

COMMISSION ON WIDENING ACCESS

CALL FOR EVIDENCE

JUNE 2015

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Background on the Commission

The recent Programme for Government sets out the Scottish Government's vision of a fairer, more equal Scotland. Central to that vision is the ambition that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of accessing higher education as a child born in one of our least deprived.

The Commission on Widening Access has been established to advise Ministers on how this ambition can be met.

The Commission is chaired by Dame Ruth Silver, a senior educationalist with a personal and professional commitment to access. Dame Ruth is joined by key figures from business, education, early years and student representatives.

The Commission has been asked to provide an interim report in autumn 2015, followed by a final report in spring 2016.

Call for Evidence

To achieve early progress, in the initial phase of its work the Commissioners have established three working groups, each focussed on a strategic theme:

1. Identification and removal of the barriers to access and retention
2. Identification and scaling up of best practice on their dismantling
3. The data and measures needed to support access and retention

This call for evidence mirrors robustly these three strategic themes. Below we set out in more detail the focus of each group and questions that they have identified to help inform their work.

1. Identification and removal of barriers to access and retention

This group will synthesise existing evidence around barriers to widening access and retention, and their removal, for those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. Within these groups, it will also seek to identify any specific barriers for those with different equality characteristics, particularly for those with a care experience.

2. The identification and scaling up of best practice

This group will identify best practice on supporting access to higher education across early years, schools, colleges, universities and employers. Based on this, it will support the Commission to make recommendations on how best practice can be scaled up and embedded within individual institutions as well as across the wider education and employment system.

3. Data and measures

This group will identify the data and information required to monitor and support improvements on widening access across all education providers, and the processes necessary to support this.

Its work will help the Commission to propose meaningful, evidence based targets for participation in higher education, as well as clear milestones to drive further and faster progress.

How to respond

Please respond to this call for evidence by completing the form at **Annex A** and then emailing or posting it to:

Email: Wideningaccess@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

Postal Address:

Secretariat to the Widening Access Commission
Higher Education and Learner Support Division
5 Atlantic Quay
150 Broomielaw
Glasgow
G2 8LU

The call for evidence will close at midnight on 20 July 2015. Responses should not exceed 1500 words.

Please provide your response in Microsoft Word format. It would be very helpful to include contact details in your response in case the Commission wishes to seek further evidence from you or your organisation.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

Responses will be reviewed by the Commission and its working groups after the closing date. They will be used to identify evidence and themes that the Commission should consider in its work. Responses may be published online or as part of Commission reports. It is therefore important to make clear if there is anything in your response which you consider to be confidential and would prefer not to be made public.

Help with queries

Questions about this call for evidence can be sent to:

Stephen O'Neill
Wideningaccess@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

ANNEX A

RESPONSE FORM

Name: Cristina Iannelli

Organisation: AQMeN (Applied Quantitative Methods Network) Research Centre, University of Edinburgh

Role: Co-director of the Centre and leader of the 'Education and Social Stratification' research strand

Are you responding on behalf of this organisation?: YES

Email: c.iannelli@ed.ac.uk

Tel: 0131 651 6281

Please provide evidence and views in relation to the questions and strategic themes on the next page.

Evidence should relate to widening access specifically for those from **socio-economically** deprived backgrounds.

Responses **should not exceed 1500 words**.

1. The identification and removal of barriers to access and retention

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What are the main barriers to accessing university and higher education in colleges for people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and those with care experience, and how can these be overcome?
- What more can be done specifically by colleges and universities, including institutions with the highest entry requirements, to generate a greater volume of successful applications from people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?
- What actions can be taken to support people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds who enter higher education to successfully complete their course?

We welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the Commission on Widening Access. The research produced by the Education and Social Stratification strand, within the AQMeN (Applied Quantitative Methods Network) Centre, aims to provide a better understanding of the mechanisms through which social class differences emerge in entry to, progression in and attainment in higher education (HE) and how these differences affect individuals' labour market outcomes and their civic participation.

