

'The university isn't even representative of its home country' – Individual Report on Scottish Identity at the University of St Andrews

Introductory remarks:

Growing up in an area lacking academic opportunities, the prospect of going to any university may seem infeasible. The lucky-few who work hard enough to go have to endure the process of university application, which is already taxing enough. Yet for the applicant to study at university with the identity they've collated from the experiences at home, there may be conflicts with the collective identity of the university they apply to, manifesting into the fear of not 'fitting in'. This fear is especially prevalent with Scottish widening access applicants, who may be at a financial disadvantage in comparison to other students. "18-year-olds from Scotland's 20% least deprived communities are more than four times as likely to enter university as those from the 20% most deprived communities. For those who wish to enter the most selective institutions, the position is considerably worse." (Silver, 2016: 3) With this, the most selective institution in the UK is the University of St Andrews. Ranked 1st before Oxford and Cambridge in *The Guardian University Guide*, (Adams & Hall, 2022) the prestigious nature of this university imposes a sense of status to those who study here. While those who are rich enough are able to flourish, those granted access to the university through widening access programmes are not as fortunate, which then hinders those students, who are unable to fully take part in the 'traditional university experience' of May Balls, golf-playing, and wearing £160 red gowns. (Deadline, 2018) While the university implements programmes dedicated to enrolling more low-income students, a lot more can be done. The university ranked second lowest in social equality in 2018, just ahead of its rival, Cambridge. "The uni, where Prince William studied for a Master of Arts, came second bottom of an index measuring equality of student entrants across all backgrounds." (Pringle, 2018) Something must be done for home-grown talent to fully prosper at the university, regardless of income.

Purpose of Report

This report therefore aims to break down the concept of identity, address the conflicts between the identity of the Scottish widening access student and the prestigious identity of the University of St Andrews and finally analyse the relevance of identity in respect to the controversy surrounding Scottish widening access in the University of St Andrews. Through this method, the report aims to answer the question on whether the university acknowledges the difference in wealth among its students, or if it glosses over non affluent Scottish students,

prioritising non-Scottish students' prosperity instead. For the purpose of this report, I will focus on widening access in terms of lower-income, as opposed to care-experienced students.

The report is specifically addressed to the admissions department, as they are responsible with allocating places to potential applicants. Due to the Scottish Government capping the number of Scottish students enrolled annually, admissions must limit domestic students from studying here, relying on international students to make up the difference. This has resulted in an 'artificial cap' on Scottish students at Scottish universities, resulting in an 84% increase in the number of Scottish applicants refused entry to higher education since 2006. (Carmichael & Brown, 2022) The findings of this report should therefore encourage admissions to reflect on their decisions when enrolling Scottish lower-income students against a cap, in contrast to enrolling non-Scottish students who are not capped.

