

ESRC Fellowship Project: Higher Education, the Devolution Settlement and the Referendum on Independence



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Widening Access to Higher Education: Scotland in UK Comparative Context

Date: Tuesday 8th October 2013

Time: 9:30am – 16:30pm

Venue: [Godfrey Thomson Hall, Thomson's Land,](#)
[The Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh](#)

Think Tank 2: Pre-Event Briefing

by

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Introduction

One of the fundamental principles underpinning the Scottish education system is the meritocratic idea that, irrespective of social background, all children should have an equal opportunity to develop their academic potential. Scottish Government representatives are emphatic that 'education in Scotland should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay'. However, official statistics show that the majority of young people who go to university in Scotland are from middle class backgrounds, and that, in the most selective older universities, about 80% of students are from professional and managerial backgrounds. This mirrors the situation in the rest of the UK and the developed world, although European countries differ with regard to their degree of success in widening access. Unless one subscribes to the view that academic ability is concentrated in the middle classes, major questions arise as to how a system based on meritocratic principles produces highly unequal outcomes. In line with the European Union's goal of severing the association between social background and higher education participation, and irrespective of the outcome of the referendum, Scotland needs to consider what can be done to erode these inequalities.

Our think tank on widening access to higher education, which is part of the ESRC-funded *Future of the UK and Scotland* programme, raises a series of questions with regard to the creation of inequality in higher education in Scotland, the rest of the UK and other jurisdictions. In this briefing, we first outline the policy developments which have characterised efforts to combat inequality in higher education, some of which are specific to Scotland and some of which are UK-wide. We also review the debates on which groups should be included in widening access initiatives in Scotland, the UK and Europe. Subsequently, we provide an overview of the social inequalities which are reflected in the outcomes of the initial and higher education systems, placing Scotland in comparative perspective. Finally, we explore the potential impact of major policy divergences between the Scottish and English HE systems, including the wide-reaching effect on widening access of different student funding regimes north and south of the Border.



Common strands in UK higher education policy pre- and post-devolution

There are strong similarities between approaches to widening access to students from socially disadvantaged groups in Scotland and in other parts of the UK. The Dearing Report, *Higher education in the learning society* (1997), and the associated Scottish committee, chaired by Sir Ron Garrick, envisaged that higher education would continue to expand throughout the early decades of the twenty first century in response to student and economic demand. Following the Dearing and Garrick reviews, the Funding Councils in both Scotland and England committed themselves to redressing imbalances in admissions from different socio-economic groups using a range of mechanisms such as outreach activities and enhanced student support. In Scotland, structures for promoting widening participation have involved collaboration between colleges and universities. Regional Articulation Hubs, where universities and colleges work together to enable college students to transfer into higher education, have played an important role in widening access efforts.

Even after devolution, Scotland's universities have shared in many UK initiatives. For example, the *Admissions to Higher Education Review* (the Schwartz report), published in 2004, recommended the setting up of a central source of expertise and advice on admissions. The report led to the development of contextualised admissions policies, based on the recognition that school achievement may not be an entirely accurate predictor of achievement at university, since students at below average achieving schools may well do better at university than students with similar grades from higher achieving schools (Lasselle et al., 2013). Contextualised admissions policies stipulate that students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds may be admitted with grades at the lower range of minimum course requirements, whilst those from more socially advantaged backgrounds may be required to attain higher than the minimum admissions score in order to secure a place on a particular course. Even though the idea of a contextualised admissions policy is endorsed by universities in Scotland, we do not yet know how the policy is being implemented and its outcomes.

In addition to common strands in approaches to widening access in different parts of the UK, there have also been significant divergences associated with approaches to student funding as well as student support. Some of these points of divergence are considered below.

Policy divergence on funding and widening access post-devolution

The large role of the college sector in the provision of higher education is a distinctive feature of the Scottish system, and the emphasis on articulation in Scottish policy is a continuing aspect of policy difference. The Garrick Report emphasised the importance of the college route into higher education in Scotland, recommending that FE and HE '*institutions should collaborate to enhance and publicise access and articulation routes into degree programmes for students at further education colleges*'. Efforts to develop a college route to higher education in the rest of the UK have met with only partial success.

