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Widening Participation in Scotland 1997–2021: A semi-systematic literature review and avenues for further research

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Abstract

This article sets out and critically analyses the state of current knowledge on Widening Participation at higher education institutions in Scotland and sets forth avenues for further research. Through a semi-systematic review of the literature, six discrete but overlapping themes relating to Widening Participation are identified, namely, (1) factors affecting the decision to apply to university, (2) the transition from high school or further education into university, (3) contextualised admissions, (4) completion and level of attainment, (5) economic, social and cultural capital and (6) equality, diversity and inclusion. The study finds that while clear progress has been made by higher education institutions towards achieving quantitative government targets for student recruitment from underrepresented groups, there is an absence of studies and knowledge about the qualitative lived experiences of students as they transition through university, how students negotiate a sense of fit with institutional systems, and what targeted supports they may require to succeed. Avenues for further research which addresses these gaps in the knowledge base are put forward, namely, (1) broaden the academic base and interdisciplinarity of Widening Participation research, (2) reform and extend measures of success beyond admissions and attainment, (3) evolve institutional level support for transition into higher education, (4) develop more nuanced understandings of

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contextualised admissions and (5) investigate and gain deeper understandings of how the lived experiences of Widening Participation students shape and inform their journey through, experience of and attainment at university.

KEYWORDS

admissions, higher education institutions, Scotland, Widening Participation

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper reviews research on Widening Participation (WP) at higher education institutions in Scotland, covering the period 1997–2021. The paper tracks how WP has become an established research domain over time, identifying the main areas of focus and suggesting important avenues for further research. The findings cover a broad range of topics, namely (1) factors affecting the decision to apply to university, (2) the transition from high school or further education into university, (3) contextualised admissions, (4) completion and level of attainment, (5) economic, social and cultural capital and (6) equality, diversity and inclusion.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Existing research on WP has highlighted both progress and challenges regarding the transition, admission and attainment of WP students from diverse backgrounds. However, this review has revealed important gaps in understanding which remain around the lived experiences of WP students, and the more systemic institutional supports needed to support their journeys through university. Conducting a literature review in this area has highlighted important implications for policy and practice. In particular, policies must contribute to greater social mobility and socio-economic inclusion by creating environments that better fit the aspirations, needs and available capital of WP students.

INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, university education is considered the primary route to prestigious occupations and high earnings (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015) and thus 'widening participation in higher education has become an ongoing policy desire' (Lumb et al., 2021). This is especially the case in the UK, which has one of the least socially mobile societies of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (Sutton Trust, 2017, 2019) and sustains persistent patterns of inequality of access (Hannon et al., 2017; Jerrim, 2013; O'Sullivan et al., 2019). The seminal 1997 Dearing Report, entitled 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' set in motion the contemporary focus on Widening Participation (WP) at UK Universities (Archer, 2007; Thompson, 2019). The Dearing report's recommendations

called for substantive expansion of higher education provision for those from non-traditional backgrounds, and the targeting of activities to increase student recruitment from under-represented groups. To drive this, UK Government targets for the composition of undergraduate university intakes were set, and over the past 20 years, access for students from lower socio-economic groups and non-traditional backgrounds has come to be viewed as universities' ethical responsibility, given that they are publicly funded institutions charging comparatively high fees (Fernando & Kenny, 2021; Parker & Starkey, 2018).

The purpose of this literature review is to outline the state of knowledge about WP at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland, and it covers a broad range of topics comprising factors affecting the decision to apply to university, the transition from high school or further education into university, contextualised admissions, completion and level of attainment, economic, social and cultural capital, and equality, diversity and inclusion. Scotland is home to 19 HEIs, two of which (Edinburgh and Glasgow) are members of the research-intensive Russell Group, and four of which (Edinburgh, Glasgow St. Andrews, Aberdeen) are classified as 'ancient universities', as laid down in the Universities (Scotland) Act 1966.

The Scottish Education system differs in important ways from the other UK national systems (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), including the length of degree and number of transition points (the dominant model in Scotland being 4 year full-time undergraduate degrees), the option to enter at an earlier age (Scottish students normally complete their higher qualifications required for university entry at 17/18 years old compared with 18/19 for A-levels in the other nations), a wider range of subjects studied (generally studying six or seven higher subjects compared with three or four A levels), and government funding covering tuition fees for all Scottish students (residence criteria must be met). Furthermore, the Scottish Government has publically highlighted inequality as a strategic priority in the publication 'A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access' (2016), resulting in the establishment of a Commission on Widening Access. This commission set out 34 recommendations, and appointed an independent Commissioner for Fair Access to drive progress. From a baseline of 14% in academic year 2016/2017 and with an interim 2021 target of 16% set by the First Minister (Scottish Funding Council, 2022), in 2020/2021, 16.7% of undergraduate entrants to Scottish universities came from households classified as falling into the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 20 (SIMD20), that is, the 20% most deprived communities in Scotland. While it is obvious that significant and laudable progress is being made, the rate of that progress is slowing (Haig & Fernando, 2021) with top-level statistics masking the complexity, granularity and nuance of the underlying contextually bound student experience.

