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**Abstract**

Since political and administrative devolution in the early 1990s, there has been considerable divergence in higher education policy across the four UK nations. In addition to different approaches to student funding, Scotland differs from the rest of the UK in relation to its use of the college sector as a major vehicle for the delivery of higher education. More than 20 per cent of higher education in Scotland, mainly in the form of sub-degree programmes, takes place in the college sector, as opposed to around 7 per cent in England. This chapter explores the pros and cons of the greater use of HNC/D to degree articulation routes in Scotland. Scottish colleges have been far more successful than universities in attracting students from less advantaged backgrounds, and this may be regarded as one of their strengths. However, the flip side of this is that students from more advantaged backgrounds claim a disproportionate share of places in the more selective universities, thus reinforcing their economic, social and cultural advantages.

SR <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9584-8885>

LHB <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4286-9826>

# 13

## **Social justice and widening access to higher education in Scotland**

### **The role of Scottish colleges**

**Sheila Riddell and Lucy Hunter Blackburn**

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## **Introduction**

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In the context of devolution, there has been growing interest in the extent to which social policy in the four UK nations appears to be converging or diverging (Greer, 2009; Mooney and Scott, 2012; Gallacher and Raffe, 2012; Riddell et al., 2016). Higher education has attracted particular interest because of the complex division of interests and responsibilities between the UK government and the devolved administrations. One of the main policy differences is the much greater use of further education colleges in the delivery of higher education in Scotland compared with the other nations, particularly England and Wales (Gallacher, 2014; Riddell et al., 2016). This chapter explores the pros and cons of the greater use of HNC/D to degree articulation routes in Scotland in comparison with elsewhere in the UK, where the development of this type of provision has been much slower. As we demonstrate below, Scottish colleges have been far more successful than universities in attracting students from less advantaged backgrounds (Hunter Blackburn et al., 2016). At the same time, there continue to be concerns about the extent to which this expansion should be seen as introducing a further layer of differentiation into an already highly stratified higher education system (Boliver, 2011; Raffe and Croxford, 2015). In Scotland, the expansion of college-based higher education

is generally seen as a success story. For example, the Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access (Scottish Government, 2016) stated:

Articulation pathways, defined as progression from college to university where full credit is awarded for prior learning, is a distinctive and much admired feature of Scottish post-16 education. In our interim report, we identified the expansion of articulation pathways as a real success story of Scottish higher education and a powerful means of advancing access.

(Scottish Government, 2016, p. 32)

However, there are also concerns that the disproportionate concentration of less advantaged students in colleges, as well as the concentration of students from advantaged backgrounds in older institutions, may indicate a form of social triage, with fewer economic, social and cultural advantages accruing to the former group (Bathmaker et al., 2008; Boliver, 2011; Gallacher, 2014).

In order to explore these issues, we begin with an overview of the literature on social justice, including the need for a renewed focus on outcomes, which, we argue, should be seen as the litmus test of fairness. We provide a brief summary of recent research on the provision of higher education in further education colleges in Scotland and England, highlighting the challenges which have been identified in both jurisdictions. This is followed by an overview of the Scottish and English policy context, describing the development of higher education in colleges and the thinking behind it. This is followed by an analysis of the social background of students in different types of institution, contrasting the social profile of colleges with that of post-92, pre-92 and ancient universities. We highlight the success of colleges in providing accessible courses in supportive learning environments for non-traditional students, while also drawing attention to the downsides of dealing with pent-up demand by diverting students from

less advantaged backgrounds into a particular form of higher education. The paper concludes by questioning the Scottish Government's heavy reliance on the college sector as the principal driver of widening access, discussing the pros and cons of policy options that the Scottish Government might consider for the future.

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## **Research informing this chapter**

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This chapter draws on research commissioned by the Sutton Trust (Hunter Blackburn et al., 2016) which focussed on access to higher education for students from less advantaged backgrounds in Scotland. The research used UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service), SFC (Scottish Funding Council) and HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) data to explore the following (i) applications, acceptances and entry rates by students from different social backgrounds across the UK; (ii) higher education initial participation rates in the four UK nations; differences in participation rates by type of university and social background; the institutional composition of the university sectors in Scotland and England; and widening participation activities and debates. The report analysed the contribution of colleges to widening access in Scotland, which is the central focus of this paper. Throughout this chapter, while our main focus is on Scotland, we make comparisons between policy and outcomes across the UK, particularly with England. While it is important to avoid over-generalisation from cross-border comparative research, we believe that work of this type provides opportunities for policy learning because it throws into high relief the elements of specific systems which may not be apparent when viewed in isolation (Raffe and Byrne, 2005).