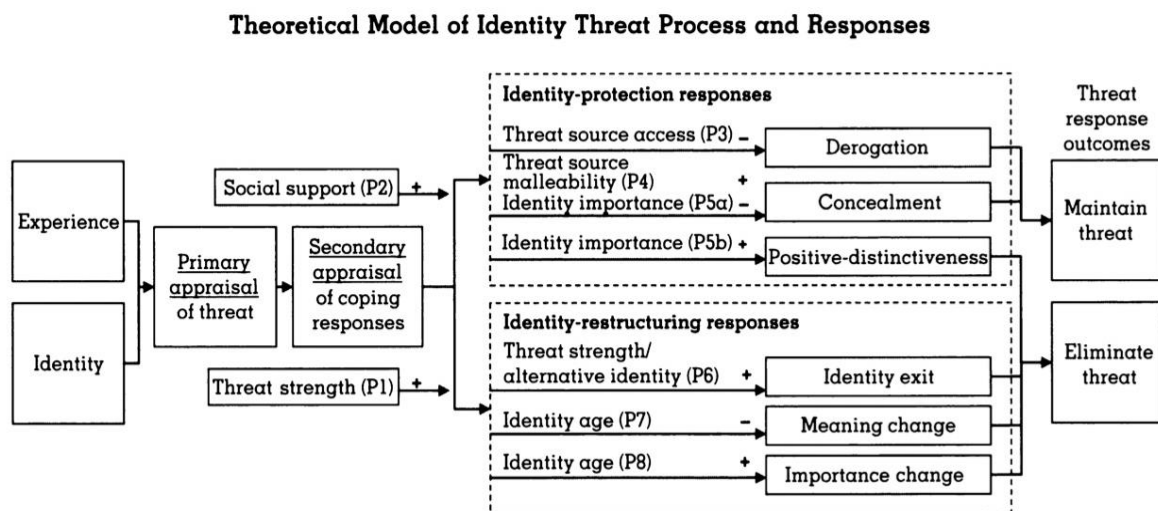
Key Concepts

It is imperative to define some key concepts regarding identity, as the idea of identity is of vital significance in the minds of Scottish widening access students. The definition proposed by Caza, Vough and Puranik is best utilised in this instance, as the accumulation of characteristics personal to the individual reflects the criteria for widening access students. "Identities are individuals' subjective interpretations of who they are, based on their socio-demographic characteristics, roles, personal attributes, and group memberships" (Caza, et al., 2018: 889) These 'subjective interpretations' are comprised of two separate components: ascribed elements and achieved elements. In this instance, the ascribed elements are of most importance for widening access, as they derive from elements that we have no control over. These include aspects like place of birth, social class, and race, which are all factors related to widening access criteria. Achieved elements are also of value, as they include aspects like grades achieved in high school, as well as extra-curricular activities that admissions may look through when enrolling students. Together these two components comprise our identity, which is malleable dependent on circumstances. Identity is "always precarious and uncertain because it is dependent on others' judgements, evaluations of the self, and these can never be fully anticipated, let alone controlled." (Knights & Clarke, 2014: 335) We adapt our identities based on the social environment we find ourselves in.

The concept of identity can be further expanded with the integration of identity confirmation and threat, two important aspects of identity that add to our discussion. Identity threat has many definitions, yet Breakwell's definition is preferred here, as it is concise and gives weight to the clashes between the organisational identity of the University of St Andrews

and the individual identity of the Scottish student. “Any thought, feeling, action, or experience that challenges the individual’s personal or social identity is a threat.” (Petriglieri, 2011: 644) Essentially, identity threat is where one’s sense of self comes into question, either from stereotypes, stigmatisation, or just general negative interactions that jeopardise a key component of one’s identity. What an individual does to affirm ones identity is known as identity confirmation. This comprises of techniques that threatened individuals implement in order to respond to the threats imposed on them. Figure 1 displays these responses in a model, which highlights the appropriate response to take, based on the threat strength (P1) and the social support (P2) present.

Figure 1 – Model of Identity Threat responses (Petriglieri, 2011: 649)



In the table above, you can see that identity-protection responses derive from a strong social support available to the individual. With this, derogation, concealment or positive-distinctiveness techniques can be implemented. Derogation involves the threatened individual denouncing the attacker in order to discredit the threat. Conversely, concealment is a method where the threatened individual hides the threatened elements of their identity, so that threatening behaviour declines. Finally, positive-distinctiveness seeks to re-educate the attacker, in hopes of a change in attitude about the threatened identity.

Identity-restructuring responses, on the other hand, are comprised of a strong threat to the individual, where social support is not available. These responses include importance change, meaning change, and identity exit. Importance change involves decreasing the importance of the threatened identity, reducing the severity drastically. In addition, meaning change involves changing what the threatened identity means to the individual, allowing for the threat to be alleviated. Lastly, identity exit is the most costly of the restructuring responses,

as it involves complete ejection from the identity and any activities or groups associated with it. These responses are essential in ensuring the identity is protected from threats, and are used by students who feel that aspects of their identity are threatened by external threats, in this case the prestigious nature of the university that they may be unfamiliar to them.

Analysis of Data:

In order to illustrate the complex aspect of Scottish widening access students ‘not fitting in’ at the University of St Andrews, I have collated several statistics which showcase the disparity between the identity of the rich and the identity of the poorer students clashing. These statistics highlight key aspects of the student body that when viewed together, convey this image of Scottish widening access students being at a disadvantage, socially and financially. I have collated data under the following characteristics:

- Change in Undergraduate Population by Domicile between 2014/2015 and 2018/2019
- Student Demographics of Scottish Universities from UK and Non-UK Domiciles
- Undergraduate Tuition Fees with Subjects and Student Demographics

The first piece of data I will analyse comes from the Public Policy Research Group in St Andrews in 2020.