Literature reviews are important mechanisms in the generation of knowledge; indeed 'an effective and well-conducted review as a research method creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge and facilitating theory development' (Webster & Watson, 2002). Owing to the nature of the topic, and associated literature, a semi-systematic (Snyder, 2019) literature review was conducted which focuses on WP at HEIs in Scotland. This article makes three important contributions to WP scholarship. First, it provides an interdisciplinary, transparent and rigorous overview of published works; second, it develops a synthesis of the research findings; and third, it identifies avenues for further empirical research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Literature reviews should be structured, comprehensive and transparent (Hiebl, 2021) and aim to help synthesise research on a topic or how a topic has been studied in different fields (Hallinger, 2020; Snyder, 2019). Following Snyder (2019) and an initial assessment of the available literature, we selected the semi-systematic methodology as the most appropriate

for our study and overall research question of 'What is the state of art knowledge about WP at HEIs in Scotland?' The semi-systematic approach is 'designed for topics that have been conceptualized differently, studied by, and across, disciplines, and which require greater breadth and flexibility than the conventional systematic review protocol provides' (Snyder, 2019, p. 333; cf. Wong et al., 2013).

The semi-systematic approach has been successfully applied across many topics whose principal aims are to produce an overview of the research area, track development over time, assess the state of knowledge and identify key themes (e.g. McColl-Kennedy et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2009). In our review we have engaged in a 'process of synthesizing primary studies and exploring heterogeneity descriptively rather than statistically' (Wong et al., 2013, p. 988). Rather than placing emphasis on quantitative data (as per the full systematic review methodology) or by measuring effect size (Wong et al., 2013), we have focused on identifying themes, theoretical perspectives and other qualitative information and patterns related to our topic (Snyder, 2019). Thus the heterogeneous, interdisciplinary nature of the WP field is accounted for in the selection of the semi-systematic methodology. To add to the quality assurance process, in [Table 1](#) we present the evaluation criteria of each of the included scholarly articles, and in [Section 4.1](#) we have stated the number of studies used to present results in each theme.

Sample selection

The literature search was conducted using a PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses) checklist and flow diagram (Page et al., 2021), see [Figure 1](#). Although primarily used in medical and public health research, the doctrines of accuracy, completeness and transparency underlying the PRISMA protocol met our aspirations for high-quality selection, screening and assessment of extant literature for inclusion to our dataset. We conducted the initial literature search based on the three pillars implicit in our research question: (1) WP as a studied phenomenon; (2) HEIs as a place of WP policy implementation; and (3) Scotland as the geographical area of the research. These pillars are reflected in the search terms presented on the PRISMA diagram.

Identification

At the identification stage, which took place in February 2022, 109 ProQuest databases were searched. Initially, 3828 records related by their meta-data to 'widening participation' and/or 'disadvantaged students' were found. In this phase, the meta-data of the records were collected without any restricting criteria such as language, scientific status, publication date or geography. Further filtering to 'higher education' and/or 'university students' in meta-data reduced the number to 2466. Geographical focus on the UK and its nations produced 1653 records. These 1653 records were exported from the ProQuest search results to a EndNote library. EndNote is a citation management software used to store, organise and cite references and proved very useful to our purposes. Once duplicate records were removed, 1342 records remained for initial screening.

Screening and inclusion

At the screening stage publications related to Scotland were identified using all record fields in EndNote (not only the metadata as at the previous stage). After reading the abstracts of

TABLE 1 Evaluation criteria for the semi-systematic review of relevant publications.

Sections	Categories
Broad aim, Title, Description	Unique values
Research field of the journal	Education and Learning Medicine Politics
Research orientation of the article	Empirical Policy research/White Paper
Methodological approach	Qualitative Quantitative Mixed methods
Research design	Case study Cross-sectional Longitudinal Experimental Document analysis
Sampling technique	Convenience sample Stratified sample Quota sample All population
Data collection method	Interviews Focus groups Questionnaire Statistical data Documents
Sample indicators	Number of participants Demographics of participants Study level of participants Geography
Data analysis	Thematic Statistical
Theories used	Unique values
Key findings	Unique values
Quality criteria	Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal Tool, as appropriate for the stated research method

Source: Authors.

1342 records and manually removing thematically irrelevant items, 58 papers remained for the full text reading. Despite extensive searches, 13 items had no full text available and were excluded from the search. Having read the abstracts of the missing papers we do not believe that they would have added the substantial value to our analysis. At this stage, our dataset comprised 45 records. We then read the full text of each record and assessed them for relevance and eligibility. A further five records were manually excluded as irrelevant during this screening process, and our screening process was completed with 40 texts directly relevant to the research question (see [Figure 1](#)).

Grey literature

Given that WP is a societal issue dealt with at government and policy level, we conducted searches for grey literature, defined as ‘that which is produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled