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## **Social justice and the importance of outcomes**

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Although they are often implicit rather than explicit, competing theories of social justice and equality underpin widening access policies in higher education. Theoretical debates in this area have a long history, influenced by Rawls' *A Theory of Social Justice*, published in 1971. Drawing on Rawls' ideas, Miller (1999) suggested that social justice should be understood in terms of the underpinning rationale of 'how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society' (Miller, 1999, p. 1). More recent thinking on this topic has been influenced by Fraser's tri-partite conceptualisation of social justice in terms of (re)distribution, recognition and participation (Fraser, 2005). Within the field of higher education, this suggests the need to examine the fairness of resource allocation and outcomes; the extent to which diversity and difference are respected; and the degree to which different groups of students are able to participate in institutional decision-making.

Phillips (2004) observes that a focus on equality of outcomes as a key element of a socially just society has come to be regarded as unsophisticated and outmoded. Critics point out that because people value different things, equalising resources may result in some people having an excess of what they regard as worthless, while other people are deprived of things they value. Rather, they argue, people should be empowered to make choices, which are likely to affect their future life chances but which should nonetheless be regarded as fair. In education, politicians and policymakers tend to adopt an equality of opportunity approach based on notions of merit and desert. For example, the Scottish government frequently claims that its system of higher education is available to 'all those with the ability to learn', unlike the English system which, it is claimed, depends on 'the ability to pay' (see, for example, the White Paper on Scottish independence (Scottish Government, 2013)). The importance of individual choice also seems to inform currently ascendant conceptualisations of equality, such as Amartya Sen's capability theory (Sen, 1992), which argues that policy should reflect and facilitate access to the social goods which people value, recognising the diversity of individual and group preferences.

Phillips takes a different position, maintaining that the predominant equality of opportunity approach ignores the extent to which individual choices and therefore opportunities are socially structured. She questions the fairness of systems which base future life chances on choices which individuals make at a particular time and place. For example, a school leaver may decide to accept an apprenticeship or offer of employment rather than undertake further study, but cannot have any idea of the future economic and social consequences of this choice relative to others. Overall, Phillips rejects the idea that differences in outcome should be accepted as a justifiable consequence of individual choices. Linking equality of opportunity and outcomes, she maintains that whenever it is possible to detect disproportionalities in outcomes for specific social groups, we should assume systemic injustice and take action accordingly:

It makes sense to start from the expectation that all groups would normally be distributed in roughly equal proportions along all measures of social activity: to expect, therefore, an equality of outcome, and to take any divergence from this as a reasonably safe indication that opportunities are not yet equal.

(Phillips, 2004, p. 28)

This is the lens we adopt in examining patterns of participation in higher education in Scotland, focusing particularly on the role that colleges are expected to play.

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## **The importance of college-based higher education in Scotland and England**

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In Scotland and Northern Ireland, and to a lesser extent in Wales and England, colleges play an important role as higher education providers. In Scotland, about 17 per cent of higher education, generally in the form of sub-degree programmes, takes place in the

### 13 Social justice and widening access to higher education in Scotland

college sector, compared with 6 per cent in England and 1 per cent in Wales. In order to increase the proportion of the population with higher education qualifications, the Scottish Government has actively encouraged the expansion of the college-based higher education, placing no limits on the growth of student numbers in this sector. Colleges have been able to expand full-time HN provision because funding for this aspect of their work comes directly from the Scottish Funding Council. While university places have also increased in Scotland, student numbers continue to be centrally controlled, an approach which contrasts with the lifting of the cap on student numbers in England from 2016. College-based higher education in Scotland is cheaper than university-based provision, and relative cost is likely to be one factor driving its growth. Relative to population size, it is evident that Scotland has a smaller post-92 university sector compared with England and a higher proportion of high-tariff institutions, making it harder to gain a university place north of the Border (see Weedon's analysis of HESA benchmark data in Section 6, Hunter Blackburn et al., 2016).

