

# Clinical aptitude tests proved barrier for widening access to medicine



**ANALYSIS**  
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THE impression has always lingered that allowing students from disadvantaged backgrounds into university with lower grades is somehow dumbing down.

Now we have more hard evidence this is not the case as a talented group of students from schools serving some of the poorest communities in the

west of Scotland prepare to graduate from Glasgow University.

None of these newly-qualified doctors, dentists, vets and lawyers has benefited from professional parents with connections or the close attention of teachers from private schools with long experience of drilling pupils for a career in the professions.

Yet all are now standing on the brink of a professional career having been given a helping hand through the Scotland-wide Reach programme.

While this is an undoubted

success story there is still a long way to go before university entry is fair.

A study by academics from Dundee University published last year showed 80 per cent of students from 22 UK medical schools came from households containing professionals or those in higher managerial roles. More than one-quarter came from private schools.

There are also wider inequalities with middle class pupils dominating the majority of higher education courses at Ancient universities.

The Scottish Government has already moved to try to rectify

this by demanding that the proportion of university students from the poorest 20 per cent of households rises to 20 per cent by 2030.

As part of this drive, all Scottish universities have agreed to accept poorer students with lower exam grades in a bid to boost working class undergraduates.

However, the key to the success of the Reach initiative at Glasgow University does not just come down to adjusted offers.

Reach has developed as a sophisticated mechanism to identify candidates who would

do well but are just outside the thresholds normally expected of professional degrees.

In addition, the level of support and the interaction between the university and prospective students is considerable and allows staff to make first hand judgments about the potential of individuals.

Crucially it does not just come down to grades. Where Glasgow University has had particular success is in the identification of the UK-wide clinical aptitude test (UKCAT) as a key to widening access.

Some teachers have little

experience of the test and pupils can be ill-prepared compared to applicants from private sector schools or those serving middle class areas.

Therefore, since 2012, the university has lowered expected UKCAT scores by 10 per cent for access students and managed to double the numbers reaching the interview stage. Of these 57 extra candidates, 38 succeeded.

Glasgow officials believe the big lesson for all universities is that, rather than levelling the playing field, clinical aptitude

tests can be the most significant barrier to widening access.