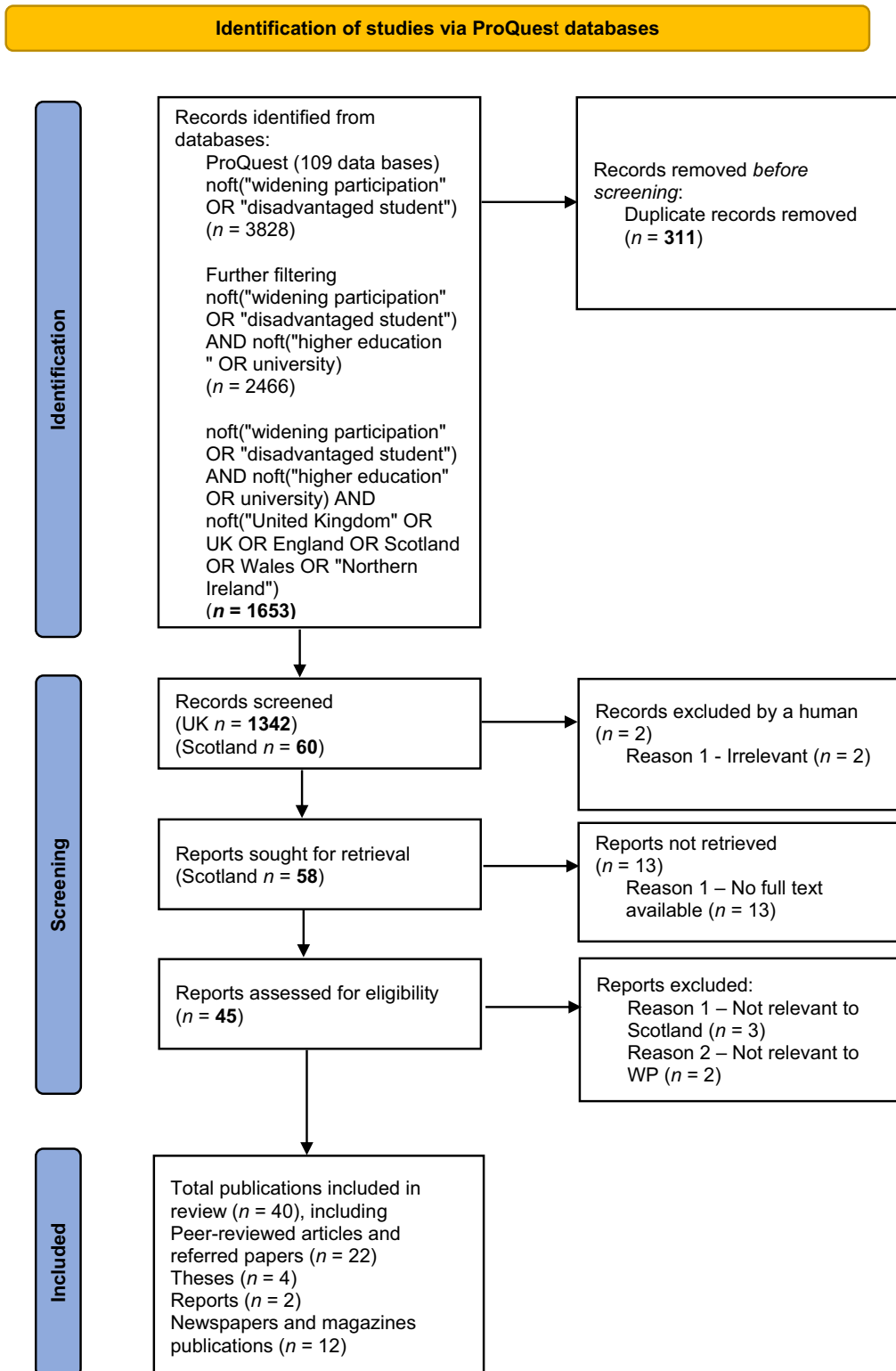


FIGURE 1 Selection of publications for the literature review in accordance with PRISMA statement. Source: Developed by the authors based on Page et al. (2021).

by commercial publishers' (Fourth International Conference on Grey Literature, 1999). In line with best practice, we hand searched the resources that are most relevant to our review. These were the webpages and publications, papers, reports and articles of the following organisations: The Scottish Government, The Commissioner for Fair Access, Universities Scotland, Quality Assurance Agency Scotland, Scottish Funding Council, Advance HE, The Mental Health Foundation and the Sutton Trust. The overarching criteria for inclusion of grey literature were direct relevance to the Scottish Context and experience of students studying at Scottish Universities. This search produced 20 reports, each of which we downloaded, read and appraised via the AACODS (2010) checklist. After much consideration and consultation, and given that the grey literature wholly comprises reports and policy documents, the grey literature is presented as a separate section of the findings (see section on policy documents and grey literature).

Analysis of the texts

We used NVivo 12 to conduct a thorough analysis of the 40 texts identified via ProQuest. Our first pass at coding facilitated the development of a codebook (see Table 1), which established evaluation criteria for the semi-systematic review. In line with our interdisciplinary approach, we found a wide range of approaches and techniques utilised by the authors. In most cases we used the authors' identification as the basis for the methodological evaluation criteria. In papers where elements of such identification were unclear or missing, we used our best judgement to identify the methods and approaches.

RESULTS

Historical overview of WP publications' structure

The analysis of the WP publications relating to Scotland reveals four stages of development of the WP agenda:

1. *Emerging interest* (1998–2001) with very first references to WP in Scotland as a new opportunity which makes higher education available to everyone (Campbell and McKendrick, 1998), overview of emerging WP trends in England and Scotland (Ward & Steele, 1999) and highlighting the success of WP in Scotland compared with the other parts of the UK (Wojtas, 2000).
2. *Developing research domain* (2004–2008) presented by the range of first substantial scientific publications dedicated to WP developments in Scotland: book (Tapper, 2007), report (Thomas et al., 2005), theses (Ferrie, 2005; Winterton, 2008) and peer-reviewed articles published annually (Donnelly et al., 2007; Edwards & Miller, 2008; Fowler et al., 2004; Knox, 2005; Parry, 2006). Thematically publications cover a wide range of topics: WP policy development (Parry, 2006), best practice for disadvantaged students' preparation for HEI experience (Fowler et al., 2004; Knox, 2005), WP students' academic experience and performance (Donnelly et al., 2007; Ferrie, 2005; Finsden & McCullough, 2008; Winterton, 2008) and WP issues regarding access to education (Court, 2008).
3. *Growing awareness in the public domain* (2010–2014) revealed by the quantitative dominance of newspaper articles over scholarly papers. Widening Participation issues appear in the Times Higher Education rankings (News in Brief, 2010, THE Awards 2010, 2010) and newspaper publications regarding financial support of the students and research projects in this sphere (Belgutay, 2013, 2014; Exley, 2014; Fearn, 2010; Grove, 2013;

MacLeod, 2010; Morgan, 2011; Scott, 2013) with a strong focus on Scottish leadership and/or comparison to England.