The expansion of college-university articulation routes in Scotland has been supported by specific funding streams. For example, from 2007 onwards, articulation hubs have been supported. These generally involve the student spending the first two years of a four-year honours degree at college taking Higher National (HN) qualifications, followed by a move to a university for the final two years of an honours degree programme. In order to improve retention and completion rates, staff at college and university are encouraged to work together to design courses with a view to ensuring continuity in teaching methods and curriculum content. There is a new emphasis on associate student status, so that from the outset an HN student is registered at both the college and the university and has access to university facilities such as sports and information services.

Since the formation of the articulation hubs, there has been an increase in the number of students moving from college into the last two years of a university



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programme, increasing from 3,019 in 2011–12 to 3,469 in 2012–13 (Universities Scotland, 2014). However, it is clearly the case that the college/university pathway is far from smooth. According to SFC data, about 47 per cent of students taking Higher National qualifications at college progress to degree level study at university, and only 22 per cent are awarded full credit. Those receiving partial or no credit are required to repeat one or more years, leading to five or six year programmes of study to obtain an honours degree. This increases costs, even in the absence of tuition fees, and delays entry into the labour market. This is likely to be of particular significance to women, who may have less time to establish themselves in the workplace before taking maternity leave. Moving from a sub-degree programme in a college to a degree level programme at a university occurs much more frequently in some disciplinary areas and courses compared with others. For example, students studying for an HNC in beauty therapy at a college are less likely to progress to degree level study compared with computer studies students (Ingram and Gallacher, 2011).

In England, expansion of higher education over the past three decades has mainly occurred in the pre-and post-92 university sectors. While there has also been significant growth in higher education delivered in further education colleges, Parry (2009) argued that this provision has been neither coordinated nor protected, and further education colleges are often competing rather than collaborating with universities. In addition to HN qualifications, English further education colleges offer two-year Foundation Degrees, which may be topped up to a full honours degree through an additional year of study at university. Foundation Degrees may be studied at college or university and are normally awarded by a university. Recently, two English colleges (Newcastle College Group and Hartpury College) have been granted full degree-awarding powers, while others have been granted the power to award Foundation Degrees.

The expansion of higher education in English further education colleges was initially driven by the desire of the New Labour Government, following the Dearing

Report of 1997, to achieve a target of 50 per cent participation in higher education in order to meet the expanding skills needs of a knowledge economy. However, as noted by Bathmaker (2016), the election of a Conservative-led Coalition government in 2010 led to a greater emphasis on the expansion of vocational rather than higher education. In a Statement to Parliament in 2010, Vince Cable, the Secretary of State for Business, innovation and Skills, stated that:

The reality is that our best FE colleges and advanced apprenticeships are delivering vocational education every bit as valuable for their students and the wider economy as the programmes provided by universities . . . There could be a law of diminishing returns in pushing more and more students through university.

(Cable, 2010)

While student numbers on college-based Foundation Degrees have continued to grow, English universities have tended to withdraw from foundation-level study, concentrating instead on the delivery of the traditional bachelor's programmes.

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## **Experiences of higher education in colleges**

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Despite the recent expansion of articulation routes between colleges and universities in Scotland, there has been relatively little research on the impact of this change on student and institutional experience and identity, although Gallacher has documented policy developments and patterns of participation, as well as considering the significance of these changes (Gallacher, 2006, 2009, 2014). Ingram and Gallacher (2013) report on the findings of a qualitative study exploring the transition from college to university of students who entered Glasgow Caledonian University with HN qualifications in specific areas (Social Sciences; Business/Management Technology and Enterprise; Computing;

and Engineering). While most of the respondents regarded their college qualifications as a useful preparation for degree level study, they also reported a number of difficulties in moving from college to university. For example, those moving into the second or third year of a degree programme found that the transition was challenging, involving a shift from small and supportive college learning community to a much more impersonal university environment where friendship groups had already formed. Furthermore, in particular subject areas, they found that they lacked specific skills, such as how to reference correctly, use software packages for data analysis and write discursive essays. Engineering students found that they needed to boost their mathematical skills and in general students reported that university assessment criteria were much more rigorous compared with the college regime. Christie et al. (2008) describe the tensions experienced by students with HN qualifications entering the first year of a degree programme at a Scottish ancient university. The students described a sense of loss and dislocation, as well as excitement and exhilaration, in coming to terms with an environment which felt alien in relation to their social class background and prior learning experiences. The studies discussed above all argue that institutions need to do much more to harmonise curriculum content and teaching styles. They also suggest that universities should do much more to support students' emotional and academic needs.

