

Supporting Equality of Access to Higher Education in Scotland: Access and Transition Through Immersion in Higher Education for Advanced Higher Pupils (0223)

Karen MacFarlane, Yvonne Wayne
Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

The Commission on Widening Access

In 2014-15 the Scottish Government announced in its Programme for Government its intention to take measures to ensure that every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, has an equal chance of participating in higher education (HE). To that end it established the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) to advise as to which measures need to be implemented to achieve this aim. Following a review of widening access in Scotland, CoWA published *A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access* in March 2016. The report proposed a systemic approach to widening participation in Scotland and made 34 recommendations to support the achievement of the key target that by 2030 students from SIMD20 (the lowest quintile of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation¹ (SIMD) backgrounds) will represent 20 per cent of entrants to HE. One the recommendations was the need for the education sectors to work together to provide pupils access to key subject areas through provision of Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers² and this paper reviews an innovative transition programme which sought to embed a culture of the university experience in school pupils by delivering Advanced Highers which are traditionally taught in school, in a university environment.

Higher and Advanced Higher Participation

The number of young people staying on to Senior 6 (the final school year) in Scotland is increasing (26,098 in 2006 increasing to 32,246 in 2011) (Scottish Government, 2011). Most hold a Higher qualification and 60% have three or more Highers (ibid). Pupils from the most deprived areas are least likely to stay on to S6 (33% compared with 76% from the least deprived areas) (ibid). Whilst there has been an overall increase in the number of entries for Advanced Highers from 15,768 in 2008-09 to 19,596 in 2010-11 (Scottish Government, 2014), anecdotal evidence indicates that many pupils who have achieved A and B grades in Highers do not then pursue Advanced Highers in these subjects. Many schools, particularly in Glasgow, struggle to provide a range of Advanced Higher courses to their final year pupils for a variety of reasons including small pupil numbers, timetabling constraints and lack of teacher expertise.

¹ Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. SIMD 20= 20% most deprived areas (quintile 1); SIMD 40= 40% most deprived areas which includes quintile 1 and quintile 2.

² Pupils in Scotland can go to university at the end of Senior 5, as Highers provide the entry requirements for Scottish universities where degrees are normally four years long; however, recently it is more common for students to remain until Senior 6, taking further Highers and/or taking Advanced Highers. The majority of English universities, the most popular choice for Scottish students who wish to study university degrees outside of Scotland, require Advanced Higher qualification levels as these are deemed by the English universities to be most similar to A-levels.

Advanced Higher Transition Programme

The University responsible for establishing the transition programme has close relationships with seventeen Glasgow secondary schools established largely through outreach and community engagement work. The current HE progression average of these schools is 19% whereas the Scottish sector average for state funded secondary schools is 37% and for Glasgow City Council is 29% (SFC, 2013). The programme was established in 2013 to serve these seventeen Glasgow schools in a pilot initiative to:

- Enable pupils in the target schools to access a range of Advanced Highers within an HE learning environment and in so doing widen access regarding Advanced Higher studies;
- Target Senior 6 pupils from secondary schools in Glasgow which fall within the two lowest quintiles;
- Provide a year-long immersion and transition programme so that pupils become familiar with the HE learning environment which in turn supports their progression and retention once they have entered HE.

In terms of demonstrable impact, prior to the establishment of the programme a key performance outcome was identified:

- Equip Advanced Higher pupils with a university learning experience that will facilitate the transition to positive HE destinations.

Evaluation Outcomes

Kirkpatrick's (1994) four stage evaluation model was used as a framework for evaluation, the results of which will be presented in greater detail at the conference but an important finding has been the importance of potential HE students becoming acculturated to the university environment. This is especially the case for those from diverse social backgrounds and those who are the first in their family to consider a university education. What is unique about the Advanced Higher programme is that it allows for total immersion within the university culture while the prospective first year student is still at school. Writing on acculturation Green (2006) has noted the contrasting and sometimes conflicting expectational schemas of teachers and students at the 'academic borderlands' of transition in terms of the transition from sixth form to university. Pupils on this programme have the opportunity to see the other side of this border and to experience life as a university student. Pupils reported feeling more prepared for university. Other writers have pointed to the significance of the development of the learner identity as being essential to student achievement and have stressed that this is encouraged where schools, colleges and universities adopt integrated systems of transition (Briggs et al, 2012) and the importance of flexible transitions and support around key transition phases are among the CoWA recommendations.

Conclusion

The Scottish Government immediately accepted the targets proposed by CoWA, with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning stating that the 'Government is determined to make urgent progress on achieving our ambition of equal access.' (The Scottish Government, 2016). Although the implementation of targets for widening participation could be viewed as a removal of institutional freedom in respect of admissions decisions, the CoWA final report argues that 'access is an issue of fairness and it is our firm belief that Scotland has a moral, social and economic duty to tackle this inequality.' (2016: 3) The Advanced Highers transition programme demonstrates the positive impact that such activities have made in respect of supporting equality of access for pupils from the most deprived areas and when coupled with the targets set by CoWA, place the Scottish higher education system in a strong position to achieve the Government's ambition of equal access by 2030.

References

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