

Developments in Research in Widening Access

It's 33 years since I taught on my first Access course¹ and over a decade since I co-authored a book on researching wider access (Osborne, Gallacher and Crossan 2004).

We have very good data now on who participates, barriers to participation, performance in HE and retention. We perhaps know a little less about the outcomes of HE, but even in that area, there is good data on first destinations. So I will not deal in depth with the statistics. However some data from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) (2012) sixth update of *Learning for All* give some pointers to areas of continuing concern.

There has been a significant **increase** amongst school-leavers entering both FE colleges and HEIs in the last decades. In the period 1993-94 to 2010-11, those entering HE have increased by nine percentage points (from 27 to 36%), whilst those entering FE have increased by 12 percentage points (from 15 to 27%) over the same timeframe.

Very noticeable is that young women outstrip young men in terms of progression, especially to HE; in 2010-11, 40% of female school-leavers as against 32% of their male counterparts entered the system.

However, when considering **articulation** from FE to HE, despite efforts over the last decade, numbers entering the second or third year of a degree with an HNC or HND were less in 2010/11 than in 2002/03. Little penetration has been made into the older universities.

The proportion of those entering universities from the **most deprived areas** continues to be less than that from less deprived areas, and does not represent the nature of the population as a whole.

Ancient universities admit only 7% of their students from the most deprived quintile and 38% from the least deprived.

How might we explain some of these statistics?

The numbers of applicants with the highest tariff bands in the school leaving examinations that are required to enter the most selective of institutions is much lower in the most deprived areas. This in turn may be related to **differential performance and opportunity at school level** across the country.

However in certain disciplines other factors are may be at play. For example in medicine, it has been shown that controlling for all other variables, school-leavers from lower socio-economic groups with equivalent high tariffs are least likely to be admitted (see Thomas *et al.* 2005).

Are factors other than academic qualifications relevant?

Notwithstanding institutional behaviours, are there more fundamental issues to consider?

The recently published Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland speaks of the 'need to break the

¹ Access to Teacher Education at City and East London College, one of the first courses to have been established following the DES (1978) invitation to establish "Special courses in preparation for entry to higher education".

cycles of poverty, deprivation, unemployment, health inequalities and poor educational attainment which have become deeply embedded in our society, particularly in our disadvantaged communities' (Scottish Government 2014).

An earlier publication concerned with places (Scottish Government 2011) argues that healthy children are more likely to perform well at school and young people with high levels of educational attainment are more likely to find high quality employment. In turn 'Good Places' (i.e. the social, economic, cultural and physical environment) lead to better health. And in its 2013-16 Corporate Plan, Education Scotland has highlighted place-based differences in educational outcomes as a key factor in holding Scotland back. There are a complex set of interactions in play, and it is not simply that good places lead to better health and other concomitant benefits. There are multi-directional interactions with much evidence that involvement in learning leads to better health and associated social and economic benefits. The Marmot Review (2010) refers to the 'growing evidence of associations between participation in various types of adult learning and improvements in well-being, health, and health-related behaviours', an issue also taken up by a recent British Academy (2014) publication.

That is why as part of our new ESRC-funded Urban Centre for Big Data² at the University of Glasgow we will be seeking to gain new understandings of the drivers of spatial educational inequalities, including neighbourhood factors to inform educational and urban policies. Amongst the questions we will be asking are:

How is educational disadvantage influenced by residential segregation processes, including divisions caused by the resurgence of private renting?

Local authorities make increasing use of the private sector in discharging their homelessness obligations. How does this impact on choices of schooling and educational attainment?

Finally let me say a little more about adults

Access provision when originally conceived in the UK in the 1970s was about adults, and most of the early forms of provision still exist in Scotland. These include customized Access courses run by universities and by FE colleges through SWAP. However, the numbers taking these courses have not expanded significantly in absolute terms, and as a consequent since the system of HE has expanded considerably are less significant.

One of the reasons may be that there has been little progress in creating a truly flexible HE system and indeed in some activities there has a decline in provision despite considerable investment in earlier decades – for example, we see little evidence that the Funding Council initiatives funded under the Flexibility in Teaching and Learning Scheme (FITLS) in the 1990s have been sustained (see Osborne 2013).

References

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² See http://www.gla.ac.uk/news/headline_306335_en.html

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