror up to education we see a reflection of society. While this is an ambitious target, we believe it is not only entirely achievable but also entirely necessary to achieve true excellence at our institutions.

FOCUSING ON THOSE WITH THE WORST RECORDS

As seen earlier in this report, there are a number of institutions in Scotland that have very poor widening access rates, including some of our largest and most research-intensive institutions. Below we looked at what a fairly modest target of 10% of entrants from the 20% most deprived communities would look like in a selection of these institutions.

For each, we have used 2010/11 (the most recent available figures) as our baseline.

TABLE 18 - HOW RESEARCH INTENSIVE UNIVERSITIES REACH 10% SIMD20

Institution	Current rate of WA	Additional entrants required to reach 10% from most deprived 20%
University of Edinburgh	5.0%	91
University of St Andrews	2.7%	35
University of Aberdeen	3.1%	112

Source: NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request to SFC

The table above puts into perspective how achievable widening access could be. Doubling the University of Edinburgh’s widening access rate to 10% would only require an additional 91 entrants each year from an SIMD20 background. When seen in tandem with the huge amount of good work that LEAPS already does in the region, reaching over 11,000 S2 – S5 pupils in a given year, taking over 2,000 to interview and providing a summer school for over 160 prospective students, it is clear that an additional 91 could be achieved by expanding existing activity and potentially refocusing this activity. Equally, 91 entrants should be seen in the context of the over 28,000 students that Edinburgh teaches each year. While widening access is incredibly important, that does not mean it is a challenge which is overwhelming in size.

Furthermore, the University of St Andrews would need only 35 more entrants to reach 10% of its intake from SIMD20 backgrounds, compared to its population of over 7,000, and the University of Aberdeen only an additional 112 entrants each year compared to its 16,000 students in total.

Therefore, while widening access should make a significant difference, it does not require a significant change to make progress. It is clear to us that reaching

10% is achievable in a short time frame, for example over a year or two.

STEADY PROGRESS IN THE SHORT-TERM

Following on from this, we looked at what progress could be expected from all universities over the next three years. We believe a key principle is that all institutions should be asked to make progress in this area, and that those with the worst records should be asked to do the most. Table 19 seeks progress from all institutions of at least 2% per year for three years for medium or small recruiters of SIMD20 students, and 1.5% per year for three years for the three large recruiters²⁵ of SIMD20 students.

In the table we have applied a 1.75% - 2% increase per year to those who currently have moderate to relatively strong records in access for the most deprived, and 2.5% to those with the lowest current rates.

As can be seen, even when applying modest increases over a three year period at an institutional level, this adds up nationally to achieve a far more representative 17.5% of Scottish-domiciled entrants coming from the 20% most deprived backgrounds; something achieved with just a 1.6% increase per year across the sector as a whole. Even at institutions such as St Andrews, where the percentage increase appears most marked, this goal would require just 12 additional students from deprived backgrounds to be recruited per year, over the three year period.

We also wanted to look at what a reflective university sector would look like, where 20% of the university population were from the most deprived 20% of the population.

²⁵ We defined ‘large recruiters’ as those institutions who recruit over 15% SIMD20 currently, which are: Abertay Dundee, Glasgow Caledonian and University of West of Scotland.

