

Widening participation or reinforcing privilege in Scottish higher education?

Alan Sherry, Glasgow Kelvin College¹

I Introduction and background

A key priority of successive Scottish and UK governments has been to increase participation in higher education based on the premise that higher level qualifications lead to economic growth which will benefit society and lead to individuals obtaining well-paid sustainable employment. The opportunity of the 'graduate' premium in terms of salary has been seen by successive governments as a means of addressing poverty particularly in communities which continue to experience the deprivation associated with post-industrialisation. This led to a commitment by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1999 to enable 50% of young people to progress to degree level education. It was anticipated that this expansion of volume would automatically increase participation from under-represented groups. However this policy ambition has not yet resulted in the major shift in participation rates in higher education by residents of the most deprived data-zones anticipated by government nor the bodies with responsibility for delivering this policy.

The failure to improve significantly participation from under-represented groups is a complex matter for which there is no one 'silver bullet'. As such to help deliver change there has been the development of a myriad of initiatives designed to improve articulation and progression into higher education programmes predominately at university-type institutions. These initiatives are led by dedicated professionals who are seeking to deliver change supported by others who populate management committees, steering groups and policy forums. However, despite twenty years of valuable work and effort it is difficult to identify any *systemic* shift in the nature of the university population and particularly at the research intensive higher education institutions (HEI's).

II The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD): is SIMD 40 the right benchmark?

As always with these matters there is the debate about what criteria should be used to identify under-represented groups. The Scottish Government has used the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) data-zones as the means to focus activity and importantly to measure success. The use of SIMD postcode data-zones is regarded by Universities Scotland² as a rather blunt instrument as it contends that there is a need to widen participation for those who do not reside in the most deprived data-zones but who, because of other factors, are under-represented in higher education. As a consequence there has been considerable debate about refining the criteria which should be included in the widening

¹ *These are the personal views of the author and are not intended to be the views of Glasgow Kelvin College. The author is currently a member of the SFC Access & Inclusion Committee, has previously chaired the former Focus West (now the Schools for Higher Education Programme) and is a former member of the Scottish Widening Access Programme-West Executive Committee.*

² *Widening Access to University- Universities Scotland 2012*

access/participation matrix to include other elements such as specific additional learning needs and ethnicity. Therefore Universities Scotland proposes that more emphasis should be placed on individuals than on post codes.

There is the other camp which contends that whilst SIMD is a blunt instrument, by using the most deprived data-zones it is the most effective proxy to identify those individuals and groups who are most likely to be under-represented in degree-level provision as the other suggested criteria based on specific elements such as those above will include individuals who are also over-represented in communities who reside in these data-zones. For example recent migrants to Scotland are more likely to reside in the most deprived communities, especially within cities, there is considerable evidence that long term medical conditions which can impact on learners is much more prevalent in SIMD20 post-codes and care experienced young people predominately live in these post-codes. In fact there is a strong argument that the Scottish Government's current use of SIMD40 (the 40% most deprived data-zones) as the benchmark to target widening access to university is *insufficiently* challenging. This is particularly the case in Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, where 50% of all local authority residents live in the 20% percent most deprived data-zones (SIMD20). Hence, in Glasgow, the use of SIMD40 as the official, Government-sponsored benchmark to widen participation in higher education automatically includes the *majority* of the population. Put more starkly, 27% of Glaswegians have no qualifications and therefore any attempt to widen access which does not engage this cohort fully is failing to address the Government's policy imperative to create a fairer and wealthier Scotland. In short, in Glasgow – and in other similar local authority areas - SIMD40 represents 'low hanging fruit'. Addressing this issue in Glasgow - and West Central Scotland more generally - to improve qualifications/skills levels and employment rates will have a significant *national* impact in improving Scottish economic growth while also tackling poverty, exclusion and health-related issues which undermine economic progress in Scotland.