In England, Bathmaker and colleagues (2009, 2016) found wide variation in students' and lecturers' experiences of working across the FE/HE divide. In some cases, further education colleges provided effective bridging support between college and university level provision, helping students to adapt to the different teaching and learning demands of college and university study. By way of contrast, some students were confused by complex institutional boundaries between colleges and universities reflected in teaching and validation arrangements. Illustrating this point, a study by Parry and colleagues found that 17 per cent of students studying for a bachelor's degree at college thought they had applied to study at university (Parry, 2012). Bathmaker (2016) also

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found tensions between staff engaged in teaching at different levels within the same college. Some institutions maintained firm boundaries between different groups of staff in terms of workload and teaching space, leading to resentment.

In light of the expansion of college-based higher education principally in Scotland, and to a lesser extent in England, it is interesting that very little data is available on the economic returns of this type of provision. In Scotland, there appears to have been no recent research on the relative destinations and earnings of those undertaking HN qualifications at college compared with those following the traditional university route. Using Labour Force Survey data from 1999 to 2003, Gasteen and Houston (2007) found that HN-level and degree courses gave similar advantages in Scotland in terms of the probability of being in employment, but that the hourly earnings benefit for degrees was almost twice as great as for qualifications at HN-level, compared to having no qualifications. In England, more recent information is available. From 2008–09, annual surveys have been conducted of those undertaking higher education in further education colleges. Like the main DLHE (Destination of Leavers from Higher Education) survey, the HE in FE DLHE survey asks graduates a series of questions about their outcomes six months after leaving higher education. A report published by HEFCE in 2013 compared destinations and salaries of graduates from English further education colleges and universities. As shown in Figures 13.1 and 13.2, those obtaining higher education qualifications from a college who subsequently moved into employment earned significantly less than those graduating from university, irrespective of whether they graduated with an honours or foundation degree.

**[Insert 15032-2029-013\_Figure\_001 Here]**

**Figure 13.1** UK-domiciled full-time first degree qualifiers from English HE providers in 2010–11 in full-time paid UK employment by salary band and institution type

Note: Salary reported six months after graduation

Source: BIS (2011)

**[Insert 15032-2029-013\_Figure\_002 Here]**

**Figure 13.2** UK-domiciled full-time foundation degree qualifiers (from English HE providers in 2010–11) in full-time paid UK employment by salary band and institution type

Note: Salary reported six months after graduation

**Source: BIS**

To summarise thus far, it would appear that in both Scotland and England the development of higher education in further education colleges has been somewhat ad hoc, although for a variety of reasons the Scottish government has been more consistent in its support of this sector. In both countries, it is clear that making the transition from college to university poses a particular set of challenges in adapting to a new learning environment halfway through a higher degree programme. College-based higher education programmes have typically evolved as training for specific occupations and continue to fulfil this function. At the same time, programmes in specific subject areas, such as computing, have morphed into transitional qualifications. Because of these dual functions, there are tensions in understandings of their underlying purpose, which are exacerbated by differences in college and university learning environments. Although the chances of being in employment are broadly similar for those with HN or degree level qualifications, evidence from England suggests that those with degrees are likely to have significantly higher earnings immediately after graduation (HEFCE, 2013) and over the course of a lifetime (BIS, 2011).

In the following sections, we explore patterns of participation in colleges and universities in Scotland and England by students from different social backgrounds, exploring the contribution made by colleges to widening participation.

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## **Patterns of participation by type of institution in England and Scotland**

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In order to assess progress in drawing more students into higher education, there is often a focus on initial participation rates and in this section we contrast participation north and south of the border since it is often claimed that Scotland does particularly well in this regard. Comparisons of participation rates between the home nations adjust for changes over time in the size of the population. A number of participation rate measures are used in different parts of the UK. The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) is the only one which covers higher education participation in both college and university, in contrast to UCAS which only covers university. It is described as a suitable basis for UK comparisons by the SFC and is available for Scotland and England from 2006–07 to 2013–14. In effect, the HEIPR expresses how likely it is that a person will have entered higher education by the age of 30. By measuring participation in all forms of higher education and including those who do not enter immediately from school, it is a more inclusive measure than, say, UCAS age 18 entry rates.