TABLE 19 - INSTITUTIONAL WIDENING ACCESS TARGETS OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS

	All entrants Number	SIMD 20 %	3 year target %	Additional SIMD20	
				Number per year	% per year
Aberdeen	1,625	3.1%	10.60	40	2.5%
Abertay Dundee*	1,529	16.8%	21.80	25	1.67%
Dundee	1,925	10.1%	16.10	38	2.0%
ECA	143	5.6%	11.60	3	2.0%
Edinburgh Napier	2,121	12.2%	18.20	43	2.0%
Edinburgh	1,808	5.0%	12.50	45	2.5%
Glasgow Caledonian*	2,819	20.7%	20.70	0	0.0%
GSA	186	7.0%	13.00	4	2.0%
Glasgow	2,906	10.4%	16.40	58	2.0%
Heriot-Watt	900	8.6%	14.60	18	2.0%
UHI	2,018	8.3%	14.30	41	2.0%
Queen Margaret	547	9.3%	15.30	11	2.0%
Robert Gordon	1,902	5.4%	12.90	48	2.5%
RCS	126	8.7%	14.70	3	2.0%
SAC	479	8.1%	14.10	10	2.0%
St Andrews	477	2.7%	10.20	12	2.5%
Stirling	1,714	9.3%	15.30	34	2.0%
Strathclyde	2,675	13.0%	19.00	53	2.0%
UWS*	4,404	25.4%	25.40	0	0.0%
Total	30,304	12.7%	17.5	485	1.9%

* Suggested targets are as per these institutions *Regional Coherence Project* outcome agreements, developed in conjunction with the SFC.
Discrepancies arise due to differences in benchmark years.

What is striking is that to reach a fully reflective university population requires only a relatively small increase in SIMD20 students, representing only 7.3% of the current Scottish-domiciled intake.

Through current debates and discussions around access, and how we ensure that we increase access to university education amongst the poorest in our society, NUS Scotland has been clear that we believe

Scotland should agree to a national aspiration (given here as the aspiration to achieve 20% representation). However we would equally agree that it is important not to be overly prescriptive, and that institutions cannot have their hand forced by centrally-set targets. As such, the above is purely indicative of where we *could* go. However, what is striking is that the number of additional students required to achieve our aspiration is entirely realistic and attainable.

TABLE 20 - CHANGES REQUIRED TO REACH 20% PARTICIPATION OF SIMD 20

	All Scottish-domiciled entrants (Number)	SIMD 20 in 2010/11 (Number)	SIMD 20 when 20% reached	Additional MD20 required	% this increase represents of total entrants
Total entrants in Scotland	30,304	3,846	6061	2215	7.3%

Source: NUS Scotland Freedom of Information request to SFC

8. RECOMMENDATIONS



This report has looked at the access problem we face in Scotland, the benefits to our institutions that widening access can bring, and the best practice which is currently ongoing in the UK. In the previous section we also considered what a fair system might look like. This section looks at some possible ways to move towards this goal. Furthermore, and most encouragingly, many of these recommendations are already being implemented elsewhere in the UK, so that what we are calling for is the adoption of these best practice examples on a much wider and larger scale.

The recommendations are wide-ranging and cover proposals both for institutional and for national action. NUS Scotland does not believe in an access 'silver bullet' or that money in itself is what will solve the access problem in Scotland; it is not an isolated issue and should not be treated as such. However, Scottish universities will receive significant increases in funding over the coming years from public sources and from the new fees system for students from the rest of the UK (despite NUS Scotland's opposition to RUK fees). This considerable public investment in difficult financial circumstances reflects the ongoing value Scottish society places on education and it is only right to consider how we can maximise the benefits of this investment.

As we have stated, widening access is not about charity or altruism, nor is it about lowering standards or

'dumbing down'. Widening access is about the pursuit of excellence, improving the talent pool at our institutions and getting the most from our graduates, and as such, at its root, promoting a genuine meritocracy where an individual's potential to succeed at university determines whether they get a place or not. Seen in this light, institutions are not doing their jobs properly unless they widen access, and access activities should be core to what every institution does, resourced through core funding.

This section details a range of recommendations which we hope can be successful ways to realise significant short-term progress on widening access and to achieve our ultimate aim of our university population mirroring society, with 20% of university students coming from the 20% most deprived backgrounds in Scotland.

I. NATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INTRODUCE ENFORCEABLE WIDENING ACCESS OUTCOME AGREEMENTS

We fully back the Scottish Government's proposals for widening access outcome agreements, whereby institutions will negotiate with the SFC to set themselves targets for widening access and retention outcomes over a three-year period. This will offer local flexibility and avoid clumsy centrally set targets. However, the SFC

should ensure a minimum standard across institutions – as we have explored above – to ensure that every institution is making progress and that the sector as a whole is improving its widening access rates.

