CES Briefing

THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Promoting fairer access to Scottish universities – how can this be achieved?

by Vikki Boliver   **Number 68, 2019**

The Scottish Government is committed to promoting fairer access to higher education and has called upon universities to reduce academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants in order to help achieve this goal. This research briefing lays out the ethical case for reducing entry requirements for disadvantaged learners, and draws on research commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council to explore how low entry requirements would need to go in order to fully widen participation, and how low they could go without setting disadvantaged learners up to fail. The briefing also considers the shortcomings of using area-level measures such as the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) to target and monitor widening access initiatives.

➢ Prior attainment is a major barrier to access. This is especially true of access to Scotland's most academically selective universities, since only *one in twenty* young people from Scotland's most deprived neighbourhoods achieve AAAA at Higher by the end of S6, compared to *one in five* from the least deprived neighbourhoods.

➢ Substantial reductions in academic entry requirements for disadvantaged learners are arithmetically necessary if wider access is to be achieved; but they are also critical for achieving genuinely fairer access, which involves recognising the impact of socioeconomic circumstances on academic attainment.

➢ All Scottish universities have put in place minimum entry requirements for disadvantaged learners, but the evidence suggests they could go further without setting disadvantaged learners up to fail. Some 80% of students entering highly selective universities with B rather than A grades at Higher progress successfully to year 2 of their programme.

➢ There is not a strong relationship between students' grades on entry and the likelihood of completing a degree but their entry grades are strong predictors of degree classification - getting a 'good degree'. This indicates that universities will need to support learners admitted with lower grades to bridge any knowledge gaps and build their academic skills to enable them to fulfil their potential.

➢ The use of area-level measures such as SIMD to target and monitor widening access initiatives creates uncertainty about whether such initiatives are reaching their intended beneficiaries, given that not all disadvantaged individuals live in SIMD20 areas, and not all those who live in SIMD20 postcodes are disadvantaged.

➢ Verified individual-level measures, such as free school meal status or low household income are more robust indicators and should be used instead of area-level measures.

Introduction

Widening access to university has been a policy objective of the Scottish Government (SG) for several decades but there is a new determination to make much more rapid progress. This determination was kick-started in 2014 when the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, set out the bold ambition that somebody born in one of the most deprived communities in Scotland should have no less a chance to go to university than someone born elsewhere. This Briefing focuses on one of the key strategies for achieving fairer access and considers the issues involved in developing a fair and effective contextualised admissions system whereby universities reduce academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants. The Briefing is based on research supported by the Scottish Funding Council (Boliver et al 2017) and was the subject of a public lecture given in honour of the late Professor David Raffe, available at

http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk/promoting-fairer-access-to-scottish-universities-how-can-this-be-achieved/.

The challenge for universities to meet access targets

The SG access targets are based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). By 2030, individuals from the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods (SIMD20) should make up 20% of entrants to higher education in Scotland, with interim milestones in 2021 and 2026, as well as a target for every individual Scottish university of 10% by 2021. Although the Scottish university sector as a whole is likely achieve its 2021 target of 16% from SIMD20 areas slightly ahead of schedule, eight universities still have some way to go to reach their 10% target for 2021, and only three meet or exceed the 20% mark (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of Scottish domiciled full-time first degree entrants from SIMD20 postcodes in 2016/17
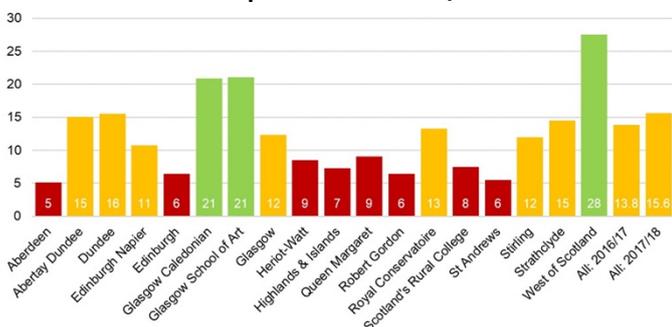
Central to meeting access targets is the development of 'access thresholds' which the Scottish Government has mandated for all degree programmes offered by Scottish universities from 2020-21. These are separate academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged learners, set substantially lower than the usual entry qualifications. The rationale is that, on the one hand, this better reflects the minimum needed to succeed at degree level approach and, on the other, recognises that the school attainment of disadvantaged learners does not necessarily do justice to their academic potential. Current access thresholds mean that, for example, to study English at Edinburgh University, entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants are 1-3 grades lower than standard entry requirements (ABBB vs AAAA-AABB); at Edinburgh Napier University, to give another example, entry requirements are two grades lower than standard entry requirements (BBBC vs ABBB).