Since 2015, the HEIPR has been published for Scotland only as a single headline figure, no longer providing a breakdown of how participation in HE varies by the type of institution (university or college) or level, treating Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels 7 and 8 (Higher National and foundation degrees) identically to SCQF levels 9 and 10 (ordinary and honours degrees). Data are also not normally available by background. This chapter uses additional breakdowns of the Scottish figures provided by the SFC. Further breakdowns of the HEIPR for England were not available, but cross-referencing with other data allows some additional tentative comparisons.

Scotland has had higher levels of total participation in higher education than England for many years, long understood to be driven by the larger volume of activity at HNC/D level which takes place mainly in colleges. Very little degree level work is

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undertaken in Scottish colleges. Although the gap in the HEIPR between the two countries has narrowed since 2006, the HEIPR remains almost one-fifth higher for Scotland, standing at 55.0 per cent in 2013–14, compared to 46.6 per cent for England. Over the period, the HEIPR increased by 1.8 percentage points (3.4% proportionately) in Scotland and by 4.4 percentage points (10.4% proportionately) in England. The increase in HEIPR has not been steady in either country. In Scotland, it peaked in 2011–12 and then fell back. In 2013–14, it remained below its 2009–10 value. The figure for England increased up to 2011–12, rising in that year, prior to a large increase in tuition fees. It fell sharply in 2012 and then in 2013 rose to a level slightly above its pre-2011 highest value (see Figure 13.3).

**[Insert 15032-2029-013\_Figure\_003 Here]**

**Figure 13.3** HEIPR 2006–07 to 2013–14, England and Scotland (2013–14 figure for England provisional)

Source: Hunter Blackburn et al. (2016)

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### **Initial participation rates by type of institution**

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To understand better the underlying trends, particularly for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, further breakdowns of the HEIPR data have been obtained from the SFC (see Figure 13.4).

**[Insert 15032-2029-013\_Figure\_004 Here]**

**Figure 13.4** HEIPR in Scotland by institution type vs total HEIPR England (with estimate of effect of removing provision in English FECs)

Note: Labels added for HEIs and FECs in Scotland. The difference from the total shown above is accounted for by entry into HEIs in the rest of the UK.

**Source:** Hunter Blackburn et al. (2016)

While the total HEIPR for Scotland is higher, initial entry to higher education institutions (HEIs) seems likely to be substantially higher in England. The HEIPR for universities and other HEIs in Scotland followed no steady trend. It was generally lower over the last four years of the period than the first and a little lower in 2013 than in 2006. Including entry into HEIs in other parts of the UK, the HEIPR for HEIs fell from 34.9 per cent to 34.1 per cent. By contrast, for colleges the HEIPR rose from 18.9 per cent to 20.3 per cent over the period. The figures for colleges showed a reasonably steady increase, although the highest figure was 21.8 per cent in 2011–12. Higher education provision in colleges therefore accounts for all the growth in the HEIPR for Scotland since 2006–07.

The HEIPR measures a student's initial point of entry and does not take into account that some of those who begin their higher education in a college will go on to undertake further undergraduate study in a university. Some students initially admitted to a college will eventually move to a university to do a degree. In 2013–14 there were around 17,500 successful HN completions, according to the SFC Infact database and just over 8,000 students who moved from a college to university.<sup>1</sup> Allowing for the fact that some students drop out between initial entry and successful HN completion, it might be expected that some 40 per cent of those initially entering a college course may move to university, probably enough to close the gap with England in degree level participation by age 30. However, students who do not get full credit – around 4,000 of the 8,000 – face one or more repeat years.

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## **Social background and institutional type**

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Using further data provided by the SFC, for Scotland, it is possible to develop a more nuanced understanding of HEIPR, comparing attendance at different types of institution by students from different backgrounds. The participation pattern for the most and least



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deprived students is starkly different, with the former relying much more heavily on initial entry into a college than a university. The least deprived are almost three times more likely to enter a university than a college. Ninety per cent of the overall growth in the HEIPR for the most disadvantaged in Scotland since 2006 (6.3 percentage points) has been due to increased entry into college level higher education. Over the period 2006–2013, the difference in routes between the two groups has therefore become more pronounced. By 2013, 61 per cent of the most disadvantaged group initially entered HE via college, compared to 55 per cent in 2006 (see Figure 13.5).