To ensure these agreements are enforceable, we believe they should have a strong legislative underpinning, with a legal duty introduced for institutions to widen access. Furthermore, there should be meaningful financial penalties introduced to incentivise institutions to prioritise widening access as core to what they do. These financial penalties could be recycled from institutions into national widening access activity to ensure that financial penalties do not act as a barrier to widening access. We would hope, however, that the threat of financial penalties would not have to be used, acting as a deterrent and an incentive to widen access, rather than a regular occurrence.

Crucially, and to act as a support, NUS Scotland and students' associations should have a formal role, locally and nationally, to ensure that the student voice is fully considered in designing, monitoring and delivering widening access outcome agreements.

Outcome agreements could follow national principles but allow local flexibility and the ability to deal with localised challenges. For example, particular institutions could have specific problems relating to access for women to STEM courses or other institutions could have specific problems with, for example, access to postgraduate study (including the professions). Equally, promoting and monitoring articulation from college to second or third year of university study could, and should, be included. Finally, we would like to see widening access rates for students from the rest of the UK monitored and protected as well.

2. UNCAP UNIVERSITY PLACES FOR SIMD20 STUDENTS

We believe uncapping places for students from SIMD20 backgrounds in Scotland could act as a strong incentive to institutions to improve access rates. This would allow institutions to recruit beyond their student number target, either taking in students from the most deprived backgrounds on a fees-only basis or recruiting

these students through their core provision and then recruiting non-SIMD20 students on a fees-only basis who would otherwise be displaced.

We believe that this is important to protect all students, both those who run the greatest risk of never being recruited, but equally ensuring that there is no displacement within the system of traditional students, making sure that there is a place for all those who should be able to achieve one.

3. DEVELOP A NATIONAL WIDENING ACCESS AND RETENTION STUDENT VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

We believe it could be beneficial to introduce a national student volunteer programme to work on widening access and retention. Using student, and potentially graduate, volunteers could be an effective way to tackle any stigma surrounding university, to create networks and connections that encourage applications to particular universities, to anchor students in the institution to improve retention, and offer useful connections following graduation. If prospective students can see examples of people that have come from similar backgrounds and gone on to be successful at university and beyond then it could inspire them to do the same. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the SFC and Scottish Government to explore how such a national programme could be implemented in a way that worked through, and supplemented, existing widening access activity rather than attempting to reinvent it.

4. CREATE AN INDEPENDENT NATIONAL UNIT TO SAFEGUARD ACCESS

Despite the commitment to ensuring fairer access, from across the political spectrum and education sector, there is a lack of an independent voice on access in Scotland to monitor and ensure delivery of action. We are interested in the work of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) which operates in England and Wales, and in the Sutton Trust, a charitable organisation dedicated to promoting social mobility. In Scotland, there is no organisation dedicated to monitoring widening access or to generating new ideas and potential best practice. We believe an independent widening access unit would be a great step forward, fulfilling the monitoring role and also the development role when it comes to widening access activities.

We do not believe that there is any need to create an additional layer of bureaucracy or another quango in Scotland and the outcomes we would wish to see could very easily be achieved with certain existing structures. One way to achieve this would be to develop a widening access unit within the Scottish Government or SFC. This could delegate responsibility for monitoring widening access – as the SFC has to some extent currently – but crucially, would specifically task this unit with developing potential new widening access activity, undertaking or commissioning research into the effectiveness of widening access activity, and working to bring together and focus national and institution widening access work.

II. INSTITUTIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

5. SIGN UP TO A PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO WIDEN ACCESS IN SCOTLAND

A public commitment, over and above an institution's widening access outcome agreements, would begin to ensure that widening access is core to what every institution in Scotland does, galvanising the whole staff team towards this aim, and ensuring we have the best students with the greatest academic potential in our universities.

