COMPARING EDUCATIONAL 'PERFORMANCE'

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SYNOPSIS

The paper draws on a wider study which is part of the ESRC's Learning Society research programme. The study compares performance in initial and continuing education in Scotland and England. Here we report on the part of the analysis which deals with performance in initial education. Key findings include the large numbers of unqualified adults as the legacy of a previously highly polarised system; and the fact that it was girls' greater schooling achievements which mainly account for Scotland's earlier lead in initial education performance. We conclude that the differences between England and Scotland are reducing; and raise some questions about the foundation laid by the Scottish initial education system for a learning society.

BACKGROUND AND SCOPE

This study was part of the ESRC Learning Society Research Programme and was a joint project with colleagues at the University of Ulster. We explored why there appear to be, in our respective countries, a high performance in initial education but low participation in adult education and training, and lower reported aspirations to participate in adult learning (Sargant, 1997, Field and Schuller 1996). The divergence between 'performance' in initial and continuing education is in both cases relative to the performance of England (and, because of England's size, to the rest of the UK).

The starting definition of 'performance' was in the very general terms underlying the publicly accepted notion of the superiority of Scottish education: higher achievement of qualifications by young Scots; stronger progression from school to higher education; and a more highly qualified workforce. But of course comparison is not simple, in part because the Scottish education system is significantly different from the English in a number of respects, but also because the statistics covering the two systems also differ somewhat in their detail, and have changed over time in different ways (for a discussion of 'comparative' studies within the UK, see Raffe, Brannen, Croxford and Martin, 1999 and Schuller and Burns 1999). A further endemic problem is precisely the difficulty of separating out initial from continuing education within the statistical picture. Given these problems one principal component of the study has been to examine the statistical evidence in greater depth, with two aims in mind:

- to supply a more detailed picture on the basis of which we might come to some judgement on whether a divergence exists, and
- by conducting such a review to sharpen up our understanding of how the issues involved can best be explored, statistically and otherwise.

This paper sets out to contribute to this by drawing together comparative statistics on school participation and qualifications and progression into further and higher education (see Schuller and Bamford, 1998 for a full account of the project). Our primary conclusion is that whilst there are still marked differences between Scotland and England in both initial and continuing education, these are of limited significance, and variation within Scotland is often greater than variation between Scotland and England. We look initially at statistics on school and early post-school education and maps these over time and this is followed by a consideration of educational

destinations post school, and, in particular, progression onto higher and further education courses. Finally we offer a brief conclusion.

SCHOOLS: LEAVING AND STAYING ON

Staying on or leaving: 15 and 16 plus

The figures in this section show how participation and achievement in school and post-school education have increased over the last 30 or 40 years. We have gone back in time because we wanted to try and map school and post school participation for older adults as well as younger ones. Someone approaching 60 probably left school at 15 with no qualifications, as 80% of children in the early 1950s did. For their grandchildren today, two-thirds or more continue in education beyond 16, and very few (less than 4% in Scotland) leave school with no graded results. These changes have knock-on effects: the length of a child's parents' education has been an important determinant of whether or not he or she stays on at school. (See Burnhill, Garner and McPherson, 1988 for a discussion of the historical relationship between the qualifications of parents and children.)

The trend for young people to leave school when they reached the school leaving age of 15 gradually shifted from being something that most children did, to something which was pretty evenly divided. In 1954, only one fifth of school pupils in Scotland stayed on at school. By 1957 this had risen to a quarter, by 1962 to over a third, and, ten years later, to a half. There was a very similar trend in England and Wales too. But more 15 year olds stayed on in these countries - around 8% more throughout this time. (Central Statistical Office (b), 1965-1969; C.S.O. (a), 1977, Table 5.33).[1]

The relative numbers staying on at school changed with the raising of the school leaving age. In 1974, Scotland was suddenly ahead: 34.9% of 16 year olds stayed on at school in Scotland, compared with only 23.4% in England. Even taking the higher percentage of 16 year olds in non-advanced further education in England into account does not alter this: by 1974, Scotland had overtaken England in the proportion of 16 year olds in education (see table 1).

Table 1: Staying on at school or enrolling in non-advanced full time or sandwich courses of further education: 16 year olds

	1974/5			**1976/7**		
	School	**f.e.**	**Total**	**School**	**f.e.**	**Total**
Scotland: 16 year olds	34.9	4.7	39.6	37.9	6.1	44.0
England: 16 year olds	23.4	9.3 *(% for 16 and 17 year olds)*	32.7	25.6	9.1	34.7

Source: C.S.O. (a), 1980, Table 5.6

The reasons for more 16 year olds staying on in school in Scotland go beyond the legal raising of the school leaving age. It coincided with several other developments: the introduction of comprehensive education; the unification of the teaching profession; and, external to the education system, the collapse of the youth labour market. It is impossible to disentangle the effects of these several developments, but it can be safely assumed that it was the combination of them which made the impact of raising the school leaving age greater in Scotland.