What do we mean by fair admissions?

One of the achievements of the Commission on Widening Access has been to make the ethical case for access thresholds and shift the thinking around what counts as fair admission. University admissions have hitherto operated in terms of traditional meritocracy: that the people who get places at this university are those who have shown that they merit them and are deemed to be the most likely to benefit. The admissions system, thus, is seen as 'fair' in terms of procedural justice because we treat everyone the same: we require everyone to have these grades and we assess everyone in the exact same way.

Access thresholds, however, reflect a recognition that formal equality of opportunity is not genuine equality of opportunity in a society that is unequal. They link into a notion of fairness that philosopher John Rawls advocated: instead of striving for formal equality of opportunity, we should aim for genuine equality of opportunity which addresses the fact that we live in an unequal world in which people are not equally able to demonstrate their capacity. This means selecting on potential or 'calibrated' merit where the calibration is not just how well people have achieved compared to the national picture but how they have performed considering their

opportunities and barriers. This is a different kind of justice: not procedural justice - considered fair because everyone is treated the same - but distributive justice, working back from a fair distribution of resources (a university education) and building in a process that is geared towards achieving a fairer distribution of that resource.

The current access thresholds are a good start towards achieving a fairer admissions system but universities will need to go further, not least because there simply are not enough high-achieving young people from contextually disadvantaged backgrounds to go around. This is evident from Scottish Government data on the attainment of pupils by the end of 6th year (S6) in Scottish state schools in 2007 and 2008 (Figure 2, below). It is striking that 57% of pupils from the most deprived neighbourhoods (SIMD20) did not have any Highers by the end of S6. The figure is even worse for recipients of free school meals (FSM): over two-thirds had no qualifications at Higher (69%). What is also striking is that very few SIMD20 residents gain the very highest grades and the same is true for FSM recipients (4% and 3%), compared to the fifth of those from Scotland's least deprived neighbourhoods who achieve these grades.

What these figures mean is that it is not possible to achieve equal representation of SIMD20 and non-SIMD20 students at university using the current access thresholds. These need to be bolder; the critical question is how low access thresholds can go without risking setting many students up to fail.

What are the necessary entry requirements for successful degree study?

The Commission on Widening Access has pointed out that universities in Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK, have been setting entry requirements at a higher level than is needed for successful degree study and these requirements have increased over time (CoWA 2015). Students are entering university with considerably more in terms of prior qualifications than even a decade ago. This is not due to grade inflation at Higher or A level but because universities with increasing number of applicants have been able to raise admission requirements.

Figure 3. Statistical relationship between prior attainment and degree success among young entrants to higher tariff universities in Scotland.
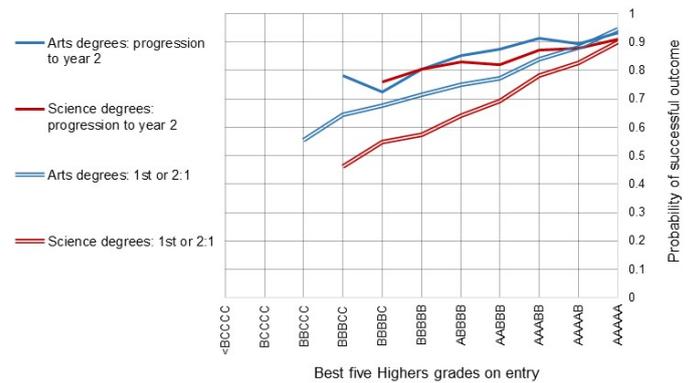
But are such high entry qualifications necessary for success? Figure 3 illustrates progression to year 2 and class of degree obtained at higher tariff universities depending on students' entry qualifications. It refers to the cohort who finished