Much work has been undertaken in schools to provide opportunities to enable young learners from SIMD40 data-zones to progress to higher education, both at colleges and higher education institutions, using a variety of approaches. These activities focus on advice/guidance/aspiration raising with additional support around the subjects and grades required for progression to programmes such as medicine, law, science and engineering. There has been a degree of success however it tends to be either with regard to an individual or a small number in a year-group cohort. However, it should be noted, that there is some evidence from work carried out by Glasgow City Council Education Services that learners who have received this assistance would have been likely to progress anyway to a degree programme and the support provided to them gave them vital additional confidence to make the leap. Despite such intensive efforts over the years, the schools which were originally identified as requiring additional support to assist learners to progress to higher education still remain in such programmes. And, unsurprisingly these schools predominately serve the most deprived communities in Scotland. In short, despite intensive and extensive efforts to widen participation in higher education, there has been no systemic shift in widening access for learners from Scotland's most deprived communities and groups.

While work has been on-going to contextualise the admissions process at a number of HEIs, and for degree programmes within universities, a number of matters remain to be considered. How do learners who live in the 5%, 10% or 20% most deprived SIMD data-zones evidence the development of skills development and/or achievements in other aspects of their lives? For example a 'gap year' experience is highly unlikely to be affordable. Sustained volunteering, unless organised within the context of the school day, is challenging as there is often the need to maximise opportunities for part-time employment. And participation in sport is becoming increasingly difficult both as it (again) reduces part-time employment opportunities and due to the cost. This is not to argue that contextualised admissions should be abandoned, as work at the University of Bristol has proved the value of such an approach, but rather it has to be adapted to take account of the real challenges faced by learners in the most disadvantaged communities in providing the opportunities required to demonstrate their abilities and potential and which go beyond simple tariff scores.

III College SIMD20 participation and College / HEI articulation: a success story

Another part of the jigsaw in promoting widening participation has been articulation from college based HNC/D provision into HEI degree programmes. This approach was developed as it was recognised that learners, particularly from SIMD20³ data-zones, were much more likely to attend college than university either immediately post-school or after period of employment. From 2003, Scottish HEIs have received funding from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to support articulation to degree programmes, initially with no conditions but subsequently with greater emphasis on the need to ensure that progression guaranteed *advanced standing* for the learner. This means that learners articulate to Year 2 or Year 3 of a degree programme with credit provided for the learning undertaken in college. Hence this reduces the length of the learner journey; were such recognition not granted it would result in such learners facing the potential of a six year degree compared to four years for direct entrants. Clearly, this has a direct financial benefit and is an important factor for learners from deprived communities wishing to access higher education provision.

However the nature of *advance standing* varies across institutions and across programmes within institutions. This is partly due to that fact that for a period of time colleges were able to develop their own HNC/D programmes which led to a proliferation of awards all with the same or similar titles but different content. However the SQA has addressed this issue and there has been a return to standardised national qualifications. From the most recent data⁴, there has been an increase in the number of articulating students with advanced standing from the baseline of 529 in 2008/09 to a figure of just under 4,000 in 2013/14. Of these articulating learners, 898 or 23% were residents of SIMD20 data-zones; that is twice that of the 12% of SIMD20 residents who are 'direct entrants' to Scottish HEIs. Therefore it appears that the articulation model is successful in increasing participation from the most deprived data-zones, though of course they still constitute a relatively low number compared to the total number of learners in Scottish HEIs.

³ SFC Learning for All: Measuring Success 2015

⁴ Commission for Widening Access Evidence 2015

The latest figures for Scotland's colleges indicate that 28.9% of all enrolments are from SIMD20; however in the Glasgow Region the figure is 42% and this, in turn, varies across the region's three colleges⁵. Indeed, in some programmes delivered by these colleges and depending on the location of the campus, the figure is nearer 70%. In HEIs the variation is even more stark; one university having circa 1,400 learners from SIMD20 and one with only 20! There is also a direct link between the higher number of SIMD20 learners who progress to HEIs using HNC/D articulation routes with advanced standing and the much lower number (if any) for those institutions which do not have well-developed articulation pathways or who offer limited credit for the college experience. Currently the HEIs with the greatest commitment to the advanced standing articulation route are the post 1992 institutions. While this is a positive development it has the impact of limiting learner choice in terms of progression opportunities.