Following devolution in 1999, there has been growing divergence between England and Scotland in higher education policy, particularly in the area of student funding, with knock-on consequences for widening access. In this section we provide a brief chronological overview of key developments north and south of the Border, identifying cross-border policy interchange in both directions. Shortly after coming to power in 1997, the Labour Government at Westminster introduced 'up front' tuition fees for students across the UK – initially £1,000 with reductions or exemptions for poorer students. After the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, there was considerable pressure to abolish student fees and an inquiry, led by Sir Andrew Cubie, was set up to examine the issue. Following the publication of the Cubie inquiry, the Scottish Government decided that graduates should repay £2,000 when their income reached £10,000. Alternatively, they could add this sum to their student loan, to be paid off over time through the tax system. The graduate endowment was presented as a redistributive policy, since one of its central aims was to fund bursaries for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, thus contributing to widening access.

The graduate endowment turned out to be only a temporary fix, with growing diversity emerging north and south of the border. In 2003 the UK Government introduced legislation (enacted in 2006) enabling universities to charge up to £3,000 per annum (later increased to £3,375). As in Scotland, students could defer payment until after graduation and repayment only started after the student's income reached £15,000. At Holyrood, by way of contrast, in 2007 the incoming SNP minority administration announced its intention to abolish the graduate endowment, characterising it as an unfair tax which was opposed to the Scottish principle of free education. The graduate endowment was duly abolished in 2008.

Different approaches to student fees led to a different emphasis on widening access in England and Scotland. In 2004, the planned introduction of higher levels of fees in England by a Labour administration provoked anxiety about deterring bright students from poorer backgrounds from attending university, leading to a greater focus on widening access. As a result, in 2004, the Office for Fair Access (Offa) was established, and universities wishing to charge variable fees were obliged to submit a widening access agreement for approval. Through the Aim Higher programme (now defunct and replaced by the National Scholarship programme), considerable government funding was channelled into widening access initiatives. Because student fees were not being charged in Scotland, widening access initiatives had lower priority and were less well-funded. For example, in 2010-11, England devoted more than three times the amount of funding per head of population to widening access initiatives (£371.5 million in England compared with £10.4 million in Scotland).

The next major gear change in the funding of English higher education took place in October 2010 and had repercussions for the rest of the UK. Following the publication of the Browne report, the coalition government at Westminster decided to lift the fee cap to £9,000 per annum. Students were able to take out a loan to cover the cost of fees, and repayment was deferred until after graduation when repayment started at an income of £21,000. Whilst the Browne Report discussed the importance of widening access, it was envisaged that the provision of grants and bursaries would be used to encourage participation by young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and that this financial assistance would outweigh the deterring effects of higher fees. Research by Sandra McNally, Gill Wyness and Martin McGuigan suggested that the increase in fees in England in 2010, particularly as reported in the media, increased the perception that university might be 'too expensive', and young people from less socially advantaged backgrounds were more likely to be put off from applying as a result (McNally, 2012). However, analysis of UCAS data by the Independent Commission on Student Fees suggests that there has been a slight increase in the proportion of applications from students from poorer backgrounds, accompanied by a decline in applications from mature students in England. Interestingly, in Scotland, where there are no undergraduate fees, and in Wales, where the impact of fees is offset by the Welsh Government, there has been no decline in applications by mature students.