**[Insert 15032-2029-013\_Figure\_005 Here]**

**Figure 13.5** HEIPR in Scotland only, by SIMD MD20 (students from most deprived 20% of areas) and SIMD LD20 (students from least deprived 20% of areas) and institutional type

Source: Hunter Blackburn et al. (2016)

The increase in the direct entry rate into HEIs by age 30 for the most disadvantaged has been relatively small, rising from 15.1 per cent in 2006 to 15.9 per cent in 2013, and not steady, ranging between 16.1 per cent (2008) and 14.4 per cent (2011). Once very low figures for entry into HEIs elsewhere in the UK are included, the figure for initial entry into HEIs rises from 15.6 per cent in 2006 to 16.3 per cent in 2013.

Overall, the HEIPR for the most disadvantaged in Scotland has increased over the period, though it was flat or falling slightly between 2010 and 2012. The HEIPR for the least disadvantaged 20 per cent in Scotland had no clear pattern: in 2013, it was much the same as in 2006, meaning that the gap between the most and least disadvantaged students had reduced. This mirrors the UCAS data. A small rise in college entry offsets a drop for HEIs. The figure for HEIs in the rest of the UK was the same at the end of the period as at the beginning.

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The concentration of growth in college entry is likely to reflect the relatively tight capping of university places in Scotland at a time of rising demand. The Scottish Government fully funds places for Scottish (and EU) students and therefore restricts recruitment for these groups. Students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland pay fees and their numbers are uncapped. Colleges are funded on a different model, which allocates less per place, and does not restrict recruitment so rigidly, so that colleges can be more responsive to demand. Since 2012, they have also been encouraged to shift their provision more towards younger full-time students studying for accredited qualifications. The figures here are consistent with the UCAS data showing signs of greater competition for university places over the period. As demand for entry into university has risen particularly quickly among this group, with government encouragement, it appears that that extra demand has in practice been met mainly by increasing HE provision in colleges.

Without equivalent data for England, it is not possible to estimate how much of the growth there in participation by more disadvantaged students may also have taken place in colleges (or other non-university providers, particularly private colleges). However, the smaller relative volume of provision in England outside HEIs makes it more difficult for these to account for so much of the change. The staged loosening and final lifting of the cap on university places in England also makes it less likely that demand has been displaced from universities into other providers.

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### **Level of initial study**

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The SFC is also able to provide data on the split in the HEIPR between levels of study on initial entry (see Figure 13.6).

**[Insert 15032-2029-013\_Figure\_006 Here]**

Figure 13.6 HEIPR by different types of course in Scotland

Source: Hunter Blackburn et al. (2016)

The strongest growth has been in HN-level entry and closely matches the increase in entry to colleges. The proportion entering direct into first degree courses has remained more or less static since 2008–09, excepting a peak in 2009–10.

A further large change has been a near-halving of ‘other HE’ (mainly non-HN sub-degrees). This seems due in part to some of the switching to degree level provision at HEIs, although there may also have been some switching towards HNs in colleges. For this analysis, it was not possible to further separate this data by background, but the strong association of HN provision with colleges implies that the figures would look like those in Figure 4.4, with HN entry being much more significant to the most disadvantaged.

Again, the same figures are not currently available for England, but the relatively low level of sub-degree provision in universities, and small proportion of HE provided outside universities, suggests that the English figures are likely to show a higher HEIPR for first degrees.

To summarise, the increase in HEIPR has not been steady in either Scotland or England. In Scotland, in 2013–14 it remained below its 2009–10 value. The figure for England fell sharply in 2012 and then rose to a level slightly above its pre-2011 highest value. As demand for entry into university has risen, detailed analysis of the HEIPR reveals this was met by increasing HE provision in Scottish colleges. An increased level of entry into sub-degree programmes (HNCs and HNDs) in colleges accounts for all of the growth in the HEIPR for Scotland since 2006–07. In particular, entry to HN-level courses in colleges has been relied on to increase initial access to higher education for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Ninety per cent of the overall growth in the HEIPR for the most disadvantaged in Scotland since 2006 (6.3 percentage points) has

been due to increased entry into college level higher education. Rates of initial entry by age 30 directly into university have increased only slightly for the most disadvantaged. Since 2006, the difference in entry routes (direct entry to university from school, or entry to university via a sub-degree college programme) between the most and least disadvantaged has become more pronounced. The increased HEIPR in England may include some sub-degree growth, but this is likely to account for a small amount of the overall growth.