The AQMeN research builds upon prior research which was conducted by Cristina Iannelli, Adam Gamoran and Lindsay Paterson (2011). This research showed that HE expansion in the 1980s and 1990s in Scotland led to a reduction in social inequalities in HE enrolment but that inequalities were (and are) still marked. A closer look showed that a reduction in social inequality did not occur in all HE sectors but was limited to the new universities (i.e. the HE institutions upgraded to university status in 1992) and the further education (FE) colleges. Thus, students from disadvantaged origins who would not formerly have accessed higher education were allowed to enter HE via new universities and FE colleges while the older universities remained mostly populated by people from more advantaged backgrounds. The AQMeN programme has developed upon this research to explore the reasons why inequality has persisted over time and between institutions.

Barriers to accessing HE

There is extensive national and international literature on the barriers that people from lower social backgrounds face in accessing higher education. These barriers, include lower academic achievement in secondary school, high perceived costs of HE participation, low aspirations and lack of confidence (HE is 'not for people like them'). However, the AQMeN Education and Social Stratification research has added at least two further elements to our understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon: 1) it has uncovered the importance of curriculum choices in reproducing social inequalities in HE entry and labour market outcomes, and 2) it has highlighted the role that national institutional factors, such as differences in school examination and in HE entry criteria, have in affecting participation in HE by different social groups.

- 1) In relation to subject choices, *evidence from the Scottish School Leavers Surveys (SSLS) and the Scottish Longitudinal Study (SLS) show that Scottish secondary school pupils from different classes of origin (measured by parental education and occupation) differ significantly in the number and types of subjects they take in S5-S6.*

Pupils from less advantaged social classes study fewer subjects than pupils from higher social classes. This difference is mainly due to the lower uptake of English, Languages, Maths, Sciences, Geography and History by less advantaged young people. These subjects are those deemed to 'facilitate' entry into universities, especially older universities (Russell Group, 2011). For example, in 2009-2010 less than half (45%) of S5-S6 pupils whose parents had no qualifications took English compared with the vast majority (91%) of pupils whose parents had HE degrees. Striking differences among the two social groups emerge also in Maths (38% versus 74%), in Sciences (25% versus 67%) and Languages (only 5% versus 24%). The patterns are similar when parental occupation is considered. These social variations in subject choices in S5/S6 are strongly explained by prior subject choices in S3/S4. Thus early choices at the age of 15 help to channel young people from different social backgrounds towards (or away from) higher education.

Why does this matter?

It matters because *social inequalities in subject choices in secondary education, in turn, have consequences for later decisions on HE entry and labour market outcomes.*

A recent comparative study (Iannelli, Smyth and Klein, 2015) showed that social inequalities in entry to Higher Education in Scotland are mostly explained by subject choice at secondary level. Subject choice plays a particularly strong role in facilitating entry to the more prestigious, older universities. Thus subject choice is one of the factors which dampens the chances of less advantaged people to enter universities in Scotland.

A study of occupational outcomes at three points of individuals' lives (at ages 23, 33 and 42) in the UK (Iannelli, 2013) found that the higher representation of those from more advantaged social backgrounds in professional or managerial jobs was partially explained by the fact that they had studied a higher number of languages, English, maths and science subjects at school. For example, when analysing occupational outcomes at age 33, we found that between 23% and 29% of the social advantage associated with having a parent from the top social classes or a highly-educated parent could be attributed to school curriculum choices.

In light of these findings we suggest that policies aimed at widening access to HE in Scotland, and in turn at improving the chances of social mobility, should not only focus on reducing the attainment gap but also on providing socially disadvantaged people with clear information and support in their curriculum decisions.