Scotland held its lead in the percentage of 16 year olds staying on in education

into the 1980s. In 1985, 42% of young people in Scotland continued at school in full-time education at 16-plus, compared with 28% in England and Wales (Raffe and Courtenay, 1988). Meanwhile, a significant change was happening elsewhere. Outwith Scotland, non-advanced further education was expanding, and it was attracting increasing numbers of 16 year olds. In 1979/80, England, Wales and Northern Ireland all had 15% of 16 year olds in non-advanced further education, whilst Scotland still had 6% (C.S.O. (b), 1983, Table 6.3). Or put differently, in the 1970s at least 50% more 16 year olds went on to non-advanced further education in England at 16 than did in Scotland, and two or three times as many at 17. By 1985, a third of young people over 16 who were still in education were in FE colleges in England and Wales, compared with just one in ten Scotland. (See Raffe and Courtenay, 1988; it is also worth noting that whilst sixth form colleges in England offered A levels, very few further education colleges in Scotland offered Highers.)

Government figures suggest that over the last ten years, the growth in the percentage of 16 year olds in education in Scotland has remained static whilst participation in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has increased dramatically.

Table 2: 16 year olds in school or further education, 1985/6 and 1993/4. Participation rate measured as a percentage of the 16 year-old population in Full-time and Part-time study

	1985/6	**1993/4**
UK	67	80
England	65	79
Wales	65	81
Scotland	87	87
Northern Ireland	60	79

Source: O.N.S. (a), 1996, Table 4.9

Latest figures from Regional Trends, 1998 are similar to those above. In Scotland, in 1995/6, 85.8% of 16 year olds were in full-time education and government sponsored training, compared with 40.4% in England. (See ONS (a) 1998, Table 4.5).

However figures comparing participation present a number of problems. The first concerns the counting of part-time participation in further education. In Scotland, to cite work by David Raffe of the Centre for Educational Sociology at Edinburgh University, Skillseekers uses more further education than youth training does in England. This suggests that Regional Trends figures include more young people in Scotland who have left school and are on a government scheme. They may contain other anomalies which could lead them to overestimate levels of participation and rates of growth, such as counting in 16 year olds waiting to reach the leaving date (made likely by different national practices in when a 16 year old is able to leave school). These anomalies have led Raffe, using data from the Youth Cohort Study in England and Wales and the Scottish School Leaver Survey, to conclude that if you allow for age, then participation in full-time post-compulsory education in Scotland is now lower in Scotland than in the rest of Britain. For young people entitled to leave school in 1990 at 16, England, Wales and Scotland had broadly similar percentages still in school or in full-time further education one year later. But two years after leaving school, Scotland had dropped behind. By age 17 plus, 44% of students in Scotland, compared with 52% in England were at school, further or higher education. By age 18 plus, the figures were 35% of students in Scotland, compared with 39% in England (Raffe, Biggart, Fairgrieve and Howieson, 1998 [2]).

To sum up, broadly speaking there are three phases in the trajectory of when young people in Scotland and England left school. Up to the mid-1970s, Scotland lagged well behind, with more leaving at the first opportunity. Raising the school leaving age brought a dramatic change, with more 16 year olds staying on in school in Scotland, and there has been a higher percentage of 16 year olds in school in Scotland ever since. More recently, the other countries of the UK have improved their rates of participation, in particular through the provision of non-advanced FE. Whilst Regional Trends suggests that Scotland has a continuing lead in the percentages of 16 year olds in school or further education, full and part-time, cohort surveys indicate that Scotland loses this lead for full-time participation beyond age 16.

Leaving without qualifications

In 1971/2, 55% of Scottish school leavers had no graded results - compared with 43% in England. (Percentages calculated from Scottish Office, 1973, Table 55 and C.S.O. (b), 1973, Table 26). England saw a dramatic improvement in the 1970s, so that by the early 1980s, at most 12% were leaving school with no graded results. Scotland meanwhile still had 30% of boys, and 26% of girls, leaving with no graded results in 1981/2. In 1986/7, before Standard Grade had an effect, the difference was still wide: almost twice as many Scottish school leavers had no graded results, compared with school leavers in England. (C.S.O. (b.) 1992, Table 5.7).