6. ADOPT AND SCALE-UP BEST PRACTICE WIDENING ACCESS ACTIVITIES

It is clear that there is a great deal of good work being undertaken by institutions in Scotland, and elsewhere in the UK. We will make specific recommendations on best practice below. However, what is clear is that we must significantly expand widening access activity in Scotland, we must focus that activity on those who would otherwise not enter university (rather than those who may otherwise go anyway), and finally we should align institutions' target groups across Scotland.

To expand current activity could be challenging, but at a time when Scottish universities are seeing large increases in public funding it is essential we do it. However, as well as additional resources from core funding, institutions

should look at how they could focus existing activity to gain greater impact.

The recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports highlighted earlier in this report cast doubt on the received wisdom that aspirations are low among people from deprived communities and furthermore, perhaps logically, cast significant doubt over the impact of aspiration-raising activities and current widening access initiatives in general. In this light, we believe the sector should look closely at whether the focus of widening access activity should be shifted away from mass-coverage, aspiration-raising, towards working with parents and with the 13 to 15 age group in keeping with the JRF recommendations. Furthermore, from our research it seems clear that many of the bridging support activities (summer schools, pre-offer access courses or assignments) are highly successful in Scotland, but simply on too small a scale.

7. ENSURE EVERY AREA IN SCOTLAND HAS SIGNIFICANT, AND FREE, BRIDGING PROVISION (SUMMER SCHOOLS, ACCESS COURSES) TO LOOK FOR ACADEMIC POTENTIAL BEYOND SCHOOL GRADES

- Provision must be increased from current levels to expand the pool of potential SIMD20 students and to meet the scale of the challenge we face on widening access.
- If expansion is not possible for in-house activity, universities could look to franchise their access courses and summer schools out to other providers like the Open University, colleges and schools.

As we have seen with the highly successful best practice examples of Access to Leeds and Access to Birmingham, bridging provision, such as summer schools and access courses, are proven ways to successfully widen access. They offer institutions a chance to test the potential of students from more deprived backgrounds or low-progression schools and look beyond their school attainment through either differential offers or through topping up grades. They also offer a chance for prospective students to learn useful skills and gain an

understanding of the learning culture at universities, which can stand them in good stead if accepted.

In Scotland, examples of this type of provision include LEAPS and the University of Glasgow summer schools. However, as mentioned above, we would like to see these focused on SIMD20 and low-progression school pupils and moreover we believe they need to be expanded in size and that similar provision needs to be put in place across Scotland.

In 2010, the University of Glasgow summer school had 235 participants of which 113 went on to be accepted by the University. Similar provision through LEAPS in Edinburgh had 165 participants in 2010/11, 24 of whom entered the University of Edinburgh. We believe that the size of these summer schools should be expanded to make a meaningful contribution to the institution's widening access outcome agreement. If for example, the University of Edinburgh required a 2.5% increase in SIMD20 students, around 25 students, then focussing the LEAPS summer school on people from the most deprived backgrounds and expanding it could be a tried and tested, and successful, way of doing so.

If expansion along these lines is beyond the physical limitations of some universities (for example in terms of facilities) then innovative ways to deliver equivalent bridging or top-up provision should be considered. For example, franchising this to alternative providers, such as the Open University, local colleges and schools, could not only expand this activity, it could reach potential SIMD20 students further away from, for example, Edinburgh itself and tap into different cohorts of people from SIMD20 backgrounds. Franchising bridging support opens up opportunities to engage with access routes from a further distance, from home or part-time (in the case of OU) or equally during 6th year (particularly if Advanced Highers are not available) or alongside college studies. Again, the University of Edinburgh and, particularly, the University of Glasgow, do use local colleges for many of their access courses, however standardising, and expanding this work, including to other providers, could be a very successful way of increasing the pool of potential SIMD20 students.

A crucial strength of LEAPS and the A2B and A2L programmes, among others, are that they offer the opportunity to prospective students from deprived backgrounds to study at first-year level. Prospective students are asked to complete academic modules, in real first-year settings, allowing the institution to judge whether summer school participants have the potential to succeed in a university setting. If a student proves their ability when studying at first year level then it allows institutions to move away from school grades alone in judging applicants through either a differential offer or by topping up an applicant's school grades. We believe summer schools and other bridging support should include academic work at first year level, if possible, to allow admissions to look beyond school grades to academic potential.