4. *Established research domain* (2015–2021) shown through the structural prevalence of research papers (scholarly articles and theses) overtaking the volume of newspapers publications. At this stage, research interest in WP in terms of context has moved from the new universities mostly represented at the niche development stage (Glasgow Caledonian University, Strathclyde University) to the Ancient and Russell Group universities (the University of Edinburgh, and anonymised Russell Group Universities in Scotland) (Figure 2).

THEMATIC SYNTHESIS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Indexed scholarly literature focused on Scotland

Our analysis of the indexed scholarly literature focused on Scotland found six discrete but overlapping themes concerning WP and we use these to structure our findings section. The themes are: (1) factors affecting the decision to apply to university (10 papers); (2) the transition from high school or further education into university (seven papers); (3) contextualised admissions (eight papers); (4) completion and level of attainment (three papers); (5) economic, social and cultural capital (five papers); and (6) equality, diversity and inclusion (seven papers). We now set out each of these in turn.

Factors affecting the decision to apply to university

According to potential university applicants, parental, rather than teacher, influence was deemed the 'most helpful' (Campbell & McKendrick, 2017:25) in making post-school choices. This key role of family in promoting educational aspirations and overall student experience in higher education is also highlighted in Costa et al. (2020a, 2020b) and Bowers-Brown (2006). The role of formal social arrangements, for example special WP activities at schools and/or university situated WP events (open day lectures/help desks; summer schools; WP specific programmes), was considered relatively less important. Furthermore, and surprisingly, informal social interactions with friends are considered not influential in terms of further educational plans (Campbell & McKendrick, 2017).

The pivotal role of school teachers in developing students' aspirations and the value of school partnerships with universities are investigated in Alexander et al. (2021) and Fowler et al. (2004). Alexander et al. (2021) reveal that teachers from schools who participate in WP initiatives feel constrained regarding their pupils' potential success in the university

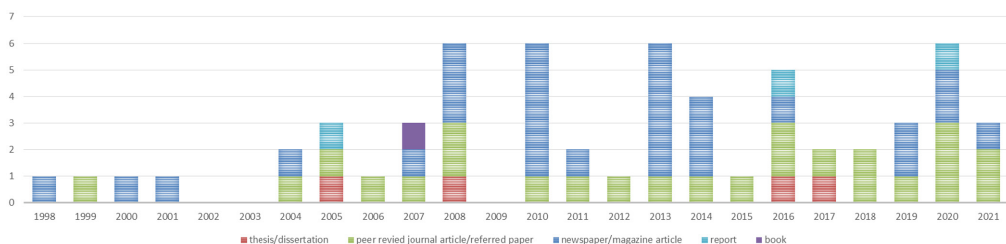


FIGURE 2 Structural distribution of indexed WP articles relating to Scotland 1998–2021.

Source: Authors.

admission process, subjectively perceiving their schools to be 'not good enough' to feed into top universities and thus perhaps prematurely clipping aspirations. The research highlights the importance of university representatives in encouraging and convincing school teachers as well as pupils—especially since Campbell and McKendrick (2017) find that 51% of students from deprived areas actually have aspirations to attend university. A further significant finding is that of the disposition of teachers, who themselves consider the decision about higher education as one for the family to make, thus actively negating their own influence. In Friend's (2021) comparative research, teacher support was mentioned in four out of 10 cases for students of English universities and not mentioned at all by respondents from Scottish universities.

An implication of the research to date is the timing of decision-making and the interactions with potential universities along this continuum. Whereas family is the most influential regarding aspirations during the school-going stage, communications with universities, and interactions with friends become more influential at the transition phase (Benske et al., 2011; Breeze et al., 2020; Knox, 2005), and to that we now turn.

The transition from high school or further education into university

Social, academic and financial aspects of university transition comprise the greatest volume of the records cited and typically report the results of qualitative studies. The crucial importance of specially designed courses to help students with different prior qualifications to make the transition from high school or further education is highlighted in Knox (2005), Mayne et al. (2015), Breeze et al. (2020), MacFarlane (2018) and Friend (2021). In particular, Knox (2005) argues that orientation programmes for direct entrants from further education must be carefully designed and tailored to meet specific needs, which, when done correctly, significantly and positively impact progression, retention, performance and attainment (Knox, 2005, p. 108). These findings hold good in Breeze et al.'s (2020) study, whose participants suggested direct entry student summer schools or another kind of deep introduction programme after further education with 'mock lectures and assessments' (p. 26) to make their transition easier and more effective. Direct entrants reported that they would also appreciate more direct, approachable communication with university staff, mutual peer support schemes and less complicated ways of navigating the university support systems (Breeze et al., 2020). That study also confirms prior work (Fowler et al., 2004; MacFarlane, 2018) which demonstrates the importance of academic and social skills development relevant to, and for, the transition into higher education (HE). Within the context of nursing articulation, Mayne et al. (2015) showed how staff understanding of the issues facing students, although empathetic and considered, was quite incomplete. Overall, this stream of research provides much empirical evidence to demonstrate that successful transition contributes to the development of a sense of belonging, successful integration to the higher education environment and overall positive university experience (Benske et al., 2011; Friend, 2021; MacFarlane, 2018).