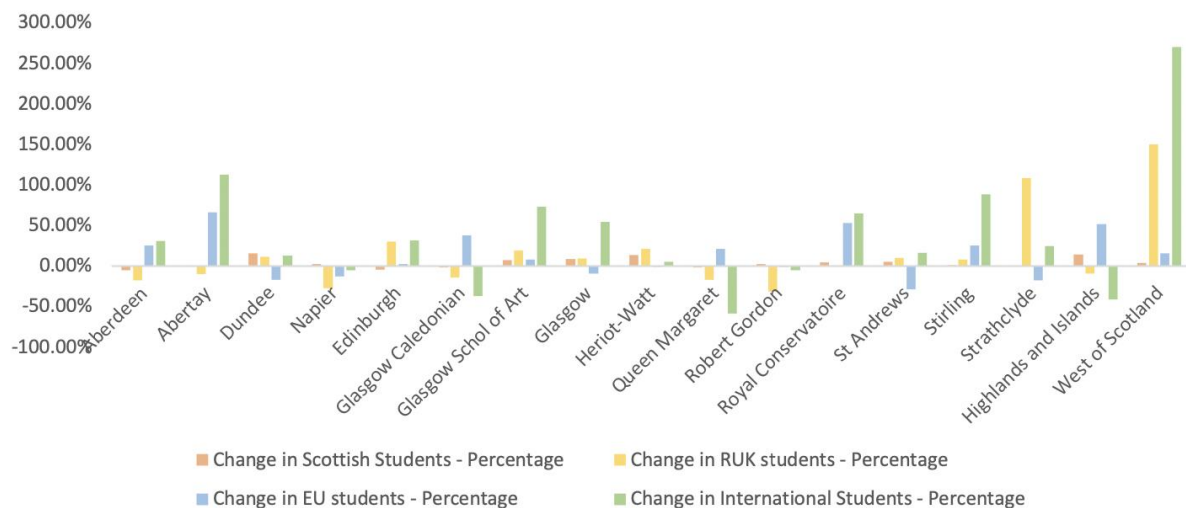


Figure 2 – Change in Undergraduate Population by Domicile between 2014/2015 and 2018/2019 (Greenwood & Irvine, 2020)

The findings demonstrate that the University of St Andrews, Scotland’s oldest university, only grew its Scottish population by 5.31% between 2014/2015 and 2018/2019. As of 2019, the Scottish student population only makes up 30.51% of the total student body. St

Andrews is not even representative of its home country. The little growth that the Scottish proportion experienced at the university ofver 4 years demonstrates that the university prefers to prioritise the enrollment of non-Scottish students, as they are required to pay for tuiton, which allows as many fee-paying students as the university can hold. The cap on Scottish students deminishes the Scottish population on campus, which results in Scottish students feeling that their sense of self is increasingly isolated. This feeling is further acknowledged with figure 3, a table illustrating the Scottish universities, and the breakdown of the student demographics present at each university. The following data was compiled from HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency between 2020 and 2021.

HE Provider	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Other UK	Total UK	European Union	Non-European Union	Total Non-UK	Not known	Total
The University of Aberdeen	1,765	60	9,255	170	5	11,255	2,160	2,665	4,825	0	16,080
Abertay University	185	5	3,715	25	0	3,930	535	110	645	0	4,575
The University of Dundee	1,885	60	10,630	585	10	13,170	1,050	2,010	3,055	0	16,230
Edinburgh Napier University	745	25	10,520	200	10	11,505	1,340	2,030	3,365	0	14,870
The University of Edinburgh	10,420	310	10,875	570	65	22,235	3,740	11,855	15,590	0	37,830
Glasgow Caledonian University	850	25	15,490	140	5	16,505	880	1,645	2,525	0	19,030
Glasgow School of Art	465	15	1,025	30	0	1,535	295	535	830	0	2,365
The University of Glasgow	3,890	140	19,215	635	20	23,900	3,095	10,150	13,245	0	37,145
Heriot-Watt University	1,405	45	6,115	340	15	7,925	770	2,500	3,270	0	11,200
The Open University	0	0	21,595	0	0	21,595	0	0	0	0	21,595
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	420	30	4,100	95	40	4,685	905	330	1,230	0	5,915
Robert Gordon University	705	30	10,670	55	20	11,475	1,050	1,720	2,770	0	14,240
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	200	10	635	20	5	870	180	280	460	0	1,330
The University of St. Andrews	2,885	110	3,185	150	25	6,355	1,040	4,090	5,130	0	11,485
SRUC	150	10	1,565	10	0	1,735	40	5	45	0	1,780
The University of Stirling	1,020	35	9,225	430	30	10,735	1,460	2,215	3,670	5	14,410
The University of Strathclyde	1,285	60	18,240	255	5	19,845	1,200	3,405	4,605	0	24,450
University of the Highlands and Islands	305	25	9,640	15	5	9,985	270	155	425	0	10,410
The University of the West of Scotland	940	5	14,465	35	0	15,450	555	1,935	2,490	0	17,935
Total	29,520	1,000	180,170	3,755	250	214,690	20,550	47,630	68,180	5	282,875