8. ADOPT ALTERNATIVE/PARALLEL ADMISSIONS PROCESSES, WHICH SUPPORT ACCESS

- Alternative access routes should be hugely increased in scale, providing two means of entry for students from deprived backgrounds across Scotland.
- Joining up of access work with admissions processes would see future potential as much of a determinant as current attainment.
- Contextualised and differentiated offers, or routes for applicants to top-up school grades, should be used to ensure recruitment of high achieving students within lower performing schools.

Many institutions' widening access programmes, like Access to Leeds, and Access to Birmingham, among many others, offer parallel admissions routes for applicants from deprived communities or low progression schools. These applicants can apply through UCAS in the normal way, and be flagged up as the institution's widening access target group, or can apply direct to the widening access scheme (if they meet the same criteria). In doing so, applicants are provided with two offers, one from UCAS and a lower differential offer. The lower offer is often on the proviso of successful completion of the institution's bridging

support (often an academic assignment or access course) and in essence works to top-up applicants' school grades. This allows institutions to see beyond school attainment, judging applicants instead on their academic potential.

Similar schemes exist in Scotland, through the University of Glasgow and LEAPS, but crucially without welcoming open applications. We would like to see their scale increased and open applications welcomed if these are to make a significant contribution to our goals on widening access.

It is clear from best practice in universities in England that by offering differential offers, and/or routes for applicants to top up their school grades, we can ensure the recruitment of the most talented students and increase graduate attainment. For many institutions this is a natural extension in the use of contextual data. Some institutions have prerequisites for making differential offers, such as the parallel (access scheme) admissions processes examined, which often act to top-up applicants' school grades – however, all institutions do this for the same reason; that research has shown that those who have faced significant educational and social challenges can still hold the ability to succeed at university at the highest level, even if their school grades are lower.

Differential offers and top-up routes are clearly hugely important in ensuring those with the most academic potential gain places at our universities, adjusting offers to take into account the context in which grades were achieved. It seems clear that Higher or A-Level grades cannot be seen in isolation from the school or the background of the applicant who achieved that grade – three As or Bs in a school or a community that has a poor track record of supporting pupils onto higher education clearly indicates even greater academic potential than three As or Bs from a school or community at the other end of the spectrum. This should be factored into admissions, and indeed if it is not, then we would argue institutions are missing out on the most talented applicants and not doing their job properly.

In order to ensure the best use of differentiated admissions, it is important to start from a robust process

of contextualising applications. It is important to note that the definition of 'contextual' will depend on who is using it – an important principle is that each institution will use it in its own way, and for its own purposes. But, a broad definition can be found in its two main instances of use:

1. Targeting low progression schools: It may be, for example, information that can help target schools and colleges in certain areas and identify potential students who may be eligible for support through compact or progression agreements, or other outreach and aspiration raising activities.
2. Applications: It can be information on the background of students (both educational and socio-economic) that is used to inform a student's application – this can then go on to inform the offer that is made (which would be a differential offer), or whether or not a particular student is called for interview.

At present there is evidence to suggest that the use of contextual information in admissions is moderately common, and becoming more prevalent. A recent UK-wide survey by Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA)²⁶ found that 41.5% of respondents had previously used contextual information in admissions, and 62.8% planned to use it in future admissions processes. Moreover, there is an even spread among institutional type and mission of those using it, or planning to.

9. UNDERTAKE PROACTIVE TALENT SPOTTING AMONG LOCAL SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

We believe that institutions should undertake proactive work to talent-spot potential university students at local schools and colleges. This links to the recommendation above. Universities in Scotland should be in their local schools and colleges, encouraging those that are displaying signs of academic potential, for example by performing far above the median of their classmates, to apply to the university (whether through UCAS or

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²⁶ SPA, *Contextual data in admissions*. Available at <http://www.spa.ac.uk/contextual-data/index.html>

alternative admissions routes) and to engage with the bridging support on offer from the university (whether in-house bridging or franchised bridging, through for example courses offered by the Open University, colleges or the school itself). It is not enough to sit back and wait for applications from SIMD20 students or from pupils at low-progression schools.