Practical cases from Scottish schools, specialist centres and universities show that university transition is exceptionally and disproportionately challenging for WP students yet can be improved by tailored programmes preparing for the HE learning environment (Breeze et al., 2020), which places great emphasis on independent learning, critical thinking and problem solving. Interestingly, research papers and practice reports published in scholarly journals mostly frame this issue in the same perspective, that is: how can WP students change in order to be made fit for university. It is only very recently that scholars have begun to ask how universities could and should change in order to be made fit better for WP students (Friend, 2021).

Contextualised admissions

The basis of fair admissions and the translation of equality into the practice of offer-making continues to concern researchers such as Knox (2005), Croxford and Raffé (2011), Croxford et al. (2014), Cameron et al. (2018), Boliver et al. (2015) and Boliver et al. (2015, 2020, 2022). The issue of the most appropriate indicators to identify disadvantaged students and thus use for contextualised admissions remains a persistent problem (Boliver, 2017; Croxford et al., 2014; Niven et al., 2013). Three broad types of indicators are currently used. Individual level (e.g. receipt of free school meals, households in receipt of income support, from a lower social class background as operationalised by parental occupation, among the first generation of family members to go to university, has been in local authority care, has been a young carer, has held refugee or asylum seeker status), area level measures (e.g. POLAR4, TUNDRA, SIMD, IDACI, ACORN) and school level measures (e.g. state or private fee-paying school, deprived school as measured by a high percentage of pupils in receipt of free school meals, achievement and progression levels of the respective school).

Cameron et al. (2018) point out that the mismatch attributed to different measures of social class in the UCAS (the University and Colleges Admissions Service) and HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) datasets against the SIMD indicator favoured by the Scottish Government and many Scottish universities is unhelpful, and makes comparative studies particularly difficult. Boliver et al. (2022) note how the current system yields an unacceptable level of 'false positives' and 'false negatives'. In the case of WP measures, a false negative refers to an 'individuals identified as not socioeconomically disadvantaged although they are' (p. 351). Conversely, a false positive refers to 'individuals identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged when they are not' (p. 351). Using statistical data from ONS, the study concludes with a strong petition: 'it is clear that intrinsically flawed area-level and school-level metrics must be replaced with verified individual-level measures of socioeconomic disadvantage if the ambition to equalise access to higher education within a generation is to be achieved. In the meantime, this goal is unlikely to be achieved and widening access efforts informed by flawed measures may even unwittingly make matters worse' (p. 371).

Completion and level of attainment

Using data from a group of students who entered Edinburgh University in 2004–2006 and who had withdrawn or graduated by 2011, Croxford et al. (2014) found that while WP-indicated students were as likely to complete their degree as non-WP indicated students, they had a lower probability of achieving a higher classification of degree. The attainment of WP students varies greatly depending on the degree programme and field of study (Cameron et al., 2018; Croxford et al., 2014). Indeed, as the authors note, the gap in achievement in a top-two degree (1st or 2.1) is most noticeable: 64% of WP-indicated students compared with 79% of non-WP students achieved a top-two degree in Humanities and Social Science, and 45% versus 58% in Science and Engineering. Widening Participation students were also less likely to achieve the top classes of degree in Medicine and Veterinary Medicine. In the study by Cameron et al. (2018), articulating students (that is, who were transferring from further education) were significantly more likely to exit with an unclassified degree, and those who stayed to the honours degree stage were significantly less likely to be awarded 1st or 2.1. While the 'first in family' students were significantly more likely to come from a SIMD20/40 postcode, no difference was found in their relative proportion of 1st or 2.1 degrees.

Although an earlier study by Donnelly et al. (2007) indicates that life constraints and pressures intersect and culminate in a lower level of attainment, in the comparative analysis

between a Scottish University with a high rate of WP students and an Australian University which had not emphasised WP, load reduction (that is, reducing the number of modules attempted) was undertaken in Scotland at twice the rate of the Australian University. For women in particular, load reduction resulted in better average marks. Posited explanations for this include the fact that women in the Scottish University were more likely to be involved in child care, and more likely to be in paid employment. Thus study environment and other responsibilities and life demands play a significant role in the overall attainment of WP students.

(Lack of) economic, social and cultural capital

The role of economic capital in the university experiences is relatively well documented, not only in the experiences once inside the university, but also in the decision of whether to participate at all, given concerns over living costs and the opportunity cost of not earning for the 4 year duration. Indeed, 'although finance is not the sole factor that contributes to low participation rates amongst lower socio-economic groups; it is a major one' (Bowers-Brown, 2006, p. 63).

