

## Participation in full-time higher education 1996-2010: a 'home international' perspective

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*In 1998-99 responsibility for Higher Education (HE) was devolved to new elected bodies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. There has been some policy divergence, especially in respect of student fees, but the devolved administrations share many policy goals, notably to widen participation. This Briefing reports on a study, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which analysed data on HE applications. It compares patterns of participation in the four home countries, especially in relation to social class and ethnicity, and reports trends in cross-border student flows.*

- HE expanded in all four home countries but the social-class composition of students changed little, while the proportion from visible ethnic minorities increased.
- Comparisons of the four countries suggest that the introduction and increase in fees – at least to the levels charged before 2012 – did not reduce working-class access to HE.
- Applicants from professional & managerial classes were more likely to gain a place than others with the same level of prior qualifications, especially in older universities.
- The 'unfairness' of admissions in relation to social class was similar across all home countries, but ethnic minorities were more disadvantaged relative to their white peers in Scotland than in the other home countries.
- English applicants from independent schools had higher success rates in applying to pre-1992 universities than comparable students from state schools.
- A declining proportion of UK students studied at an institution in another home country, but the proportion doing so continued to vary widely across the four countries. These students tended to be socially advantaged and better-qualified.
- Ethnic minority students domiciled in Scotland – and to a lesser extent in Northern Ireland and Wales – were more likely to study outside the home country than their white peers; those domiciled in England were less likely to do so.

## Devolution and policy divergence

In 1998-99 the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales were established, with devolved responsibility for HE. This has resulted in a degree of policy divergence, notably in relation to student fees and support. In 1998 an up-front annual fee of £1,000 was introduced across the UK, but in Scotland this was replaced in 2000 by a smaller 'graduate endowment', paid after graduation, which was subsequently abolished in 2007. In England and Northern Ireland fees were increased to £3,000 in 2006, but to be repaid after graduation, and accompanied by 'fair access' measures. In Wales this increase was delayed for a year and then offset by a student grant up to 2010.

However the history of fees and student support illustrates the continued interdependence of the four UK systems; the policy options for the devolved administrations, especially Wales and Northern Ireland, have been shaped by decisions taken for England. Divergence in most other policy areas has been limited, or at least constrained. All four administrations share many policy objectives, including the desire to widen participation.

In this *Briefing* we describe changing patterns of participation across the four home countries over this period of parliamentary devolution. We focus especially on participation in relation to social class and ethnic background. We use data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) on applicants to full-time undergraduate programmes in HE institutions in 1996, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010.

## Trends in participation

This period was one of expansion in UK HE. The number of entrants rose by 56% in England, 37% in Wales, 50% in Northern Ireland and 33% in Scotland (based on student domicile).

Our analysis shows that while students from all social classes benefited from this expansion, the share of HE places filled by each social class changed very little, although changes in the measurement of social class prevent us from reporting precise trends.

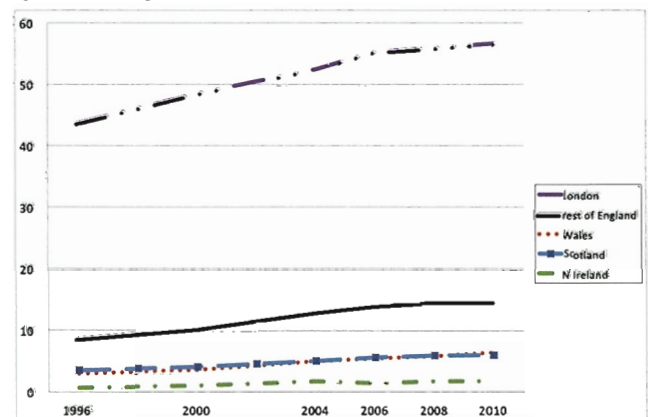
More Welsh and (especially) Northern Irish students were from working- and intermediate-

class backgrounds than English or Scottish students, probably reflecting (at least in part) the composition of the populations from which they came. These differences remained broadly stable over the period. The divergent policies for student fees did not result, as might have been expected, in a greater widening of access in Scotland. Nor did the changing fee differentials between Wales and England increase social-class inequalities within Wales, as some commentators had feared.

Further Education colleges are not included in our data. Colleges account for very few full-time HE students in England and Wales but for a significant minority in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where they recruit more students from less advantaged social backgrounds than HE institutions. Taking account of colleges might affect our comparison of levels of access by less advantaged students, but it is less likely to affect the comparison of trends.

In all home countries a rising proportion of entrants to HE described themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority other than 'white'. However, their proportions varied widely across the UK (Figure 1): in 2010 ethnic minorities accounted for 23% of entrants in England compared with 6-7% in Scotland and Wales and 2% in Northern Ireland. The proportion in London was even higher (57%).

*Figure 1: Ethnic minorities as percent of entrants to HE, by location of domicile and cohort*



## From application to entry: are admissions 'fair'?

The UCAS data cover only people who applied to HE, not the larger population of potential applicants. We therefore cannot directly observe whether any social or ethnic group is over- or



under-represented in HE. We can, however, compare applicants with entrants.

Around three-quarters of all applicants were accepted for an HE place, although this varied across cohorts and between the home countries.