Levels of eventual entry into university-level higher education may be similar in Scotland to England, allowing for movement from HN and equivalent courses to university. However, students who progress from a two-year college HND programme to degree level study may take up to six years to complete an honours degree, incurring substantial additional time and cost. Given the high incidence of repeat years, for equal access on equal terms to the most competitive institutions, over-reliance on the HN to degree route is problematic, and it should not be simply assumed that this route makes up for initial differences in access, particularly to older universities.

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## **Comparing patterns of participation between Scotland and England**

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Comparisons of participation between Scotland and England based on HEIPR tend to paint a positive picture of Scottish higher education. However, because increased participation in Scottish higher education by students from disadvantaged backgrounds has been in the college sector, it is important to consider the equivalence of college sub-degree programmes and university degrees. For the most disadvantaged, it seems likely that not only entry to university through sub-degree programmes but also some purely sub-degree provision would need to be regarded as equivalent to direct entry to university, to close the gap in participation rates between Scotland and England recorded

by UCAS. Much discussion of higher education participation in different parts of the UK assumes equivalence between colleges and universities. However, the data presented in this chapter suggests that we should be cautious in assuming such equivalence, as those articulating from college to university are disadvantaged in a number of ways. Overall, only half of those who enter a higher national college course subsequently move on to a university degree programme, and when they do it is usually in the post-92 sector. Of students who articulate, only half receive full credit. For students progressing into one of the ancient or pre-92 universities, this means that the process of obtaining a degree may take six years, with major implications in terms of loss of earnings. Women who subsequently take time out of the labour market to have children may experience a cumulative financial penalty, contributing to the persistent gender pay gap.

A further problem is that students who enter university with HN qualifications rather than a mixture of Highers and Advanced Highers are more likely than others to drop out, particularly from ancient universities (Kadar-Satat and Iannelli, 2016). As noted in our earlier review of the literature, this is likely to reflect a lack of alignment between the academic requirements of college HN courses and university degree programmes (Gallacher, 2014). For example, students on college courses are required to demonstrate the attainment of learning outcomes, which in some disciplinary areas, such as social care, may be practical rather than academic. Particularly in ancient universities, relatively little attention has been paid to supporting articulating college students once they are enrolled. Even for those who articulate with no credit (this group of students undertake a college HN course and then move into the first year of a university degree programme), there may be challenges. First-year teaching in some selective Scottish universities is at SCQF Level 8 (assuming attainment of Advanced Highers or A levels), so students entering these universities with Highers or HN qualifications are likely to find that there is a sudden increase in the level of academic work expected, with little additional support.

Quite apart from academic challenges, social barriers may also be encountered. Students entering the second or third year of a university programme after a college HN course may find that informal academic and social networks are already established. Breaking into these networks would be difficult for any student, but is likely to be particularly challenging for those from less advantaged backgrounds who may be the first in their family to attend university. Furthermore, because most articulation routes are from college to post-92 universities, the choice of degree subjects available to this group of students is limited. For example, to gain access to a higher paying job in the field of law or medicine, it is necessary to study at an older university.

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### **Conclusion and future policy scenarios**

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College-based higher education has become an increasingly central part of the UK higher education system over time, particularly in Scotland, and its strengths in attracting students from less advantaged social backgrounds have often been emphasised. However, far less attention has been paid to its disadvantages. Almost half of students who embark on an HN course at a Scottish college do not progress to university-level study either because this was never their intention or because they encountered insurmountable hurdles along the way. Of those who do progress to degree level study, only half receive full credit for their earlier qualifications, resulting in up to six years of full-time study to obtain a bachelor's degree which would have taken three years in England. Drop-out rates are higher for those on 'two plus two' courses than for other students. Finally, those who graduate from colleges rather than universities appear to have significantly lower earning potential. These disadvantages accrue disproportionately to those from less advantaged backgrounds, and we should therefore be cautious in assuming equivalence between college and university higher education programmes.

In the light of these issues, in the following sections, we consider some of the future possibilities for college-based higher education in Scotland, returning to the need to ensure that the system of higher education system in Scotland is not only efficient, but also fair.