Figure 3 – Student Demographics of Scottish Universities from UK and Non-UK Domiciles (Perrott, 2022)

Figure 3 plots the proportion of UK students in Scottish universities, as well as non-UK students. If we look at the University of St Andrews, the total population is 11,465. Yet the Scottish proportion only makes up 3,185, which is dwarfed by other leading Scottish universities like Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee, who have 19,215, 10,785 and 10,630 Scottish students respectively. Clearly, the Scottish identity is lacking at the University of St Andrews, having to compete with 8,300 non-Scottish students. While this evidently gives the sense of an international community that St Andrews prides itself on, Scottish students, and their identities are threatened as a result of the mass of non-Scottish identity. This creates the sense of ‘not fitting in’ which seems ludicrous, considering it is the best university in Scotland. It is an institution that makes Scottish people proud to be Scottish. Yet Scottish individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are not getting enough placements here in St Andrews or more specifically, there are masses of fee-paying students that highlight the disparity in wealth.

According to *A Blueprint for Fairness*, the Scottish Government proposed that in 2021, 16% of university entrants should be from Scotland's most disadvantaged areas. (Silver, 2016) This was achieved in the academic year 2020/2021, which is a year ahead of schedule, according to Universities Scotland Director Alastair Sim. (Universities Scotland, 2021) Further, half of the Scottish student body come from disadvantaged areas, according to *The Scotsman*. (Wilson, 2019)

While this is a great accomplishment, granting these students access to prestigious universities like St Andrews indirectly threatens their identity, as international fee-paying students pay obscene tuition fees to study here at St Andrews, with medicine students overseas paying upwards of £35,000 per academic year. Figure 4 from the university's website displays the tuition fees non-Scottish students pay for to attend the university annually, with the obscene difference in fees illustrated.

Tuition fees for undergraduates	Approved 2021-2022	Approved 2022-2023	Approved 2023-2024	Notes
Home (funded) - Arts, Divinity, Science, Medicine	£1,820	£1,820	*	*to be confirmed by Scottish Government
RUK (England, Wales, N Ireland) - Arts, Divinity, Science, Medicine	£9,250	£9,250	£9,250	
Islands - Arts, Divinity, Science, Medicine	£9,250	£9,250	£9,250	
Overseas - Arts, Divinity, Science	2023 entrants	-	£28,190	2023 entrants - fixed tuition fees for the duration of study
Overseas - Arts, Divinity, Science	2022 entrants	-	£26,350	2022 entrants - fixed tuition fees for the duration of study
Overseas - Arts, Divinity, Science	2021 entrants	£25,100	£25,100	2021 entrants - fixed tuition fees for the duration of study
Overseas - Arts, Divinity, Science	2020 entrants	£23,910	£23,910	2020 entrants - fixed tuition fees for the duration of study
Overseas - Arts, Divinity, Science	2019 entrants	£22,350	£22,350	2019 entrants - fixed tuition fees for the duration of study
Overseas - Arts, Divinity, Science	2018 entrants	£21,290	£21,290	2018 entrants - fixed tuition fees for the duration of study
Overseas - Arts, Divinity, Science	2017 entrants	£20,570	£20,570	2017 entrants - fixed tuition fees for the duration of study
Overseas - Medicine	2023 entrants	-	£35,920	Tuition fees may increase each year and further information can be found on our Study at St Andrews webpage under the 'Tuition fees' heading
Overseas - Medicine	pre-2023 entrants	£32,910	£33,570	Fees may increase annually during the course of your study by up to 5% or up to the amount of the mandatory national levy.