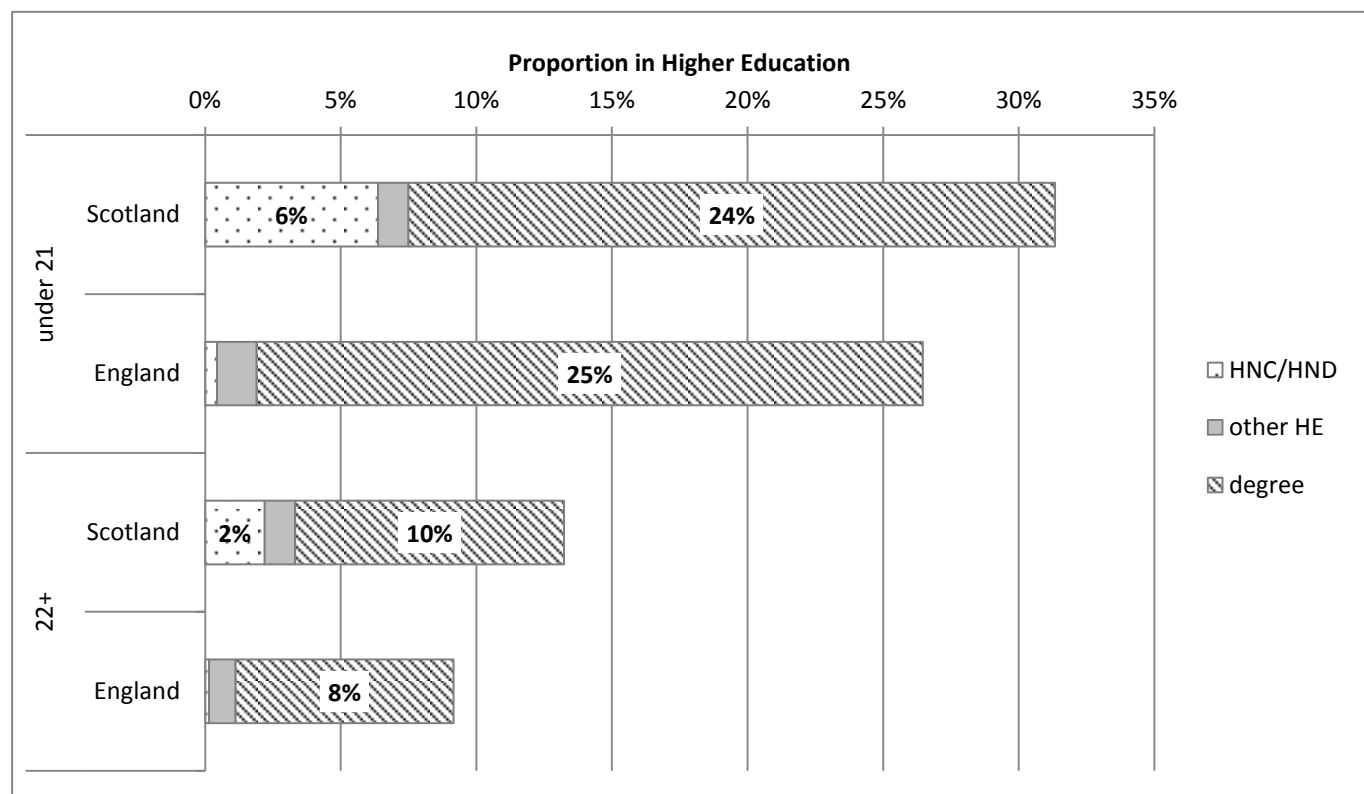
Recently, there has been a growing emphasis in Scottish higher education policy on widening access. Since 2011, Scottish universities have been obliged to submit their plans on widening access to the Scottish Funding Council as part of their outcome agreements. The Scottish Government has emphasised the role of the 2013 Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act in terms of widening access. The Act allows the SFC to impose financial penalties on institutions deemed to have achieved insufficient progress in relation to widening access, and makes provision for extra university places for widening access initiatives and articulation.

The Scottish Government has also introduced what it describes as 'the best and simplest support package in the UK'. From August 2013, in addition to free tuition, Scottish students with a family income of less than £17,000 per year will receive an annual income of £7,250 through a combination of bursaries and loans. However, as Lucy Hunter (2013) has pointed out, the amount of funding available to poorer students in grant aid has diminished, and there is very little difference in the overall funding package available to students from more and less socially advantaged backgrounds. In addition, funding packages available to students from poorer backgrounds are considerably more generous elsewhere in the UK. Scotland has adopted a universalist approach to HE funding, treating all students (virtually) the same irrespective of family background, but this has not been redistributive in its effect. In the following section, we briefly review evidence on higher education participation in England and Scotland, and differences in the social profile of the university population in the two countries.

Higher education participation and the social profile of students in different institutions

As shown by Figure 1, Scotland has a higher proportion of 18-30 year olds in HE compared with England, but the proportion on degree programmes in university is very similar. Compared with England, a higher proportion of HE students in Scotland are undertaking sub-degree programmes in colleges, such as HNCs and HNDs. Some of these students subsequently obtain a university degree.