However the above is not to contend that the HNC/D articulation/progression route is better than other approaches, rather it is one which is more likely to engage with residents of the most deprived communities on a sustained basis. If higher levels of participation in higher education from Scotland's most deprived learners / learner communities is a key aim of government policy, further consideration requires to be given as to how the articulation approach can be developed further to ensure that all Scottish HEIs work collaboratively with colleges to the benefit of SIMD20 learners.

IV: Participation and productivity opportunities in work-based and blended learning

A further factor that requires to be considered when evaluating the success or otherwise of widening participation rates is the focus on the linear learner journey. There has been insufficient work undertaken on the opportunities for work-based learning which combines work and study, or indeed return-to-study following work. This could be of particular interest to learners from SIMD20 data-zones as accessing sustainable employment and the salary it attracts is often a motivating factor on leaving school. Hence, moving into the world of work immediately post-school or college is attractive. This may be the time to consider a wider application of the apprenticeship/HNC/D to degree route which is utilised in some aspects of the energy and engineering industries. Or, for those of us old enough to remember, a return to 'sandwich' degree programmes which provided the benefits of both employment and degree study – and boosted social mobility.

For far too long the emphasis has been on a traditional, full-time provision model which articulates with more full-time study. Consideration of more flexible modes of part-time study or 'blended' learning at undergraduate level linked to employment is now required. With skills and productivity at the heart of Scotland's economic future, work-based and blended learning offer an opportunity to both widen participation, provide alternative routes for more diverse learners and also support employers in key areas of the economy to enhance the skills of their workforce, increase productivity and contribute to economic growth.

⁵ From Glasgow Clyde College at 28.3%, City of Glasgow College at 32% and Glasgow Kelvin College at 58.5%.
Source: SFC Infact database 2014

V: Delivering a step change in inclusion and participation in Scottish higher education

Much progress has been made in developing potential opportunities for access into higher education for residents from the most deprived data-zones. However, to date the scale of the impact has been limited and at the current rate of progress fundamental change in the composition of the student population at some HEIs will take generations, if ever, to change. If it is the ambition of Scottish education institutions to reflect Scottish society more accurately they will have to consider how radical and brave they are prepared to be in order to provide residents from SIMD20 with greater opportunities to participate in degree level education. At a time of austerity, and in effect a cap on student numbers, this will mean a reduction in opportunity for those from SIMD80 and above. This in itself will be a challenge both to government and to institutions and is likely to be unpopular with a very influential group of the population.

To implement such a change will require a review of the means of recruitment/selection to a more appropriate contextualised model, consideration of guaranteed places for learners from SIMD 5, 10 and 20, more effective models of guaranteed articulation from college based HNC/D routes with advanced standing and more flexible modes of degree delivery that support work-based and blended learner journeys.

In short, more of the same will not deliver the step change needed to ensure that participation in higher education and skills is increased for learners in Scotland's most deprived communities. If we continue as we are, we are knowingly tinkering at the margins, while reinforcing privilege and exclusion. Therefore the publication of the Commission on Widening Access final report, scheduled to be available in early Spring 2016, is awaited with some interest by those who are waiting for a strategy which will produce a step change in how Scotland will seek to address the under-representation of learners from the most deprived communities in degree programmes offered by all of Scotland's HEIs.

If we want to unleash Scotland's potential and we are all Jock Tamson's bairns, now is the time for government, institutions, business and civic society in Scotland to be radical in developing our most precious resource, our people.

Author Details

Alan Sherry
Principal and Chief Executive
Glasgow Kelvin College
<mailto:asherry@glasgowkelvin.ac.uk>