The literature is overwhelmingly clear that the university experience of WP students is highly affected, in multiple intersectional ways, and at all stages of the university journey, by their comparatively lower levels of economic, social and cultural capital (Friend, 2021; Mayne et al., 2015). This is usually strongly connected to family background (Costa et al., 2020a, 2020b), and especially in cases where social capital accrual is disrupted by family estrangement. In qualitative work, Costa et al. (2020a, 2020b) have skilfully applied the theoretical framework of Bourdieu (1996) to make sense of the delicate and sensitive experiences of family-estranged WP students. In cases of family estrangement, the loss, lack or disruption of economic, social and embodied cultural capital, which 'ultimately grants [students] a place in the hidden social structure of academic and social relationships (symbolic capital)' severely impacts their capacity to thrive during their time at university (2020, p. 108). All 21 participants, without exception, reported the deficit of economic and social resources such as family support and ties as a constant, grinding, stressor and struggle in their everyday lives. Economic factors force students to look for an additional income to cover every day needs, and the vast majority are in paid employment alongside their studies, yet while saving them from immediate financial destitution, employment serves to create extra pressures and furthermore distracts students from their studies (Costa et al., 2020a).

Several studies report that the shortage of financial resources and disposable income excludes WP students from many social activities at the university (Costa et al., 2020a; Friend, 2021) thus, creating a recursive negative spiral of reproduction of inequality and disadvantage and weakening their potential to accumulate social and cultural capital at university. Social capital differences such as social class and family support, and subjective comparison with others in terms of differences of privilege, advantage, capabilities, aspirations and resources can serve to multiply the negative effects of lack of economic capital (Friend, 2021). In Friend's (2021) comparative study of WP students at US, English and Scottish universities, Scottish WP students emphasised how the 'social stigma of higher education attendance along the lines of socioeconomic status still exists' (p. 370). This appeared to work in ways to make them feel that they did not belong in a university, that university was not for 'people like us' (p. 372), compounding entrenched barriers, and serving to make WP students feel shame, resentment and social exclusion acutely in comparison with their middle-class peers. The study concludes with a shrewd probe: 'The question elite universities must ultimately decide is whether in fact inclusion is a priority or simply an advantageous rhetoric designed to project the image of success for all while perpetuating social and cultural advantage' (p. 375).

Equality, diversity and inclusion

Establishing knowledge on the nature of the enduring inequalities within the UK higher educational system and the possibilities for the establishment of a more egalitarian system underlines the sentiment of all papers in our sample. Comparative studies (Donnelly & Evans, 2019; Gallacher & Raffe, 2012) discussing the divergence/convergence of strategies pursued across the different countries of the UK show that WP is conceptualised differently in each and is in line with their prevailing conceptualisation of equality—equality of opportunity or equality of outcome. In the most recent of these studies, an analysis of key policy documents, Donnelly and Evans (2019) find that England is strongly orientated towards equality of opportunity, whereas Scottish policymaking addresses both equality of opportunity as well as equality of outcome (Donnelly & Evans, 2019). The authors note how one distinctive feature of WP in Scotland is ‘some attempt to adapt and modify aspects of the HE system *itself* with a view to aligning it to a more diverse society’ (p. 110, emphasis in original).

The contours of that diversity and categories of difference is the focus of the remaining studies in our sample of indexed scholarly literature focused on Scotland. In her 2006 study, Bowers-Brown notes that the removal of upfront fees for Scottish domiciled students expedited an increase in applications including from WP applicants. Interestingly (although outside the strict Scottish scope of this paper), studies in other areas of the UK have questioned the argument that finance is a factor determining entry to HE (e.g. Rees and Taylor, 2006). In one of the earliest empirical WP studies in the sample, Ferrie (2005) examines the factors affecting the performance of former access students (who embark on specialist HE access programmes usually owing to having dropped out of or failed through the normal educational route) in selected Scottish institutions. Social class was identified as the most promising variable for explanatory power, and the affective factors of barriers to participation, less confidence in interfacing with staff and institutional culture, and less understanding and support from their extant social networks are posited as explanatory factors. Further, Ferrie's (2005) work provides insight into one key category of diversity—age. In his study, the number of withdrawals fell with increasing age (p. 436). Age is also a key focus of the work of McAllister (2010), who reports on older working class adults' participation in the context of a new university in the west of Scotland and shows that ‘older adults continue to be marginalised in current widening participation policy and practice’ (p. 551). Drawing on Gallacher (2006) and statistical analysis by Findsen & McCullough (2006), he points out how HEIs may be perpetuating class and age-based discrimination owing to overall WP vision being ‘defined by economic concerns rather than social justice’ (p. 550). A project reported by Findsen et al. (2011) examining gender, age and social class calls for increased provision of financial assistance as a fundamental component of government initiatives to engage working-class adults with formal education and support them through their time in higher education.

Policy documents and grey literature

In the main, the policy documents and grey literature are concerned with the targets set by the Scottish Government—‘that every child, irrespective of socioeconomic background, should have an equal chance of accessing higher education’ (Final report of the Commission on Widening Access, 2016: 7), and the extent to which fair access is being achieved in practice (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2022). The Scottish Funding Council (2022) presents statistical reports and qualifier data to confirm that in 2020–2021, 16.7% of all Scottish-domiciled new undergraduate entrants were from the 20% most deprived areas (SMID 20), indicating that the interim goal of 16% has been

achieved. Blog posts (Boliver, 2017; Dunphy, 2020), the Quality Assurance Agency (Quality Assurance Agency, 2014, 2017) and Advance HE (Advance, 2017) are concerned with the indicators used and the outreach strategies employed by HEIs, and the QAA's Thematic Report on Enhancement-led Institutional Review (2017) provides examples of good practice. Unsurprisingly, Universities Scotland (2022a, 2022b) highlights progress and makes the case for further investment, while noting that the pandemic had a disproportionate effect on those already socio-economically disadvantaged.