Figure 2. Highers achievement by the end of S6 for all state school pupils in S4 in 2007/8 or 2008/9.
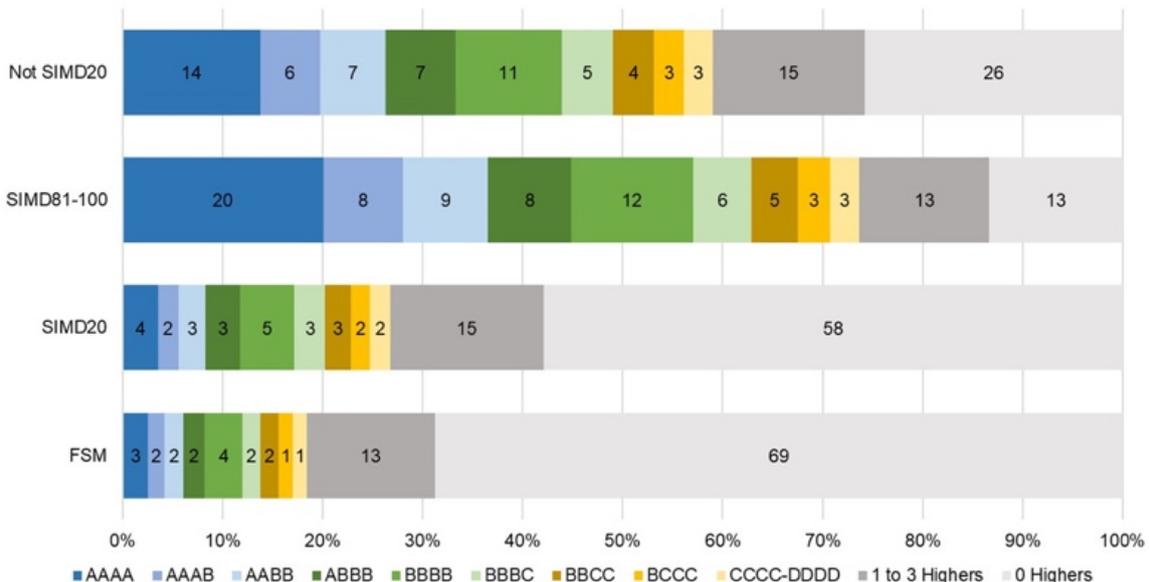
secondary school and attended university at the beginning of this decade.

Although students were more likely to get through their first year successfully if they entered with higher grades, the slope is very shallow. There is no sharp drop off in success for students who entered with less than five Highers at A grade, and even students who have entered high tariff universities with B grades, by and large, progressed successfully into year two. The picture differs somewhat in respect of the degree classification students achieved, where there is a steeper relationship between grades on entry and gaining a first or a 2.1, rather than a lower degree classification. Nevertheless, students who have come into those universities with Bs rather than As had a better than evens chance of achieving a first or a 2.1. It is not a foregone conclusion, therefore, that students who enter a high tariff university with B grades at Higher will not get a good degree: in fact, there is 50/50 chance that they will.

The same analysis was carried out for medium tariff and lower tariff universities with very similar results. For medium tariff universities there is little relationship between grade of Highers on entry and getting through into year two. Again, there is a steeper slope when it comes to success as measured by getting a good degree, a first or a 2.1 . But it is still the case that those coming in with Cs have a better than evens chance of achieving a first or a 2.1 and a four in five chance that they will come out with a degree. Similarly, for lower tariff universities there is a very flat, shallow relationship between Highers on entry and progressing to year 2. In these universities, there is a less steep relationship between Highers on entry and the outcome of getting a good degree.

The analysis shows that it is possible for students to come in with lower than traditionally required grades and to succeed in their degree study, even at high tariff universities. But the analysis also highlights the need to think much more carefully how we support students to learn once they get to university in a context where increasing numbers will be entering Scottish universities with lower entry requirements. Some of them, not all, will come in with gaps in their knowledge or needing help with academic skills. They are, by definition individuals

whose circumstances have prevented them from having as advanced and as deep and developed an education as more traditional students.

More active support for students' learning at university.

Certain discourses are evident in the Scottish context as elsewhere that push universities away from devoting resources and energy into helping students to learn. To put it in a very blunt way, much of the discourse about excellence in higher education is framed in terms of academically selective admissions and research intensiveness; it is not really about the quality of teaching and learning.