It took educational reform - the replacement of Scottish O grades with Standard Grades - to bring the percentage of Scottish school leavers with no graded results below 10%. (Standard Grades began to replace Ordinary grades in 1986, and, by 1992, had super-seeded them.) England, meanwhile, had achieved just 9.5% leaving with no graded results in 1983/4. (C.S.O. (b), 1986, Table 6.9). Today, Scotland has fewest young people leaving school with no graded results: Regional Trends 33 gives Scotland at 3.6%, compared with England at 7.8%, Wales at 10.8%, and Northern Ireland at 4.6%. The UK average is 7.4%. (O.N.S.(a), 1998, Table 4.6. Figures are for 1995/6).[3]

It is possible, then, to identify three phases in the historical picture of unqualified young people:

a. Up to the-mid 1970s when more young people in Scotland left school at the first opportunity, with no qualifications. England was slightly ahead, with fewer leaving and fewer having no qualifications.

b. A period when the percentages leaving with no qualifications fell to less than 10%. England achieved this by 1984 - and Scotland not until the early 1990s.

c. Very recent years, when Scotland has managed to keep improving the numbers who leave school with an SCE or equivalent qualification, whilst England has not.

These changes in the percentages leaving school with no qualifications are dramatic ones. Seven out of ten Scottish school leavers had no qualifications in 1965/6; three decades later it was less than one in 25. One important implication of this is that there are still very many adults in Scotland - more than in England - who will have left school with no qualifications. Yet they do not show up in the figures for qualifications in the workforce, suggesting that gaining no qualifications at school is a continuing cause of social exclusion. The poor performance of the school system in this respect one, two and three decades ago will continue to leave its legacy for another 30 years.

School qualifications

Over time, the picture is one of rising achievement throughout the UK. But there are differences in how sharply levels of attainment improved, and in the relative proportions of those achieving most, and those achieving least (see tables 3a, 3b and 3c). In 1965/6 in Scotland, 12% of school leavers achieved 3 or more Highers; by 1973/4 this had risen to 19%; and by 1993/4 to around 30%. (C.S.O. (c), 1974, Table 118; C.S.O. (b) 1975, Table 64; C.S.O.(b), 1996, Table 4.7). The proportions getting even higher levels also rose, and the proportions getting only very low ones at Standard Grade or equivalent dropped. How does this transformation compare with what is going on elsewhere?

It appears that Scotland was already ahead of England at the higher end of school leavers achieving 3 or more Highers in 1963/4, when Social Trends started publishing figures. In the remainder of the 1960s, the gap increased from around 1% in 1963/4 to 3% in 1968/9. In the 1970s, it slowly widened - 5% in 1970/1; 6% in 1971/2; and 7% in 1973/4. (C.S.O. (c), 1974, Table 118; C.S.O. (b), 1975, Tables 63 and 64). The next decade saw the gap widen further, with England reaching 14% to Scotland's 23%; but as with staying on rates, the next decade saw a dramatic closing of the gap. Today, Scotland has lost its lead in the percentage leaving school with 3 or more Highers/2 or more A levels - the minimum grades necessary for university entry.

Table 3a: School leavers' examination achievements 1973/4

	2 or more A levels	**At least 5 O levels and/ or 1 A level**	**No GCE or CSE passes at grade 5 or better**
England	12.20	23.52	20.40
Wales	11.74	24.54	31.60
Northern Ireland	15.90	29.00	42.40
	3 or more H grades	**5 or more SCE O grades and/or 1 H grade**	**No O grades Band A–E**
Scotland	19.30	35.0	33.4

Source: C.S.O. (b), 1975, Tables 63 and 64.

Table 3b: School leavers' examination achievements 1983/4

	2 or more 'A' levels	**5 or more higher grade O levels and C.S.E.'s only**	**No graded results**
England	14.0	10.7	9.5
Wales	12.5	10.7	17.7
Northern Ireland	18.5	8.7	22.4
	3 or more H grades	**5 or more SCE O grades only**	**No graded results**
Scotland	21.3	7.5	26.1

Source: C.S.O. (b), 1986, Tables 6.9 and 6.10

Table 3c: Examination achievements 1995/6
Pupils in their last year of compulsory education percentages

	2 or more A levels/ 3 or more SCE Highers	5 or more GCSE/ SCE Standard Grades 1–3	No graded results
UK	29.7	45.5	7.4
England	29.6	44.5	7.8
Wales	27.0	41.6	10.8
Scotland	29.3	53.6	3.6
Northern Ireland	35.9	51.6	4.6