The Sutton Trust, in an extensive report drawing on UCAS, Scottish Funding Council and HESA data (Sutton Trust, 2017) highlighted how 'privately educated pupils make up an increasing proportion of new entrants to leading universities in Scotland' (p. 3) and although qualifying Scottish based new university entrants do not pay fees, there is no evidence to suggest that this serves to increase overall levels of participation by disadvantaged groups. In fact, rising demand, lack of proportionate supply and increased competition for university places, especially in the most selective universities, has had the effect of crowding out students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Widening Participation in Scotland is only a partial success, they deem, recommending that the Scottish Government ensure that additional places are available to meet the rising demand and suggesting reserving a percentage of places for Scottish students from the most deprived backgrounds.

One recent publication particularly worthy of note is the 'Thriving Learners' report commissioned by the Mental Health Foundation Scotland (Maguire & Cameron, 2021). Although the report does not specifically distinguish between WP and non-WP respondents, in the largest ever survey of Scottish student mental health, it is revealed how Scottish students' mental health is lower than the mean national figure, with the mean of respondents sitting in 'low' wellbeing (p. 14; cf. Scottish Health Survey, 2020). Rising social inequalities (such as those which count towards classification as WP) are argued to adversely affect the mental health of these student groups and place them at higher risk for poor overall wellbeing (Arday, 2018; Macaskill, 2013; McCloud & Bann, 2019; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021). Given rising societal awareness of the implications of poor mental health and multiple reports of the declining state of student mental health, this topic in particular requires much additional research.

AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND POLICY MAKERS

The six themes above outline the current literature on WP in Scotland. Several gaps and opportunities for future research emerged, which we discuss below to forward a WP research agenda. In addition we make practical recommendations to HE institutions, academic researchers, WP professionals and HE policy makers.

WP interdisciplinary collaborations

Our analysis shows that the vast majority of scholarly output on WP in Scotland comes from educational specialists with limited disciplinary input into how WP plays out within and across, academic schools and disciplines. This is despite all HE academic schools and disciplines being involved in recruiting, supporting and organising WP students onto their degrees and through university. This is arguably a symptom of the applicant/student being expected to fit the existing HE system, and that the system has seemingly done very little

analysis of itself. To address this, we call for more interdisciplinary WP research collaborations that bring together educational and disciplinary experts to explore how programmes of study and host academic schools and disciplines shape the HE experiences of WP students across admittance, transition, capital acquisition, co- and extra curricula access and provision, academic learning, progression and attainment, and graduate outcomes. We recommend that HE institutions invest more into learning how their processes, practices and support systems work with or—as the literature has touched upon—more often, against, the circumstances of WP students. Areas ripe for investigation include modes of study (e.g. predominance of full-time), special circumstances processes (e.g. multiple retrospective form filling), required resources (e.g. IT equipment, stable WiFi, private study space, studio equipment), regulatory requirements and financial support.

WP policy beyond admissions targets and attainment

We call for work that interrogates the wider WP policy-making context, target setting and measurement, independent oversight and HE response. Notwithstanding excellent empirical work in this area, existing metrics of WP success—which focus primarily on admission targets and attainment—frame, and limit, institutional ideas of what a successful WP student experience is or should be. Research that goes beyond a narrow focus on entry and exit, and instead engages across the different stages and lived experiences of the whole WP student journey is required. Such information would greatly assist us to better understand how WP students learn about and navigate through HE institutions to overcome the challenges they face (i.e. financial, age, class, capital, personal confidence, university systems) and assess how, if at all, they have benefited from going to university.

WP aspiration and application to HE

The literature is clear that aspiration and ability to go to university is evident in WP populations; however, the conditions and support for entry may not be (Breeze et al., 2020; Friend, 2021; Knox, 2005; MacFarlane, 2018; Mayne et al., 2015). Following Alexander et al. (2021) we advocate for research that interrogates the barriers faced by teachers and career guidance professionals in providing support and encouragement to WP applicants and provides more nuanced insights into how to better inspire, encourage and support WP applicants. Furthermore, the mechanisms and antecedents of aspiration, and how these relate to, and are impacted by, the advice and support provided to WP applicants, also needs further investigation. For example, what are the motivations of WP applicants to study at university versus seeking employment or apprenticeship? How are these aspirations fostered and harnessed? How are the associated costs (financial and other) framed and understood? By answering these questions, future research will provide better insights into the motivations, aspirations, constraints, fears and future goals of WP students (and how, if at all, these differ from non-WP students). Such knowledge would undoubtedly help teachers and career guidance professionals, WP professionals and HE institutions to better inspire, respond to and provide bespoke advice and support for WP students from aspiration through to graduation.

Contextualised admissions

Despite some excellent empirical work in this area (Boliver, 2015; Boliver et al., 2015, 2020, 2022; Cameron et al., 2018; Croxford et al., 2014 and Croxford & Raffe, 2011), the concept

and practice of making contextualised admissions is under researched. While studies have discussed the problems inherent in identifying and measuring features of WP identification, the category itself is not homogenous, with wide ranging degrees of severity and intersecting characteristics. There is a clear need to better understand the nuance, variety, and sometimes error, in WP categorisation and how attainment maps to contextualised offers. Research is also needed to investigate the shorter and longer term impacts of contextualised offers on those who receive them, for example, is the experience of transition and sense of belonging impacted; what, if any, stigmas are associated with receiving a contextualised offer; and is imposter syndrome an issue? While universities in Scotland are likely to be carrying out internal analysis of attainment and progression for WP students, it is notable how little published data there is in this area. From the few extant studies reviewed, there is an attainment gap between WP and non-WP students. To make sense of and bridge this gap, we call on Scottish universities to acknowledge the strategic importance of research into contextualised admissions. We encourage HEIs to engage in more internal and cross-institutional WP grant funding and research through data sharing and collaborative projects, and to contribute more actively to growing public debates on the tensions caused by existing admissions structures and constraints (especially for Scottish domiciled applicants under the free fees regime).

