

Commission on Widening Access
Submission from The Sutton Trust

Purpose: Examining the work of the Commission on Widening Access ahead of the Education and Skills Committee's session on the Commission's final report.

Date: Friday 13th January 2017

The Commission on Widening Access:

The Sutton Trust contributed to the work of the Commission on Widening Access and welcomed its recommendations. We also welcome the appointment of a Commissioner for Fair Access who will take forward the policies and recommendations of the Commission.

The target from the Commission on Widening Access to ensure that a fifth of all those entering higher education in 2030 should come from the fifth poorest areas in Scotland is an ambitious one, and one which the First Minister has committed to.

With that in mind, we support many of the Commission's key recommendations including universities each having clearly published policies on contextual admissions which include a minimum academic threshold for less advantaged students.

Sutton Trust – Access Scotland report (May 2016)

In our report, *Access in Scotland*, commissioned from the University of Edinburgh, we examined which policies and changes needed to be made in order for Scotland to achieve its target of widening access to its higher education institutions.

Key findings:

- In 2013-14, 55% of Scots entered higher education by the age of 30, with 20.9% starting at an FE college and 34.1% going straight to university after school. In England 46.6% entered higher education, with just 6% starting at FE colleges and other non-university providers.
- The gap in university participation between young people from the most and least advantaged areas is higher in Scotland than in the other home nations, although it has closed more quickly than elsewhere. Scottish 18 year olds from the most advantaged areas are still more than four times more likely to go straight to university than those from the least advantaged areas. In

England, those from the most advantaged areas are 2.4 times as likely to go to university as those from the least, and three times as likely in Wales and Northern Ireland.

- Despite this, there has been improved access for disadvantaged students in Scotland as well as in the rest of the UK. Detailed analysis of Scottish Funding Council (SFC) data reveals in Scotland this has been met almost entirely by the expansion of sub-degree programmes in Scottish colleges. Since 2006, 90 per cent of all the growth in entry into Scottish higher education by disadvantaged students has been through sub-degree courses in colleges. The funded places at the ancients are a notable exception, but there have been few other extra university places taken by disadvantaged students.

Below are the main recommendations from the report, and we hope that these will help the Scottish Government and the Commissioner for Fair Access to achieve their ambitious goals tackling the social class gap in higher education in Scotland.

1. The Scottish Government should ensure that additional places are available to meet rising demand.

Our report demonstrates that there is a mismatch between supply of higher education places in Scotland and demand, with disproportionately detrimental consequences for those from less advantaged backgrounds. The funding of additional places at the Ancients earmarked for students from disadvantaged backgrounds seems to have been an effective way of improving the participation rates of this group, and it is important that such measures continue. However, this report shows that the growth in higher education provision in Scotland has been largely in the college sector, which caters disproportionately for those from poorer backgrounds. So, there is a need for a more nuanced analysis of the pros and cons of relying on the college sector to drive the expansion of higher education. The money for this should be ring-fenced.

2. Bridging programmes to encourage successful higher education destinations should be expanded, alongside effective career and subject advice in schools.

There is some evidence that students from low-progression schools admitted with lower grades may perform better at university than their counterparts from high participation schools with higher grades, as shown in some contextual admissions programmes in Scotland. Programmes aimed at raising awareness and aspirations for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds – such

as those targeted at the highly able at a younger age and summer schools for students taking Highers - are crucial. Schools and colleges should also have free access to professionally qualified careers advisers including specialist advisers with knowledge of entry to elite universities.

3. Both the Scottish Funding Council and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills should provide a breakdown of the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate by social class and type of institution attended.

Our analysis has highlighted significant gaps in the availability of administrative data to inform cross-border comparative analysis. The use of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as the principal measure of social disadvantage is problematic, since it does not capture data on young people from poorer backgrounds who are living in more advantaged areas. In addition to SIMD, data should be gathered on parental occupation and levels of education.

4. Widening participation initiatives need to be planned carefully to avoid duplication, and rigorous evaluation needs to run alongside implementation.

The Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Government should evaluate the effectiveness of widening access outcome agreements as a means of achieving social change. In particular, further research into student retention strategies for disadvantaged students and in how best to support higher education students at FE colleges, is critical.

5. Universities should have clearly published policies on contextual admissions which include a minimum academic threshold for less advantaged students.

St Andrews University has shown that those students from low progression schools admitted with lower grades may perform better than their counterparts from high participation schools with higher grades. Each Scottish university should, as well as having clearly published policies on contextual admissions, have its own minimum academic threshold, based on its own unique circumstances.

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