Source: O.N.S. (a), 1998, Table 46

The relationship between high and low or no achievement may be a key characteristic of the effect of education systems. To get some idea of the changing profile, we can start by setting the 1963/4 Scottish figure of 12.2% achieving at least 3 Highers against the 63% of 15 year olds who left school that year at the earliest opportunity - a 'ratio' of 0.19. Moving forward to 1973/4 we can juxtapose the 19.3% getting 3 or more Highers with the 33.4% who did not get any O grades - a ratio of 0.58. Forward another 10 years, and the respective figures are 22.5% and 26.1% - a ratio of 0.86. A little more than another decade later, and not only has cross-over occurred, but eight times as many (29.3%) have Highers as have no graded results (3.6%) - a ratio of 8.14. For England, the equivalent ratios are 0.6 for 1973/4; 1.47 for 1983/4; and 3.79 for 1995/6.

These figures, showing Scotland's past lead in the percentages with 3 plus Highers and its lead in the percentages leaving school with no graded results, lead us to conclude that in the 1960s, 1970s and indeed much of the 1980s, Scotland had a much more polarised pattern of achievement. More young people gained qualifications adequate for (or nearly so) university entrance, but at the same time more left school early and gained no, or almost no, qualifications. This polarised pattern of attainment was reduced because the increase in highly qualified school leavers was not as fast as the reduction in the proportions leaving with nothing. By 1995/6, differences between England and Scotland had shrunk. England had caught up in the higher levels of achievement and Scotland had made better headway in reducing the numbers leaving with no graded results. The pattern is one of convergence not divergence.

Gender differences

The examination attainments of girls and boys have also differed historically and by nation. Today, girls are outperforming boys in school examination achievements in all UK countries and at all levels (see table 4).

The difference between girls' and boys' performance has varied by country in the past. That girls are ahead of boys in performance in school examinations is a trend that goes back to the mid and late 1970s. In the 1960s, boys were in the lead in Scotland at the higher levels of achievement: more boys left school with 5 or more Highers, even though more girls left with 1 to 4. (S.O., 1973, Table 54). By the early 1980s, girls' and boys' performance at this level was pretty even, at 11%, and stayed at this until 1986/7. From then, girls started to pull ahead, and they increased their lead year on year. By 1993/4, 4% more girls left school with 5 or more Higher grades (Powney, 1996, Table 8). At the level of 3 or more Highers, girls moved into the lead a good

decade sooner, in the mid 1970s. Again, girls have increased this lead year on year, and, by 1996/7, it stood at 7 percentage points. (S.O., 1998, Chart 1).

Table 4: Examination achievements of pupils in schools: by region and gender 1995/6 percentages

	3 or more Highers or equivalent*		5 or more Standard Grades or equivalent		No graded results	
	males	*females*	*males*	*females*	*males*	*females*
England	19	21	40	49	9	7
Wales	18	23	37	47	12	9
Scotland	28	35	47	60	5	3
Northern Ireland	26	37	45	59	7	3

Source: O.N.S. (b), 1998, Table 3.16.

* Pupils aged 17 to 19 at the end of the school year in England, Wales and Northern Ireland as a percentage of the 18 year old population. For Scotland the figures relate to pupils in years S5/S6 gaining three or more SCE Higher grade passes as a percentage of the 17 year old population.

Aggregated figures for Britain suggest that girls did not overtake boys elsewhere until later. In 1974/5 for example, 12% of girls and 14% of boys left school with 2 or more A levels or their equivalent. Ten years later, boys still had a slight lead, and it was 1989/90 before girls started to pull ahead. (C.S.O. (a), 1987 and 1997, Table 54). A slightly different measure of school leavers with one or more Higher/A level show girls moving ahead sooner in Scotland than in England too. By the mid-1980s, girls were ahead in all the UK countries apart from England, where they only crept into the lead in the next few years. Girls in Scotland had the biggest lead. The Scottish Leavers Survey for 1995 revealed the effect of the difference in school attainment amongst 18-19 year olds. It found that 51% of women, compared with 41% of men, held Higher grades. (Taylor, 1996, p.13).

Gender differences in gaining no qualifications

In Scotland, more boys leave school with no SCE qualifications - and whilst the percentages have dropped dramatically, boys are still a little more likely to have no qualifications than girls are. For boys, this has dropped from 66% in 1967/8 to 56% in 1971/2, 37% in 1974/5 and 7% in 1996/7; for girls, it has dropped from 64% to 54%, 33% and 5%. In the 1980s and 1990s, fewer girls than boys left school with no qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland also, although the size of difference varied. In England, the gap was smaller, and it was greatest in Northern Ireland. (Percentages calculated from C.S.O. (b) 1989, (Table 9.8), and figures from S.O., 1998, (Chart 1).)