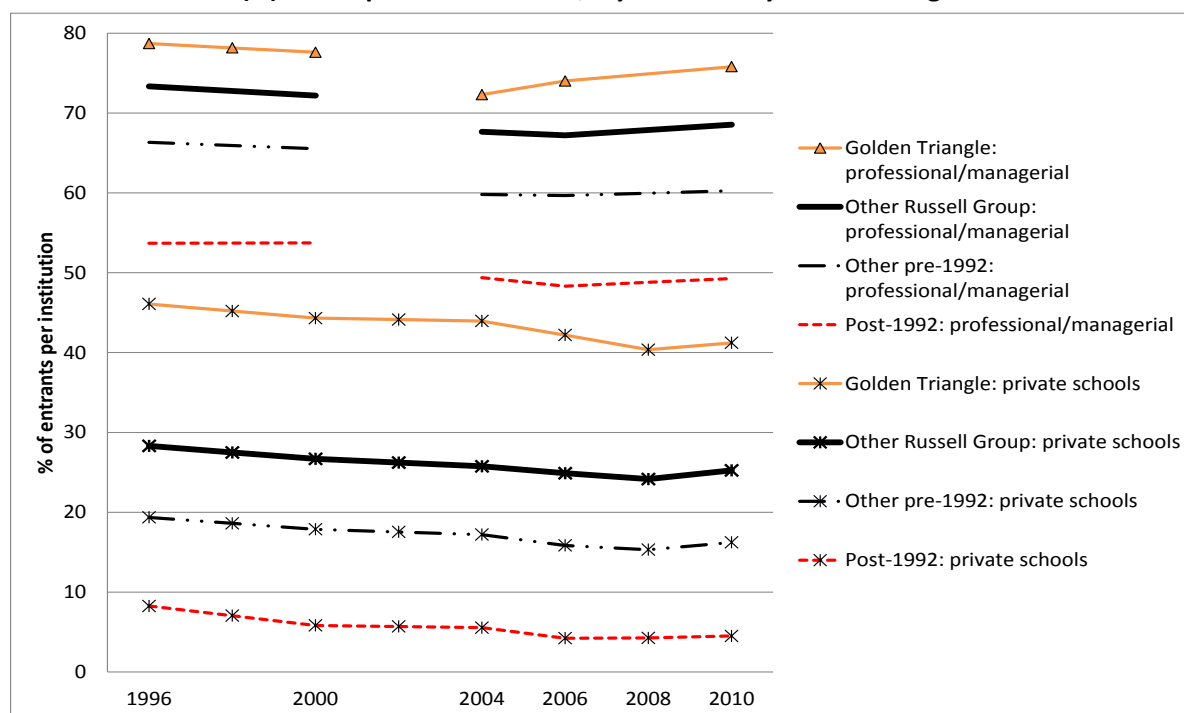
Figure 1: Higher education participation in England and Scotland



Source: Wyness (2013)

Figures 2 and 3 below show the social class profiles of different types of institution in Scotland and England. Private school pupils make up about 8% of the total pupil population in England and a slightly lower proportion in Scotland. Pupils from the private school sector are massively over-represented in pre-92 institutions in both countries. Most starkly, private school pupils make up more than 40% of the student body in the 'Golden Triangle' universities (Oxford, Cambridge and the two founding members of the Russell Group in London). They also make up more than 20% of the student body in the ancient universities in Scotland (Edinburgh, Aberdeen, St Andrews and Glasgow), with Glasgow having the least socially skewed intake. As shown by figures 2 and 3, students from professional and managerial backgrounds are much more likely to study in pre-92 than post-92 institutions and the profile of different institutional groups has changed little over time.