Transitioning into, through and out of HE

The literature shows that support with transitioning into university through bespoke conversion courses positively impacts WP student experience, progression and ultimately attainment (Breeze et al., 2020; Knox, 2005). Such conversion courses should run alongside, and be supported by, academic skills training, early, direct, positive, contact with academic and professional services staff, and a removal of uncertainty around the cultural practices of lectures and tutorials. Thus, transition events, resources and communications should focus on helping WP applicants to learn about, gain experience of, and develop a level of comfort in navigating through their new HE environment. Interestingly, WP transition literature primarily concentrates on entry with little or no research into the role of, and requirements for, transition through, and out of, university and into the workplace. Mayne et al. (2015) showed how staff understanding of the issues students face is incomplete. Given the acknowledged career attainment gaps for WP students, HEIs must also consider the role academic schools and wider university services (such as student development and career services) play in enhancing aspiration and opportunity for WP students while at university and how, if at all, these shape the graduate career options considered and choices ultimately made. Studies are necessary to better understand whether WP students have different needs to non-WP students at these points of transition as they move through their degree programme. Further, comparative studies which examine how WP and non-WP students develop their wider work and extra curricula experiences, apply for graduate positions, prepare for leaving university and enter the workplace are also required.

Forms of capital and hidden labour

A lack of capital is a significant barrier to success and student satisfaction at university. Studies show that WP students lack economic, social and cultural capital (Costa et al., 2020a, 2020b; Friend, 2021; Mayne et al., 2015), particularly in contrast to more privileged non-WP peers. As a result, many are required to engage in significant 'hidden labour' to navigate an unfamiliar system, one not designed to fit their needs and which, at times, might actively

deepen the challenges they face, especially in balancing part-time work, caring responsibilities, family problems and financial strains. While much of the research discusses the importance of social and cultural capital to achieving a university degree, it is not clear what these concepts translate into in lived experience. For example, what social and cultural capital resources do WP students feel they lack and/or do not have access to? What structural changes could help to overcome this? Coping mechanisms should also be explored—how do WP students accrue capital, or mask their lack of it, and in what university situations? Widening to all students (regardless of WP status) would allow the links between social class, economic capital and sense of belonging to be better interrogated.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

Finally, studies of equality, diversity and inclusion highlight that the removal of fees is considered key to inclusion in Scotland. However, the Scottish model, in comparison with the rest of the UK, seeks not only to deliver equality of inclusion but also equality of outcome (Donnelly & Evans, 2019). Therefore, Scottish HEIs must strive to create the conditions for WP students to succeed equally and fully, an area which, as this literature review has determined, still requires significant work. Studies included in this review focused on gender, age and social class as markers of diversity (Findsen et al., 2011) yet race, religion, sexuality, ability and ethnicity remain unexplored. We advocate for intersectional approaches as they may help to mitigate somewhat the dangers inherent in homogenising groups with respect to class, gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality and/or disability. Such research offers the opportunity for more nuanced and granular understandings of the WP student and their lived experience and will offer valuable insight into systemic issues which compound the challenges faced by WP students.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper has reviewed and critiqued the current literature on WP in Scotland (1998–2021). We have shown how research in the field has grown in sophistication, focus and criticality. Our analysis derived six themes which constitute the main areas of focus in this body of literature. With this foundation in place, we have established a future research agenda that addresses gaps in our current knowledge of the WP student experience. Our agenda highlights the deep value of understanding the lived experience of the WP student as they move into, through, and out of university. We argue that if we are to offer HE systems that allow WP students to thrive, the systems themselves must be required to change rather than the students. Thus the themes, recommendations and implications summarised should be of interest to HE staff, faculty, institutions and policy makers who engage with, deliver and plan educational opportunities for WP students. In Scotland, while much laudable progress has been made in widening HE participation, the rate of that progress has stalled. We therefore also call on all stakeholders involved in, and responsible for, WP in Scotland (and beyond) to take forward this research agenda in order to reignite progress and improve our understanding of the lived experiences of WP students. The findings of this study demonstrate that particular systemic supports, sectoral wide changes to processes and regulations, and creative forms of institutional collaboration are likely to be needed in HE if we are to properly support WP students and account for the context-sensitive lived experiences they encounter and must deal with across the journey. In doing so, HEIs in Scotland and elsewhere can move beyond merely reacting to and reporting on government targets, and instead embrace a more proactive, pro-student stance that explicitly challenges and transforms their own embedded institutional processes, systems

and regulations. Such a system would contribute to greater social mobility and socio-economic inclusion by creating environments that better fit the aspirations, needs and available resources and forms of capital of WP students. This in turn can enhance how WP success is measured and evaluated in relation to the ultimate aim of ensuring fair access and equality of outcomes in terms of creating the conditions for students from diverse backgrounds to aspire to, thrive within and succeed in HE.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This project received level 3 ethics clearance from The University of Edinburgh institutional ethics committee.

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