These gender differences in performance suggest that girls moved ahead in educational performance in Scotland well in advance of England. Boys have been slightly more likely to leave school with no qualifications. And perhaps, going further back in time, girls have achieved less at the highest levels.

Gender differences at Standard Grade

Throughout Great Britain, at GCSE and Standard Grade level, girls' performance has increased more rapidly than boys' and boys are performing less well than girls

in most subjects. In Scotland, girls are doing better than boys in English, modern foreign languages, and in creative subjects. Boys only do consistently better than girls in one subject: physical education. Girls' performance has been steadily improving over that of boys - girls take slightly more subjects, and attain a slightly better grade (Powney, 1996).

That there continue to be gender differences in occupations and indeed vocational training post school is borne out by the Scottish School Leavers Survey. Figures for 1995 for 18 to 19 year olds in full-time jobs or on training schemes show 'ten times as many men as women were working or being trained in the construction industry; 20% of men compared with 2% of women. Conversely, five times more women than men were working in the areas of health, education and social work; 17% of women compared with 3% of men, and twice as many women as men were working in other community, social and personal services; 10% of women compared with 5% of men' (Taylor, 1996, p.10).

National Targets

One way that the school and non-advanced further education achievements of young people can be measured and compared is through the Advisory Scottish Council for Education and Training (ASCETT) targets one and two. These allow comparisons between the different countries of the UK, and, indeed, between different areas of Scotland.

Figures for 1997 show that, in achieving target one (the proportion of 19-21 year olds with GSVQ Level II/5 Standard Grades (1-3) or equivalent) Scotland leads England by 6 percentage points. Scotland is also in the lead in target two (the proportion of 21 year olds with GSVQ Level III/3 Higher A-C or equivalent), although no UK country is likely to reach the year 2000 target of 70%. (ASCETT, 1998).

However these Scottish figures mask very large regional differences. Figures from the Scottish Office for 1996/7 (which are different from those produced by ASCETT because the Scottish Office only includes people achieving the levels through SCE and National Certificate modules) show wide variations in levels of attainment by education authority area. According to these figures, 65% of the 19 year old population has achieved target one, 49.1% through the academic route, and 15.9% through the vocational one. The highest scoring local authorities on the academic route are the Orkney Isles (at 70.9%), the Shetland Isles (at 67.6%), and East Renfrewshire (at 66.1%). The highest scorers on vocational route are the Eilean Siar (at 47.3%), Stirling (at 28.2%) and Orkney Islands (at 26.9%). Lowest scorers on the academic route are Glasgow City (37.7%), East Lothian (40.9%) and North Ayrshire (40.7%).

For target 2, success by region shows a similar pattern. Orkney, Shetland and the Eilean Siar are closest to the target, and Highland is level with Shetland. Orkney again has the highest academic score, and Eilean Siar the highest vocational one. Glasgow and Lanarkshire have the lowest academic score. The achievements of girls and boys has levelled, although girls achieve more by the academic route, and boys by the vocational. Figures from the Scottish Office show a very wide range, with 68.9% of girls in Clackmannanshire achieving the academic target in 1996/7 - and only 15.3% of boys in West Dumbartonshire. Vocational scores also vary widely: 0.2% of girls in East Lothian and 55% of girls in Eilean Siar achieving the target through the vocational route. Nor do high academic scores necessarily go with low vocational scores and vice-versa. Highland, Orkney, Shetland and Western Isles score well on both. Lanarkshire, Glasgow, West Dumbartonshire and West Lothian score badly on both.

Conclusions

We conclude that divergence between performance in school and early post-school education between Scotland and England has been largely eroded. Figures for 1998, for school performance, show that England has all but caught up with Scotland in the percentages gaining the minimum grades necessary for university entry. In those areas where Scotland has had a lead - greater numbers with 5 or more Standard Grades; percentages reaching targets 1 and 2 - progress in Scotland has been slow giving other countries the chance to catch up. But the routes which Scotland and other UK countries have taken to reach this point have diverged in ways which will continue to matter to Scotland's adults over decades to come.

As we have shown above, Scotland has had a more polarised pattern of achievement than England. In the 1960s, 1970s and indeed much of the 1980s, more young people gained qualifications adequate for (or nearly so) university entrance - and more also left school early and gained no or almost no qualifications. Girls have outperformed boys at school for longer in Scotland, overtaking boys in the numbers achieving 3 or more Highers in 1974, and they have increased their lead at this level year on year. (Girls did not overtake boys at this level elsewhere until 1989/90.) In recent times then, much (even if not all) of Scotland's better performance in initial education is down to girls doing better. But whilst girls may be doing better on average, subject choice remains 'gendered' so that the education which girls and boys receive, especially beyond Standard Grade, is not the same.