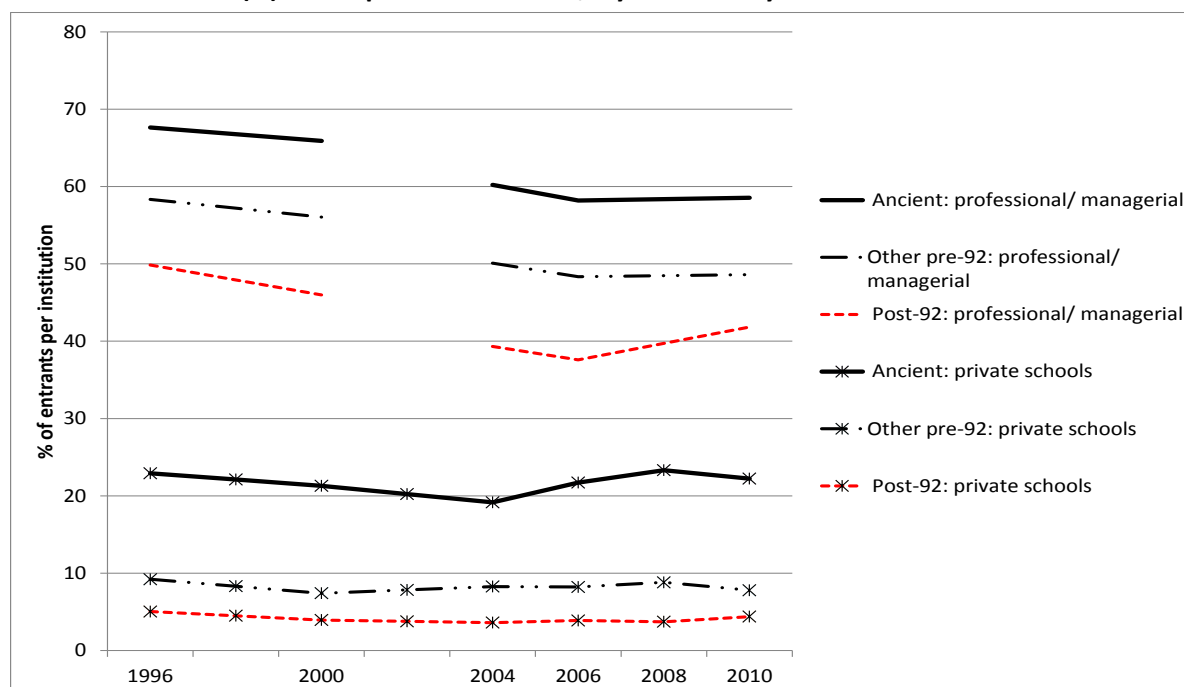
Figure 2: Average percentage of under-21 entrants (i) from professional and managerial class, and (ii) from private schools, by university sector: England



Source: Raffe and Croxford (2013)

Notes: Golden triangle institutions are Oxford, Cambridge and the two London founder members of the Russell Group. The gap in the time series between 2000-2004 is due to the introduction of a new methodology for measuring parental occupational background: Registrar General's classification was used in 1996-2000; National Statistics socio-economic classification in 2004-2010

Figure 3: Average percentage of under-21 entrants (i) from professional and managerial class, and (ii) from private schools, by university sector: Scotland



Source: Raffe and Croxford (2013)

Notes: see notes for figure 2

Figures 2 and 3 are based on UCAS data which does not include college students. Table 1 below shows the social profile of students in Scottish universities and on HE courses in college by deprivation quintile. These data reinforce the point that students from more socially advantaged backgrounds are over-represented in the most selective universities. Post-92 universities and colleges are more likely to include students from socially deprived areas and there has been little change in institutional profiles over time. The abolition of the graduate endowment in Scotland

in 2008 has not led to increased representation of students from more socially deprived backgrounds in universities. It is still too early to be sure of the impact of much higher deferred fees in England, but early analysis from the Independent Commission on Student Fees suggests that there has not been a drop in applications from students from more socially disadvantaged backgrounds (although such students were poorly represented in the first place). Analyses of the earlier fee increase in 2006 similarly suggested that this did not increase social inequalities in participation.

Table 1: Participation HE sectors in Scotland by deprivation quintiles (Percentages)

Deprivation quintile	Ancients		1960s		Post '92s		Colleges	
	2000-01	2010-11	2000-01	2010-11	2000-01	2010-11	2000-01	2010-11
1 (least)	38	38	30	30	28	26	19	17
2	23	25	23	24	21	22	21	18
3	17	17	20	19	18	19	21	20
4	12	12	15	15	17	18	20	22
5 (most)	8	7	11	11	15	16	18	23

Source: Raab & Small (2003) & SFC (2012)

Having explored patterns of HE participation by students from different social groups and institutional profiles over time, we now briefly review the evidence on the efficacy of widening participation initiatives and debates on how institutions should measure their progress on widening access over time.