Interviews conducted in 2015-16 indicated much enthusiasm among admissions staff in Scottish universities for widening participation, but with a focus still on a very narrow proportion of disadvantaged young people (Boliver, Powell and Moreira 2018). Most spoke about looking for students who had overcome major adversity but had still achieved very high grades at school, and were likely to be able to hit the ground running when they got to university. Yet, as noted above, few people from genuinely disadvantaged backgrounds achieve the highest grades at Highers.

Staff interviewed were genuinely concerned about admitting students for whom success was not guaranteed. This reflected, in part, a recognition that in many universities and departments the culture is not currently oriented towards helping students who need more support. There has been a long history of teaching students who, in a sense, do not really need much teaching, who will be fine if staff deliver a course of lectures and then simply point students in the direction of the library.

There is much good practice in the sector already of pre-entry programmes that are working with students to help them develop academic skills and fill in subject knowledge gaps prior to starting their degree programme. But as research on disadvantaged students at universities has shown, students want more support throughout their time at university and as part of everyday teaching and learning (Howieson and Minty 2019). Supported first years are going to be increasingly important to help students make the transition to degree study, fill in

the knowledge gaps and build up academic skills. There are already some good examples of this.

The need for individual measures of socioeconomic disadvantage.

The SG access targets are set in terms of SIMD and it is the official measure of progress on widening participation in the sector. Yet SIMD is acknowledged to be problematic, because not all people who live in disadvantaged areas are disadvantaged and not all disadvantaged people live in SIMD20 postcodes.

A comparison of SIMD and free school meal status illustrates the problem of using SIMD to determine eligibility for initiatives such as access thresholds and to assess progress on widening participation more generally. Individuals in receipt of free school meals are, by definition, disadvantaged since they must meet eligibility requirements in terms of family income and receipt of certain welfare benefits. It is verified information about individuals that is available from official records and is a very valid and reliable indicator of disadvantage.

Analysis of data for the population of S4 pupils in Scottish state schools in 2007 and 2008 shows that, in fact, only about half of all free school meal recipients lived in SIMD20 areas (48%). Thus, using SIMD20 to decide who is entitled to the access threshold means that we are excluding half of those we definitely know should be included. Universities are increasingly aware of this and are not necessarily using SIMD20 as the only criterion but nonetheless, government still requires universities to measure their progress at least partly in terms of SIMD20 and that is problematic.

The other problem with using SIMD is that some people who live in deprived neighbourhoods are not themselves deprived and are not the intended beneficiaries of these access thresholds. Including them in statistical returns would give a misleading picture of progress. Among the population of S4 pupils attending Scottish state schools in 2007 and 2008, 75% of those who were SIMD20 residents were not receiving free school meals and we simply do not know what proportion of this 75% were, in fact, deprived. If SIMD20 is used to decide who is entitled to an access threshold, we could be in a position where we are giving adjusted entry requirements to people who are not disadvantaged at all, they just happen to live in SIMD20 postcodes. This would of course be the opposite of what was intended. If the goal is genuine equality of access to university, we must use verified individual-level measures, such as free school meal status or low household income, to determine whether someone is socioeconomically disadvantaged or not.

Big strides, but still a way to go

Scotland's goal of fully equitable access to higher education within a generation is impressive, and the sector-wide development of access thresholds represents a big stride along this path. Critical to its success will be the capacity of universities to support contextually disadvantaged learners to fulfil their potential, and the proper targeting of access thresholds and other widening access initiatives to ensure that they reach their intended beneficiaries.

References

Boliver, V., Gorard, S., Powell, M., and Moreira, T. (2017) Mapping and Evaluating the Use of
Contextual Data in Undergraduate Admissions in Scotland. Edinburgh: Scottish Funding Council. Available at:
http://www.sfc.ac.uk/access-inclusion/contextualised-admissions/evaluating-contextual-admissions.aspx

Boliver, V., Powell, M. & Moreira, T. (2018). Organisational Identity as a Barrier to Widening Access in Scottish Universities. Social Sciences 7(9): 151. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/7/9/151

Commission on Widening Access (2015) Interim Report. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Howieson, C. and Minty, S. (2019) Supporting widening participation students at university. CES Briefing No. 67. Available at:
http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk/PDF%20Files/Brief067.pdf

CES Briefings

CES Briefings are edited by Dr Cathy Howieson. All Briefings can be downloaded from our website, free of charge.