What is the significance of this for adults? Older men and women are both more likely than not to have left school with no qualifications, so that there will be more people of working age in Scotland with no school qualifications on which to build. If we include people who left school before the early 1970s (people in their mid 40s and older today), then the 'hardest core' of non-participants in continuing education - older, unqualified males - may be more significant in Scotland than elsewhere.

EDUCATIONAL DESTINATIONS POST SCHOOL

As soon as we leave schools behind we run into a problem about measuring the relationship between initial and continuing education in any overall sense. The distinction itself is not a difficult one, though it has fuzzy edges. Initial education refers to that period, however long it may be, of education as a preparatory phase, whilst continuing education refers to learning undertaken after a break. But the transition into further and higher education is becoming more blurred - or has a 'ragged edge' to use Peter Burnhill's phrase (Burnhill, 1984) - as young people leave school without effectively entering the labour market. These uncertainties are augmented by the growing trend towards mixing work and studying, because of the changes in financial assistance to students, changes in the patterns of full-time and part-time provision, student consumption patterns and family relationships (see Schuller, Raffe, Morgan-Klein and Clark, 1998).

Extracting a coherent profile from the figures is highly problematic. Bringing together statistics on participation in the different countries of the UK is also a difficult exercise because different departments have been responsible for the collection of statistics in each country. In the following section, we try to track where those who continue in full-time education in Scotland are based, and to evaluate how their participation compares with that of young people in the other countries of the UK.4

Higher Education

In the three decades from 1964/5 to 1994/5, the number of students enrolled in higher education in Scotland multiplied from 29,000 to 202,000, a 7-fold increase.

(S.O., 1971, Table 42 and 1996, Table 7E4). Participation has increased in all the countries of the UK, although not in quite the same ways. Historically, Scotland has been ahead. But the recent rate of growth - comparing figures for 1988 and 1992, and taking full-time and part-time students of all ages - has been slower in Scotland than the UK average for students on courses in higher education except for non-degree courses where Scotland is at the UK average. In the UK, there was a 53% increase in students on first degree courses, compared with a 42% increase in Scotland (and a 55% increase in England). And, in Scotland, there was a 33% increase in students on higher education courses overall, compared with a 42% increase in the UK (Parry 1997, Table 2).

Age and participation

The Age Participation Index for the UK gives some indication of how more recent figures for participation break down by age. This API (a different definition is used in Scottish statistics) is defined as the number of UK domiciled initial entrants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate higher education who are aged under 21, expressed as a percentage of the average number of 18 and 19 year olds in the population.

Table 5: % Age Participation Indices within the UK by country, 1989-1993

Year	**1989**	**1990**	**1991**	**1992**	**1993**
England	16	18	22	26	28
Wales	19	19	21	29	32
Scotland	23	24	28	32	35
G.B.	17	19	23	28	30
N.Ireland	24	26	28	32	33

Source: NCIHE, 1997, Report 6: Table 1. Figures from HESA, 1996.

The API for Scotland is defined by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID) as the number of Scottish-domiciled first-time entrants to full-time higher education in the UK who are aged under 21, expressed as a percentage of the base population of 17 year olds in Scotland in the previous year. It shows a rise between 1987/8 and 1996/7 from 20.5% to 44.2%. The proportion of all 18-21 year olds in full-time HE in Scotland has also shot up, from 14.5% in 1985/6 to 31.6% in 1995/6. So by now almost exactly one in three of the 18-21 year population in Scotland is in full-time HE. (NCIHE, 1997, Report of the Scottish Committee, Table 1 and S.O., 1997).

Whilst these figures show how participation has increased amongst young people, they point to something else too: that participation in higher education in Scotland is more 'front-loaded' than it is elsewhere (see table 6). Starting with the 16 year olds, we can see from Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics that even given the tiny numbers, there is a big discrepancy between Scotland and England: in England the proportion is 1 in 10,000, in Scotland it is 1 in 200. At 17, the really significant difference emerges: nearly 12% of the Scottish population is already in higher education, compared with only just over a quarter of one per cent for England. For the 18-20 age group, Scotland has gone from being far out in front to being narrowly bottom of the pile, with 22% compared to England's 24%. From then on Scotland continues to occupy bottom place until we get into the 30-year olds and above, when Northern Ireland takes over. But Scotland is lowest in the all age

index - the Population Participation Index - at 2.52% compared with the UK figure of 2.59% and an English one of 2.58%.

