



## Access To Higher Education: How Might This Be Achieved For Students From Economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds?

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### Session Information

#### **22 SES 03 C, Inclusion and Diversity in Academia**

Paper Session

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### Contribution

#### Access To Higher Education: How Might This Be Achieved For Students From Economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds?

There are significant social inequalities in access to higher education internationally. Students from the most disadvantaged households remain persistently under-represented (Jerrim, Chmielewski, & Parker, 2015), are less likely to enter higher education, and when they do, are more likely to go to further education college rather than university (OECD, 2015; Scottish Funding Council, 2015; Sosu & Ellis, 2014). As a result, governments, supranational organisations such as the EU, and global agencies like UNESCO have expressed ambitions to reduce educational inequality and improve access to higher education (EHEA, 2012; UNESCO, 2015). Several factors such as academic performance, subject choice at secondary school and low motivation have been documented to account for this gap (e.g., Iannelli, Smyth, & Klein, 2015; (Iannelli, Smyth, & Klein, 2015; Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, Goodman, & Vignoles, 2013; Gorard & Smith, 2006).

In Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has funded the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) to tackle the educational access gap. Each of the four SHEP programmes work in distinct geographical regions to raise aspirations, and provide support to students attending schools with historically low progression to higher education, in a bid to increase the number of students from these areas attending university. The programmes target early to late secondary students (aged 14 to 16), and undertake a range of activities such as campus visits, study skills programmes, and subject choice guidance. The initiative is premised on the notion that inequality in access is a result of a lack of agency on the part of pupils and their families as well as structural barriers inherent in the education system. This structure versus agency reference underpins

influential sociological theories that aim to explain social inequalities in educational access, as well as psychological theories on why people behave in particular ways. For instance, Bourdieu's social and cultural reproduction theory posits that educational inequalities are due to differences in socialisation around what is possible within different communities, their knowledge about the benefits of education, and the social connections they have (Bourdieu, Passeron, & Nice, 1990; Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, those from disadvantaged communities are unconsciously socialised to think that university is not for them, tend not to be aware of the advantages of higher education, and lack the social connections that can be mobilised to assist them achieve entry into university (Nash, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986, 1977). The social psychological theory of planned behaviour, on the other hand, argues that individual behaviours, including going to university, are determined by attitudes, social norms, and perceived and real barriers to entry (Ajzen, 1991).

Despite the acknowledgement of the inequity of access to higher education in Scotland and the development of schemes to narrow this divide, very little is known about the impact of the various interventions. While modest progress has been observed with respect to an increase in the number of disadvantaged students entering university and for those attending SHEP initiatives (SFC, 2015), it is not clear what is facilitating this process. As far as we are aware, there is no systematic documentation of the nature of activities undertaken by these programmes, their impact on progression rates, or evidence on what makes these programmes successful. This study examines the extent to which SHEP initiatives contribute to widening access for pupils attending schools with historically low progression to higher education, and to document what makes them successful. We addressed the following research questions:

1. What interventions are used by the SHEP schemes for widening access to higher education and what barriers do they address?
2. In what ways do different stakeholders perceive the impact of these interventions?
3. Are changes in progression rates to higher education influenced by participation in SHEP?

## Method

Documentary and secondary data analysis techniques were used. Documents consisted of annual reports submitted to the funders by each of the four SHEP programmes over a three year period (2012-14). The reports document the activities of the schemes, the rationale behind the development of activities, and testimonies from pupils, teachers and parents relating to the impact of the interventions. Secondary data consisted the proportion of students who progressed from SHEP schools to university over the three year period.

In the first phase of analysis, a thematic analysis of activities undertaken by the SHEP initiatives was carried out following several steps: Initial codes were inductively generated from the systematic identification of different kinds of interventions. These initial codes were then deductively collated into potential themes of interventions, informed by the explicit rationale for the interventions and what outcomes they aim to achieve (i.e. confidence building, knowledge development). Finally, themes were refined taking into account the literature on widening access, as well as theories of structure and agency to develop a range of categories of intervention.

In the second phase of analysis, the testimonial information from parents, teachers and pupils was thematically analysed to identify impacts on progression to higher education and ascertain stakeholder perceptions on what makes the SHEP initiatives successful.

The third phase of analysis drew on secondary data on progression rates among schools over time. Using latent growth modelling techniques, we first explored growth trends in progression to higher education and tested whether this is different for schools enrolled on the SHEP initiative. We then followed this by controlling for school size and deprivation rates within the schools.

## Expected Outcomes

The SHEP schemes work with approximately 80 schools, constituting about 20% of the secondary schools in Scotland. Schools enrolled on the programme have a higher proportion of students coming from the most deprived quintiles (46% vs 13%).

Thematic analysis identified five categories of barriers the schemes sought to address: systemic, cultural, institutional, situational and personal. These barriers were addressed through an array of interventions including campus visits, residential experiences, summer schools, application support, funding information and direct advocacy on behalf of students.

Analysis of stakeholder testimonials suggests that SHEP programmes contributed to pupils' awareness of options, application decisions, and academic attainment. Students reported that interventions developed confidence: "My confidence to go away to uni grew" (S6 School Leaver 2013, Highlands & Islands).

Students and school staff identified residential and campus visit experiences, support with university applications and personal one to one contact as the key ingredients for the success of the programmes. They highlighted development of

positive personal relationships, trust, expertise of SHEP staff, and ability to advocate on behalf of students with university admissions departments as crucial: "I was reluctant to contact universities with some queries I had and [SHEP staff] took this on-board for me which in the end helped me decide on my final choices for my UCAS application" (S6 Pupil 2014, Grampian).

Results from the secondary data analysis indicate significant increases in progression rates for all schools in Scotland (SHEP and non-SHEP) over the three year period, with SHEP schools demonstrating a significant growth in comparison to non-SHEP schools ( $B=1.31$ ,  $SE=0.52$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, when we control for level of deprivation and school size, no differences in growth rates were observed between SHEP and non-SHEP schools. The implications of our findings as well as limitations of the study will be discussed.

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