LEAPS, and others in Scotland, do undertake a great deal of outreach work in Scotland. However, while we understand applications do outstrip acceptances among SIMD20 students at research-intensive universities (showing an untapped pool of SIMD20 students) it is unclear whether this is an impact of outreach work or not.

Going further, and giving a more formal, robust and automatic approach, to this could see schools, local authorities, colleges and universities working on a regional basis to share pupils' exam results. This could work by students in each school within a local authority being 'flagged up' where they perform above a certain median point in exams, compared to their peers, especially where there is a cross match between higher levels of deprivation, judged either by free school meals or SIMD. This would serve to ensure they know their options and can engage with potential universities' alternative admissions routes, bridging provision (summer school or access courses) or other widening access activity and equally to ensure universities proactively reach out to these students.

10. TAKE ACTION TO IMPROVE RETENTION WORK IN SCOTLAND

As shown in our previous section, while there is a persistent problem with getting students from the most deprived backgrounds into universities, there is an equally pressing issue in ensuring that they stay on once there. At present, they are the students who are at the greatest risk of dropping out.

The truth is that many of the issues surrounding retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds are not dissimilar to those of 'traditional' students. Where the issue comes is through transition, and ensuring that activities are properly structured and

targeted, to ensure that those who need them the most are able to benefit from them.

We believe that institutions could:

- Deliver student mentoring and support to prospective students (in partnership with existing services where appropriate). Ideally this would match current students from more disadvantaged backgrounds with those coming in, in order to provide aspirational peer support from someone of the same background.
- Over time expand this to mentoring networks between graduates, students and prospective students. This would provide a clear link between entry, retention, and graduation, giving students from such backgrounds a mentor who has come through the system and succeeded.
- Provide ongoing pastoral support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, by academic staff. Ideally the staff member would remain a constant throughout the student's time, ensuring that they are continuously supported by one person with whom they can build a relationship in order to engender the greatest trust and confidence.
- Ensure that students who gain admittance via access routes are monitored throughout their studies – in a non-intrusive way – and that there are robust reporting mechanisms in place. It is vital that retention is monitored past first and second year, and that ongoing support is provided.

As well as institutional efforts, we believe that the preceding should be underpinned by national initiatives, mirroring that of the HEFCE-funded and Open University-run Back on Course in England, which provides free and independent advice to those who have dropped out of higher education on their potential choices and alternatives.

11. UNIVERSITIES SHOULD WORK TO WIDEN ACCESS TO POST-STUDY OPPORTUNITIES

We have consistently stated that widening access is more than just ensuring students from deprived backgrounds

get the opportunity to start a degree, it is also about retaining students to successfully complete and graduate. More than this, however, universities should also focus on widening access to the opportunities available while studying at university that can lead to a successful outcome post study. One strand of this is around employability, ensuring that financial barriers are removed from gaining voluntary and other experience that could stand students in good stead in their future career. This could mean, for example, providing a bursary to students along the lines of the University of Birmingham's Gateway Bursary which is provided to students who entered university through their Access to Birmingham Scheme who would otherwise be unable to take up a work placement or volunteering opportunity, due to financial constraint.

Furthermore, ensuring opportunities are available to people from all backgrounds to study at postgraduate level is crucial, and becoming ever more important. We would like to see work begin to assess levels of fair access to postgraduate study, to see the scale of any problem around fair access and, if so, what can be done to rectify it.

12. STRENGTHENING WIDENING ACCESS PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

As seen above, higher education at college is, and can be, a huge potential source of talented students from

deprived backgrounds, whether direct from FE to university, or through articulation from HN to second or third year of university. It is therefore important that colleges continue to sustain their proud record on widening access and furthermore that universities do more to expand the amount of college recruitment undertaken, and to broaden the number of institutions undertaking such work.