Table 6: Higher education participation rates by country of the UK and by age band 1995 percentages

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK
16	0.01	0.10	0.55	0.00	0.07
17	0.28	0.30	11.89	0.29	1.33
18 - 20	24.13	24.99	22.44	26.20	24.09
21 - 24	10.35	11.15	8.63	13.46	10.33
25 - 29	4.03	4.18	3.65	4.14	4.01
30 - 39	2.91	3.06	2.77	2.68	2.90
40 - 49	1.96	2.00	1.82	1.63	1.94
50 and over	0.42	0.47	0.26	0.29	0.40
All ages	2.58	2.63	2.52	3.00	2.59

Source: HESA, no date, Table 2.

Now let us look at the figures from another angle: the distribution of students by age. The data in table 7 is calculated from HESA regional statistics. It shows that over 48% of Scottish undergraduates in 1995/6 were under 21, compared with under 40% of English ones. Conversely, there was a 5 point gap in the percentages over 25, with 32% of Scots falling into this category, compared with over 37% of English.

Table 7: UK domiciled students by age group and level of study 1995/6

Under-graduates	Under 18	18-20	21-4	25+	Not known	Total
England	1,921	400,689	225,317	380,463	9,638	1,018,055
%	(0.2)	(39.3)	(22.1)	(37.4)	(0.9)	
Scotland	7,339	41,869	19,661	33,210	173	102,252
%	(7.2)	(40.9)	(19.2)	(32.5)	(0.2)	
NI	75	18,382	10,659	9,498	1,030	39,645
%	(0.2)	(46.3)	(26.9)	(23.9)	(2.6)	
Wales	154	25,187	13,571	24,019	792	63,723
%	(0.2)	(39.5)	(21.2)	(37.7)	(1.2)	
Other/ unknown	29	3,091	2,763	4,143	2,352	12,378
%	(0.2)	(25.0)	(22.3)	(33.4)	(19.0)	
Totals	9,518	489,219	271,971	451,333	14,012	1,236,053
%	(0.7)	(39.6)	(22.0)	(36.5)	(1.1)	

Source: Calculated from HESA, 1997, Table 1.5

These figures confirm the front-loaded character of Scotland's education system. Compared to England more young people are retained in the school system beyond

school leaving age. More of them acquire qualifications which give entry to higher education. More of them pass on directly to higher education, and more of them do so earlier. Once over 20, fewer are in higher education (at least in higher education institutions), and this continues to be true through all the remaining age groups.

Does this different age profile matter? On one interpretation, the job has been done. Entry into higher education continues to expand. Lower participation rates later on simply reflect that more of the population has already got their degrees or other HE qualifications; there is not the same need for access to HE by adults. On the old human capital model this is efficient: the investment should be made as early as possible. But this success is less convincing in achieving the goals of lifelong learning.

More recent figures from the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC), whilst they are for Scotland only, show how widely participation in higher education varies by age. The peak age for male and female participation in higher education is 18 - and is comprised mainly of students who have entered HE soon after leaving school. This group is dominated by those taking courses full-time, although there are also significant numbers of younger male students taking part-time higher education courses, for example on block or day release (SHEFC, 1998, pp.12-15).

Courses and levels

There are national differences in the levels of courses which students enrol for, and the places where they study. A far higher proportion of higher education in Scotland takes place in FE colleges than in England. Of the 239000 HE students in 1996/7, 67000 were in FE - over one quarter of the total, and about double the proportion in England. Some of these were studying for degrees (17% of full-time undergraduate provision, and 42% of part-time undergraduate provision in Scotland is provided by FE colleges (NCIHE, 1997, Report of the Scottish Committee, p.18). But the majority of these were studying for HNCs or HNDs (36% of all HE students in Scotland were not studying at postgraduate or first degree level). The figure increased by 11% over the previous year. In addition to the 67000 HE students in FE, there were 332000 students on FE courses in Scotland in 1995/6, an increase of 27% on the previous year; 90% of these were part-timers, 29% up on 95/6 (SOEID press release on Further and Higher Education, 1996/7).