The trends in the social and ethnic composition of entrants, summarised above, broadly reflected trends in the composition of applicants. However, within each cohort and country, applicants from professional and managerial-class backgrounds had higher 'success rates' than those from intermediate and working-class backgrounds, and (except in Northern Ireland) white applicants had higher success rates than ethnic minorities.

We explored these inequalities at three stages of the application process: (1) receiving an offer (conditional or unconditional), (2) gaining a place through UCAS' main scheme, and (3) gaining a place by any route, including the clearing scheme. We examined whether inequalities by social class and ethnicity were evident by comparing success rates between applicants with comparable qualifications, school type, gender and other personal characteristics. We found that working-class applicants were less likely to receive an offer than comparable peers, but all classes had the same chance of gaining a place through UCAS' main scheme, except for the 'unclassified' group who had lower success rates. However, applicants from professional and managerial backgrounds had a higher chance of securing a place by any route.

Among applicants to older (pre-1992) universities, there were class differences at all three stages of the process, that is, in the chances of receiving an offer, of gaining a place through UCAS' main scheme and of gaining any place. None of the social-class 'effects' on the outcomes of applications differed significantly across the four home countries.

Ethnic-minority applicants from England and Wales were less likely to receive an offer, or to gain a place through UCAS main scheme, than comparable white applicants. However, they used the clearing process to reverse this disadvantage: they were more likely to gain a place by any route, but still less likely to gain a place in an older university. Ethnic-minority applicants from Scotland were as likely as comparable white applicants to receive offers, but

were less likely to convert these into places, especially in older universities.

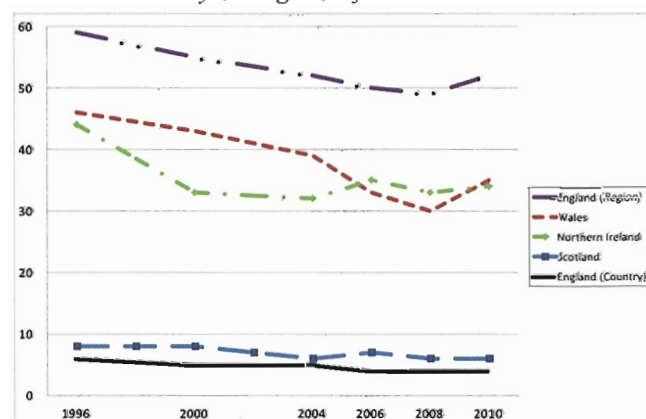
Applicants from independent schools were more likely than comparable peers to apply to, and enter, pre-1992 universities. However, their apparent reluctance to apply to institutions with less demanding requirements meant that, overall, they were less likely than their peers to receive an offer or enter any HE Institution.

## Cross-border applications and entries

Between 1996 and 2010 there was a decline in the proportion of applicants from each home country applying to, or entering, HE in the rest of the UK. This decline was partly linked to the emergence of differential fee and support regimes which encouraged Scottish and (in some years) Welsh applicants to remain within the home country. There was a parallel trend within England towards remaining within the region of domicile, but the home-country effect was stronger than the home-region effect.

The proportions applying to, or entering, institutions elsewhere in the UK continued to vary across the four systems (Figure 2). Even in 2010 around a third of new students from Wales and Northern Ireland studied outside their home country, compared with one in twenty entrants from Scotland and England. The outflow of students from Wales was matched by an even larger inflow from the rest of the UK, but Northern Ireland attracted relatively few students from mainland Great Britain.

*Figure 2: Percent of entrants going to an HE institution in another country (or region) by domicile*



Most cross-border moves were either by English-domiciled students or to English institutions.

The main exception, the flow of students from Northern Ireland to Scotland, saw the greatest decline over the period. The proportions of applications and entries of Northern Irish students to Scottish universities declined over the period, while those to English universities remained steady. By 2010 Northern Irish students were three times as likely to enter an English institution as a Scottish one.

Those who applied to and entered institutions in another home country were more likely to be well-qualified, middle-class students seeking places at Russell Group universities. But there were many exceptions. Many less-qualified students left Northern Ireland to study, often because entry requirements at home were too high, and post-1992 universities in England attracted significant numbers of entrants from Wales and Northern Ireland.

Ethnic-minority students domiciled in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales were more likely than their white peers to go to England to study; however, ethnic-minority students domiciled in England were even more likely than their white peers to remain in England. There was a parallel regional trend within England, where ethnic-minority students tended to concentrate in institutions in Yorkshire and Humberside, the West Midlands and (especially) London.

## Summary

This study shows the persistence of social inequalities in participation in HE. Patterns and trends in social inequalities in entry to HE were very similar between the home countries.

Parliamentary devolution has provided scope for policy divergence, but the effects have been limited; country differences in tuition fees have not altered social inequalities, but there has been a slight decline in cross-border flows of students.

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## About this study

*This Briefing is a product of the research project on Changing Transitions to a Differentiated Higher Education System, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. It uses data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). UCAS cannot accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the data by third parties. The views expressed in this Briefing are those of the authors and not of the Nuffield Foundation or UCAS.*



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