Increasing levels of articulation is a key priority for NUS Scotland, and we believe government should explore ways to increase articulation as a good in itself, but also as a way of maximising the number of graduates from the university places we have available and also to boost rates of widening access. One possibility could be to look at additional funding for colleges, tied to defined impact, to boost rates of articulation. This would also have the advantage of boosting college budgets at a time of financial strain.

A key avenue over the coming years could be to use outcome agreements for colleges to protect widening access rates within FE and HE provision. Furthermore, including agreed outcomes for articulation within each college and university outcome agreement, would be a good step towards increasing the quantity and breadth of articulation and protecting rates of widening access in colleges.

9. CONCLUSION



This report has examined Scotland's poor record on widening access, looking behind the national statistics to see how we got to where we are, and why. It has revealed a story of, at best, slow, incremental progress, and within this, real disparities as certain institutions have contributed significantly to this marginal improvement, with others, particularly some of our most research-intensive institutions, actually going backwards, seemingly abdicating any responsibility in this area.

In trying to explain the current situation we have looked at social factors and school attainment and found that while important, they by no means fully account for our poor record on widening access. Poverty has decreased in recent years, and school attainment has improved, yet we have not seen these changes translate into greater levels of access to our institutions. At the same time, the Scottish Parliament has provided for the removal or reduction of significant barriers to access: abolishing up-front tuition fees and then the Graduate Endowment, protecting places and increasing funding, and from academic year 2013/14, the promise of significant increases in student support for higher education students.

Together these changes create an important opportunity to realise fairer access to our universities and to education more generally, and all the benefits in terms of social justice, quality of life and our economy that come from this.

However, to see our focus on fair access as simply charitable or altruistic would be to risk viewing widening access activity as a positive but optional extra, rather than something which is essential to the success of our higher education sector and our wider economy. Widening access is our priority not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it can promote a genuine meritocracy in access to our universities. Rather than 'dumbing down', or lowering standards, by widening access we can ensure we benefit from the most talented students and graduates, and boost attainment at our institutions.

As we have seen, there is a great deal of evidence that students accepted with differential offers from low-progression schools or deprived backgrounds, can outperform their counterparts with higher grades from 'better' schools. This should, once and for all, dispel the myth that school grades are the only, or even the best, way to judge an applicant's academic potential or ability to perform at university.

Seen in this light, widening access is the pursuit of excellence not something which jeopardises it. If choosing the best applicants is core to what every university should do, then universities are failing to do their job properly if they are not seeking to widen access in a meaningful way. What is a hugely positive finding from our investigation is that there is a number of widening access initiatives already out there that

work. Institutions in Scotland and in the rest of the UK are doing great work to widen access – our task now is to both focus and scale-up these activities to meet the size and nature of the challenge we face. The other key positive from the report is that however important widening access may be, the numbers involved to make a real difference are easily within our reach – to double the University of Edinburgh’s SIMD20 intake would take just 91 students compared to a total student population of over 26,000. This puts real perspective on what we are seeking to achieve.

NUS Scotland is keen to work with the sector as a whole, with government, and across the political spectrum to widen access to education in Scotland, and ultimately to achieve truly fair access, where our universities reflect our society. We will work through forthcoming legislation and over the coming years to achieve this aim and hope that this report can be the starting gun on this work, towards what must surely be the shared aim of all in our sector and our society; a genuine meritocracy, where each and every individual has the opportunity to let their talent, not their background, dictate how far in education they can go.

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5. Three year institutional average retention rates, by deprivation status

6. Scottish domiciled graduates from Scottish universities, SIMD 20 and others, 2010/11
 7. Percentage of Scottish children living in poverty
 8. Performance at A-level, first year, and final year, by school background (University of Bristol)
 9. Degree outcomes, by school background and A-level performance (University of Bristol)
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ANNEXES:

All annexes referenced within the report can be found at: <http://www.nus.org.uk/en/campaigns/campaigns-in-scotland/priority/unlocking-scotland-potential/>