A certain amount of the Scottish reputation for excellence in education depends on its very clear lead in the proportions of young people enrolling in higher education. The figures show that many of these enrolments are in further education institutions, and the courses to which they refer are not degree courses. As others have noted, this should be seen as a sign of strength.5 We would argue that the British system and the English system especially, are over-dominated by degrees and a preoccupation with them. A more balanced distribution, which gives more place to other, shorter HE qualifications is desirable rather than the reverse, and earlier exit points, with honour (such as with broad-based Bachelors degrees) should be promoted.[6]

But it is important to point out this difference, since it warns us against assuming that simple like-for-like comparisons can be made. We should also note that the balance between degree and non-degree enrolments within the Scottish undergraduate population is shifting. In 1980, 31817 people entered non-degree courses compared with 16591 entering degree courses, a ratio of 1.92; by 1993, the figures had changed to 40026 and 33633, a ratio of 1.19. Once again, some convergence is occurring as Scotland moves closer to the degree-dominated English pattern. And HNCs and HNDs are being used as stepping stones to degrees: not necessarily a bad thing in itself, but is possible evidence of the growing dominance of the degree.[7]

In 1994/5 63.2% of 16-year old Scots remained at school, compared with 27.8% of English youth of the same age. Conversely, 26.7% of the English were enrolled at an FE college, compared with 8.5% of Scots. Overall, the Scottish system of retaining students in school rather than transferring them to FE colleges has the advantage of causing a higher proportion to stay in the education system at 16 (76.8% against 71.0%), and to achieve at least some Standard Grades and very commonly some Highers, to a greater extent than the (more or less) comparable English achievements. But transfer to FE at 16 or 17 may suit some young people, and the latest evidence suggests that more 17 and 18 year olds are in full-time education in those countries where this choice is more widely offered.

A model which achieves high levels of attainment by concentrating on an extended period of initial, full-time education, moving from school to higher and further education, carries costs for those whom this route fails. Being working class, having parents who themselves left school early, living in a area where educational attainment is low, all count against staying on in school beyond the school leaving age, and gaining the qualifications necessary to enter into more advanced study (Taylor, 1996).

This model may also carry a number of other negative features. It is possible that the experience of initial higher education is affected by the closer link to school. The transition to HE may be felt to be less a matter of positive choice than elsewhere, and higher education may be felt to be more an extension of schooling than is the case in other countries. This may then negatively affect the motivation of adults to return to learning, not only by those who do move from school to university, but also for those who do not, but who perceive it as an extension of school.

One further factor is that the Scottish system is very heavily assessed. One reason for higher school retention rates is that Highers are available after only one year, presenting a more realisable goal to those categories of students who are most likely to leave early. But this means that Scottish students will regularly undergo assessment and, almost certainly, exams every single year from the age of 15/16 up to 20/21. Some of the assessments are more serious and stressful than others, but this is a formidable loading, and may well have a deterrent effect on potential returners.

The key argument we wish to make here is that the Scottish system is front-loaded, arguably more so than most others. It concentrates educational opportunity into the initial phase of the lifecourse, so that the balance between initial and continuing education is tilted in favour of the former. This of course begs large questions about what an appropriate balance is, and it may be that Scottish exceptionalism is in this instance a positive virtue. But if so it is a remarkable defiance of the growing conventional wisdom that education should be a lifelong process - even allowing for the fact that participation by mature students in formal institutions is only part of the picture. Not all of what we show is negative. Moreover, the issues raised are complex - for example, the success of Scottish further education colleges in attracting older students goes some way to compensate for the lower representation of older people in Scottish universities, and it may be that concentration early on is followed by informal rather than formal learning in adulthood. What we have shown is that in comparison with England, the greater Scottish participation in higher education is due in part to a difference in qualifications sought, with more attention to qualifications other than the degree. But it is also due to the fact that Scots go younger into higher education, and finish earlier. In one sense this is extremely efficient. But the concentrated nature of the participation raises real issues about distribution - horizontally in the sense of distribution across social groups, and vertically in the sense of distribution over the lifecourse.

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NOTES

1 Figures may not always be directly comparable from year to year because of changes in how they were compiled.

2 These are postal surveys of nationally representative samples of young people. The figures reported here are based on surveys in Spring 1991, 2 and 3 of young people aged 16 on 31st August 1990, who were eligible (with the exception of a small number in the Scottish sample) to leave school in 1990.

3 These figures are for SCE/GSCE qualifications. A proportion of those in Scotland with no qualifications may have National Certificate modules.

4 We have not included many figures on part-time participation because of the difficulties of counting and comparing between courses and institutions and across the countries of the UK.

5 See for example Dearing, 1997, Report 1 which states: 'There is a body of feeling that the honours degree exerts a disproportionate influence in UK higher education (although less so in Scotland). In particular, more flexibility in the pattern of awards at sub-degree level should be introduced'. (p.5)

6 The Report of the Scottish Committee to Dearing argues this on p.68. See also Williams, G. 1995.

7 In 1994, 55% of diplomates - usually with HNCs and HNDs - from further education colleges went on to further, full-time study, mostly for degrees, at higher education institutions, suggesting, as the Report of the Scottish Committee to Dearing argued, 'a less-pronounced distinction between academic and vocational subjects in Scotland' (p.14).

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