Figure 4 – Undergraduate Tuition Fees with Subjects and Student Demographics (University of St Andrews, 2022)

Figure 4 displays the tuition fees for each student demographic. Home (funded) refers to Scottish students, which the Scottish government pays £1,820 to annually. In comparison, overseas students pay for their tuition themselves, and has grown in price between 2017 and 2023, priced from £20,570 to £28,190 per academic year. It is acknowledged that Scottish

students are not required to pay for their education, which is not being criticised here. Rather, this growth in the price of education for overseas students suggests that they require substantial wealth in order to study here, contrasting with Scottish students being paid for by the government. Due to the disparity in population between Scottish and non-Scottish students described in figure 3, along with the monolithic gap between education prices, the university indirectly propagates an elitist nature that is multiplying annually, detrimenting the Scottish individuals that study here. The identity of the Scottish widening access student is therefore threatened as a result of the propagated prestigious culture surrounding the university.

This threat is further recognised with the greed that the university expressed over the 2020/2021 academic year, when they admitted 20 times more postgraduate students in 2020 than 2019. (Geyer, 2022) While one may argue that this oversubscription is a result of postgraduate intake not requiring A-Levels, the university knowingly admitted more students than their capacity could cope with. Exceeding the prior year's enrollment of students is solely a way for the university to attain more profits and revenue, putting the welfare of its prospective students at risk. This overflow of students has created a housing crisis, which drives up the prices for accommodation and diminishes available places to live. For widening access students at a financial disadvantage, Gannochy House is the cheapest option for university accommodation, priced at around £550 a month. Yet there is only 167 rooms available there. (Geyer, 2022) A lack of available low-income friendly accommodation cannot be justified if half of the Scottish students attending the university are from low income backgrounds. This further reinforces the idea that the university, while advocating for widening access, is not doing enough to care for the identities of these students.

Another threat to the Scottish identity at the University of St Andrews comes in the form of the removal of Tennent's Lager in the Student's Union. As trivial as this point may seem, a large number of Scottish students at the university associate with the alcoholic drink, as (in contrast to other pints) Tennent's is cheap, it is brewed in Glasgow, and therefore is an essential component of the nightlife of Scottish students. This is especially relevant to those who may be allocating certain funds for going out with. Despite some concerned students petitioning, and the Tennent's company actually delivering pints to St Andrews students, the university were silent. Thomas Coombes, a former Scottish St Andrews student who organised the petition said, "The opportunity to drink Tennent's is one which should be available to any student in Scotland. To take it away from us is to deprive us all of the only thing which keeps the student population going through the long winter nights" (The Scotsman , 2016) This

further detriments the Scottish identity, who are even afflicted through the lack of a Scottish drink that is readily available in local pubs across St Andrews.

Critical Evaluation:

In this report, I have taken the concept of identity work, and applied it to the prominent issue of widening access at the University of St Andrews. By establishing the identity of the Scottish widening access student, and the financial hardships they experience, acknowledging the immense proportion of wealthy non-Scottish individuals creates a sense of ‘not fitting in’ for Scottish students less affluent than their overseas counterparts. This isolated feeling is further established with the statistical inference provided above, demonstrating that while the university acknowledges lower-income students welfare, it only does so to a certain extent.

However, there are shortcomings in the research I conducted in writing this report, that future research may be able to amend. This includes the specific identity confirmation techniques these threatened individuals implement when surrounded by non-Scottish students here at St Andrews. Perhaps surveys can be taken by Scottish students who identify with widening access backgrounds, who could then report on the way their identity is threatened with the prestigious nature of the university. Having closed questions in these surveys would allow easy processing, completion and analysis for both the interviewer and the interviewee. (Bell , et al., 2019) In addition, further research could be taken in regard to the cap on Scottish students at universities. Suppose the cap was lifted by the government, and Scottish students had to pay for their tuition, what would the effect be on widening access students? The fees may limit those able to afford to come to university, yet the abolishment of the cap would also allow as many Scottish students to study here as financially feasible, increasing the Scottish identity at the University of St Andrews. Moving forward, widening access should remain a priority for the University of St Andrews, yet by acknowledging the disparity between the identities of the rich and the poor who study here, the university can do more to ensure these students feel more welcome.

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