## **Improving articulation routes**

The problem of poor articulation between college and university higher education is well recognised and is one of the principal areas being addressed by the recently appointed Commissioner for Fair Access in Scotland.<sup>2</sup> In light of the expansion of articulation routes between college and university, it has been argued that students with HN qualifications should always receive full accreditation, allowing them to progress to the second or third year of a university honours programme in the subject and institution of their choosing. As noted earlier, more selective universities may require students with HN qualifications to undertake a full degree programme. As a result, students who begin their higher education career in a college before moving to university may take six years to gain a degree. Issues, of course, arise with regard to the subject-specific knowledge that may be required by particular degree programmes and restrictions on student places in some areas such as medicine. However, if it were demonstrated that college-based higher education could provide a route into more selective universities, its status would almost certainly improve. Clearly, these issues will continue to be debated, but radical action is needed to address well-documented but unsolved problems of ‘dependency and difficulty’ (Bathmaker et al., 2008) in the relationship between colleges and universities, where colleges may be positioned as the ‘poor relation’.

## **Responding directly to rising demand for university entry**

The available evidence suggests that the growth in college entry has been due in part to an increase in the number of students wishing to gain entry to university, but who are unable to do so, with colleges relied on to absorb unmet demand for direct university entry, and for university level education more generally. College places are funded at a lower level, providing government with a strong incentive to allow the system to drift in this direction. In February 2017, after sustained questioning about the supply of university places by the Scottish Parliament's Public Audit and Post-Legislative Scrutiny Committee, John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary of Education, conceded that it was likely that suitably qualified young people were failing to gain entry to university, saying that 'not everyone who wants to go to university is able to go to university'. However, this has never been clearly set out as a formal policy position and subject to scrutiny as such. The equity implications of a de facto policy of diverting young people from university to college requires far more attention. It carries a substantial risk of further stratifying the higher education experience, for as long as those entering the college sector are disproportionately from more disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to those gaining a university place. A detailed study of the current relationship between supply and demand for direct university entry, particularly among school leavers, at the national and sub-national levels is overdue. A plan to address any growing mismatch might include targeting additional university places towards parts of the country where there is persistent evidence of under-supply. Bathmaker (2016) has argued that colleges with a significant proportion of higher education provision should be recognised and valued as HE providers in their own right, rather than being seen as precursors to university provision. An alternative view is that colleges can successfully include a substantial higher education role without compromising their broader purpose, but only if it is for those for whom college entry is the preference. The more colleges are used as a substitute for direct university entry for those who want and are ready for it, the harder they may find it to maintain a distinctively valued identity.



## **Tackling disproportionalities within the higher education sector**

We began this chapter by outlining of view of the criteria which should be used to judge the fairness of Scotland's higher education system. While acknowledging the multi-dimensional nature of social justice and equality, we emphasised that judgements of systemic fairness should be based on an analysis of the economic and social outcomes which are produced. In this chapter, we demonstrated the disproportionalities in participation by different social groups in different types of institution, noting that Scotland's fee-free regime continues to underpin a highly stratified system, where young people from socially advantaged backgrounds are concentrated in high status universities, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds are congregated in colleges. Colleges have been responsible for the vast majority of progress in relation to widening access, but students who find themselves on college courses face many additional barriers compared with their privileged peers. It is sometimes quite difficult to question the Scottish government's reliance on colleges to undertake the bulk of widening access work, since raising concerns of this nature may be interpreted as intellectual snobbery or a desire to protect the vested interests of universities. Throughout this chapter, we have acknowledged the work of both colleges and universities, but fairness will not be achieved until equal proportions of students from different social backgrounds are present in each type of institution. The Scottish government's widening access targets set out the expectation that by 2021 those from the most disadvantaged 20 per cent of backgrounds at least 10 per cent of entrants to every university, and, by 2026, 18 per cent of university entrants in total. By 2030, the government expects equal representation of different social groups in higher education overall. These targets still leave scope for institutional stratification. In order to monitor progress towards socially just patterns of participation,

far better data are needed on ‘who goes where and does what’ (Reay, 1998), not just at college or university, but also in relation to later labour market outcomes.

## Notes

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**1** Scottish Funding Council (2015). *Learning for all: Measures of Success*. Edinburgh: Scottish Funding Council, Table 12.

**2** In December 2016, Professor Sir Peter Scott was appointed by the Scottish government as the first Commissioner for Fair Access following the publication of the report of the Commission on Widening Access.