- 2) Our comparative work with Ireland has shown that national institutional factors play a role in shaping social inequalities in HE participation. Both Ireland and Scotland experienced similar levels of educational expansion and have a largely non-selective secondary school system. However, differently from Scotland, in Ireland upper secondary students are required to study three compulsory subjects (English, Maths and Irish) and typically take six to eight subjects in the Leaving Certificate exam (corresponding to the S5-S6 exams in Scotland). Moreover, places in HE are allocated through a centralised system which considers students' grades in the Leaving Certificate (i.e. the results for the 'best' six subjects) as the main criterion for admission. Our study shows that social class variation in HE entry is mainly explained by differences in attainment in Ireland while in Scotland it is mainly explained by different curriculum choices. *We argue that in Scotland a flexible system of curriculum choice and low standardised and decentralised HE admission practices have produced another avenue for social inequalities to emerge.* This is because more socially advantaged parents are likely to be better equipped (i.e. they have more insight knowledge and resources) to help their children make the best decisions leading to higher educational attainment and better jobs. These results also demonstrate the potential unintended consequences of any educational reform as middle-class groups will 'reposition' themselves to their advantage.

International research has shown that systems where curricular choices are made earlier tend to result in greater social class differentiation. In this context, it is worth noting that the introduction of the 3/3 model through the Curriculum for Excellence, that is a three-year 'Broad General Education' (in S1-S3) followed by a three-year 'Senior Phase' (in S4-S6), potentially restricts subject choices offered at S4 (from 8 to 5-6 subjects). The earlier selection and restriction in the number of subjects to be studied for the S4 exams is indeed worrying because it may exacerbate existing social inequalities in subject uptake.

In light of these findings, policies oriented to increase the number of pupils from less advantaged social backgrounds having access to and being encouraged to take up subjects such as languages, English, maths and science, as well as to encourage universities to avoid tightening up their entry requirements to specific subjects (when there is not a specific disciplinary reason to do so) may improve access opportunities for less advantaged people.

2. The identification and scaling up of best practice

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What can be learned from Scottish access programmes, across the education system and early years, about best practice in relation to improving access, retention and successful completion?
- What new programmes might be introduced in Scotland, drawing on experiences in the rest of the UK and other countries, that have had proven success in improving access, retention and successful completion for people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?
- Which widening access programmes, initiatives and curriculum components, with a proven record of success, have the potential to be scaled up nationally?

AQMeN and other research indicates that initiatives which focus solely on the transition from secondary to higher education are unlikely to be effective given that social inequalities in HE entry reflect processes within secondary (and possibly even primary) education. Widening access therefore requires a holistic view of the education system and a recognition of the cumulative impact of earlier decisions on later outcomes.

3. The data and measures needed to support access and retention

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What evidence or data is required to effectively measure Scotland's progress on widening access to higher education at both a national and institutional level?
- What evidence or data should be considered as part of the admissions process for students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?
- Do we have enough evidence on the effectiveness of existing widening access programmes and initiatives and, if not, what else do we need to do to build a robust evidence base in this area?

Most of the current research is based on either relatively old data from surveys which have been discontinued (such as the Scottish School Leavers Surveys) or administrative data which are often limited because they lack good measures of family background characteristics and are cross-sectional (i.e. restrictions in the provision of the HESA data do not allow research to follow students from the time they enter HE to the time they graduate).

There is scope for improving the evidence base on widening access issues in Scottish Higher Education by facilitating access to existing data and linking data from various administrative sources. In particular data from schools, Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA), Further Education (FE) Colleges, UCAS and Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) should be linked together to provide longitudinal individual data which would allow Scottish-wide analysis of patterns of HE application, entry, retention and attainment for different social groups and analysis of the effects of widening access initiatives across subjects and institutions.

In addition it would be desirable to make linkages between national survey data, such as Growing Up in Scotland, and administrative data on school attendance and attainment for respondents in the survey. These linkages are possible and Scotland has the data infrastructure and expertise needed, such as the ADRN (Administrative Data Research Network), which can provide support for successfully achieving these linkages.

4. Any other comments

The closing date for responses to this call for evidence is 20 July 2015

Please provide your response in Microsoft Word format. **Responses should not exceed 1500 words.**

Is there any part of your response which you would prefer not to be made public? NO

If yes please indicate in the box below:

Please email or post the completed response form to:

Email: Wideningaccess@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

Postal Address:

Secretariat to the Widening Access Commission
Higher Education and Learner Support Division
5 Atlantic Quay
150 Broomielaw
Glasgow
G2 8LU

The Commission thanks you for your response.