Widening access: current issues and future prospects

What works in widening access?

Despite the considerable effort devoted to widening access activities over the past decade, there is a lack of evidence in relation to the type of actions which are likely to have the strongest impact. Gorard and Smith (2006) note that many initiatives have been small-scale and evaluations have drawn heavily on participants' and providers' accounts. In many studies, there are no comparator groups. Gorard and Smith argue for the use of more robust quantitative methods to build up a stronger evidence base of 'what works'.

Among young people, social inequalities in rates of entry to higher education overwhelmingly reflect inequalities in the achievement of the qualifications that give access to higher education. Many outreach projects are based on the assumption that the problem lies in the aspirations and attitudes of potential students. Kintrea *et al.* (2011) have suggested that these assumptions may be over-simplistic, and there needs to be a better understanding of the social structuring of choice and the difficulties in overcoming entrenched social and economic disadvantage. Drawing on interviews with 490 school pupils aged around 13 in disadvantaged areas in Glasgow, Nottingham and London, the researchers explored factors affecting aspirations. Although they noted that successive governments had made use of the concept of aspirations in their policies, Kintrea *et al.* argue for a different approach, taking into account their findings that:

- *aspirations are high, but uneven*
- *place matters*
- *higher aspirations are not enough*
- *aspirations are complex and require informed support*
- *individual aspirations are influenced by multiple mutually reinforcing factors*
- *parents are important.*

(2011, p. 67-70)

Overall, there has been an emphasis on out-reach activities in schools in socially disadvantaged areas. The Scottish Funding Council's Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) works across four regions, targeting schools with low rates of progression to HE. It has had a positive impact on entry to higher education among pupils in the targeted schools, although this is not yet reflected in aggregate national data.

Outreach programmes are also conducted by individual institutions. For example, Glasgow Caledonian University's Caledonian Club uses student mentors to engage with children and young people in nurseries and primary and

secondary schools to raise aspirations and build skills. There is also a need for targeted support for students from under-represented groups once they get into university. Research from the University of Glasgow's Top-Up access programme has shown that Top-Up participants achieved higher grades and were more likely to enter a second year of study than their counterparts from less deprived areas.

In addition, students from less advantaged backgrounds may lack the social capital needed to help them access professional occupations, so additional measures are needed to provide these links. The Reach Scotland project is run by the universities of Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Glasgow and St Andrews and works with secondary school pupils with the aim of increasing access to the more highly selective professional areas. While the initiatives outlined above are focused on widening participation among young people, the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) assists adults wishing to return to study by providing support for those who lack the required entry qualifications for university.

What metrics should be used?

As noted earlier, the Scottish Government wants to increase university accountability in relation to widening access, with the new possibility of sticks as well as carrots. However, major questions remain with regard to the metrics which should be used to measure progress towards widening participation goals over time. The SFC favours the use of an indicator based on area social deprivation (SIMD40), but institutions point out that area deprivation is concentrated in urban areas in the west of the country, and does not capture the existence of poverty in more rural areas. Furthermore, SIMD measures the characteristics of areas, not individuals, thus potentially providing a misleading picture. Universities favour the use of a 'basket of indicators' which would be selected by each institution to reflect its individual context. Whilst this approach has some advantages, it does not facilitate cross-institutional comparisons.

Conclusion

Finally, free higher education has become emblematic of Scotland's desire to provide high quality universal services which every citizen has the right to expect. However, it is evident that Scotland, like other parts of the UK, has a major problem with unequal participation of different social groups, particularly in the older more selective institutions. This inequality is a major driver of wider, and growing, economic inequality, which over time may threaten social cohesion and stability. There is a general consensus in Scotland that much more needs to be done to tackle inequalities in higher education, but less certainty about which measures are likely to be most effective. The policy of free undergraduate university education is one of the major points of divergence between England and Scotland to have emerged post-devolution. However, there are clearly questions about whether it will encourage a greater proportion of students from poorer backgrounds to enter higher education, or simply concentrate resources on those who are already relatively advantaged. This is a particularly important issue during times of economic retrenchment, since greater expenditure on universities is likely to mean fewer resources for other parts of the education system, including schools and colleges.

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