Among the manicured lawns and gilded masonry of the University of Glasgow the shoots of a quiet revolution are becoming visible. When they come into full bloom they will provide the key to delivering real and lasting social change across the elite institutions of Scotland’s higher education firmament.

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The university has revealed that almost 20 per cent of the Scottish students in the latest entry to its world-renowned school of medicine are from MD20 postcodes, the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and communities. Nineteen of this year’s intake participated in the university’s GAP (Glasgow Access Programme). The numbers are unprecedented among the elite Russell Group of universities and in the UK’s 34 medical schools.

Even though the seeds of this success were planted more than a decade ago and have been nurtured carefully since, this year’s numbers have been greeted with barely concealed delight and no little pride by the university’s senior academic officers.

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of the 20 GAP students they would have been delighted if even half had attained the required level to start the medical degree course. “We were simply astounded that all of them flourished on it and met the very stringent academic standards required to study medicine at Glasgow.”

The numbers are sure to be celebrated too at Bute House, the official residence of Nicola Sturgeon. During a speech at Wester Hailes education centre in Edinburgh in August 2015, the First Minister said her aim was to close the attainment gap in education completely.

“My priority for my time as First Minister – and let me be clear I want to be judged on this – is that every young person should have the same advantage that I had when I was growing up in Ayrshire.”

This was one of those rare occasions when a political leader ties her future to a set of outcomes that are easily measured but not so easily guaranteed. And although progress has been slow, with work still required to increase the numbers of pupils from poorer backgrounds obtaining Highers, there is comfort to be derived in how Glasgow University is engaging with secondary schools to widen access for their pupils and raise standards.

Dr Neil Croll, head of widening participation at Glasgow University for the last nine years, is unshakeable in his belief that this benefits the whole of Scottish society. He also rejects the view, espoused by many in the UK’s political and social elites, that widening access programmes penalises hard-working children from more affluent backgrounds.

“Look,” he said, “there are many historical and deeply-rooted barriers blocking the way to university for bright pupils from disadvantaged communities. It’s a tragic waste of talent that hurts the country.

“Essentially we have to remove those barriers and it’s not complicated. It’s simply a case of being serious about identifying these barriers at all levels of the process and then either removing them completely or finding ways of getting round them.

“If universities are serious about this we need to understand the social, cultural and economic complexities and challenges that exist in the lives of our target students. That’s what widening access is all about.”

He believes that Scotland’s universities were effectively punishing bright children in disadvantaged communities for being born poor.

“I wasn’t surprised that so many of the students who participated in our access programme are succeeding in getting onto our medical degree course. I mean, who would guess that people from disadvantaged areas had brains?” he says with more than a hint of bitter sarcasm.

Glasgow University’s GAP programme is one of a suite of pre-entry schemes widening participation for school leavers and adult returners to education. These include early secondary, summer school, top-up and access to career programmes and have expanded over the last few years. They now reach around 25,000 pupils in more than 120 secondary schools in the west of Scotland and their summer schools target pupils across all of Scotland’s 360 secondary schools.

The programmes are designed to address some of the challenges that students from disadvantaged areas have faced when making the transition from school to university. Each provides a route into every degree course at Glasgow and includes adjusted offers of entry.

They are characterised by close contact with the students through mentoring schemes and academic performance is monitored to ensure that each student is given the best possible chance to maintain their studies and obtain their degrees. The GAP for pre-entry into medicine includes classes in advanced biology, chemistry and biology and provides opportunities to obtain clinical experience. There is financial support through bursaries.

“When we embarked on this work only 4.5 per cent of our medical students came from MD20 postcodes, which was a disgrace,” said Dr Croll. “There are various
reasons why we’ve had this success. One of the main ones is a belief by the university that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can come in and do well. In terms of contextualisation [weighting personal circumstances] we’re not reducing the offer but tailoring the offer to fit the personal circumstances and challenges encountered by these students. In the past maybe people didn’t believe this and this arose from academic snobbery.

“Then there was a commitment to help these candidates get all the way through. The normal entry tariff for medicine at Glasgow is five As, but these students still have to get four As and a B or, in some circumstances, three As and two Bs, so it’s still a very stiff ask.”

Another major barrier preventing students from MD20 neighbourhoods is the UK Clinical Aptitude Test (CAT), which is used by all medical schools to sift out pupils beyond grades and which some believe is merely another method deployed by the academic establishment to keep poor students away. This is even before a selection interview where children from poorer backgrounds had also previously come unstuck. Perhaps lacking the confidence of more affluent and privately educated and expensively tutored children, they often failed to do themselves justice.

The GAP programme addresses this and provides other practical instructions, ranging from the art of writing scientific essays to arranging voluminous pillars of notes. These build on the students’ academic talents and gifts already present by providing the means to access the secret codes of the elites.

The medical degree course at Glasgow University or the Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) is effectively two degrees and one of the most psychologically and academically demanding courses in any university that offers it. Often it requires a 12-hour-a-day commitment of its students. Ryan McMillan

must add a few more hours to this. He lives in Dalmellington, the little market town in East Ayrshire, and can’t afford the large and often exploitative rents demanded by providers of student accommodation. He starts his day at 5am and two buses later he’s in place to start his first lecture.

He says the GAP year gave him a chance he wouldn’t otherwise have had. “I got a good group of Highers at Doune Academy but just missed out on the Glasgow University entry requirement,” he said. “But the programme helped me out as the UKCAT barrier had been my downfall. I eventually got an offer from Edinburgh but it was too far from home and renting was out of the question.

“Then the GAP programme opportunity came out of nowhere. I got an email asking me to apply and here I am. It’s provided me with an outlook on Glasgow and given me the chance to see what it’s like having to

Many historical barriers block the way to university for bright pupils from disadvantaged communities
Dr Neill Croll, the head of widening participation at the university
Professor John Paul Leach, head of undergraduate medicine at Glasgow University
travel here every day. The reach programme and the summer school I attended changed everything.”

Melanie Gilmour, a former pupil of Govan High, found out about the GAP programme after she’d completed her Highers. “I’d thought about medicine,” she said, “but never really made it apparent to anyone because no one from my area had done that before. So I applied and was surprised to get an interview a week later. If it wasn’t for this programme I wouldn’t have been able to study medicine.”

Life at an elite university can be a daunting prospect for students who are coming from a working-class area. Often they may be the only pupils from their class who have made it through the obstacle course and arrive on day one alone.

They may experience feelings of alienation caused by lack of finances as they encounter a big, confident student body seemingly at ease with themselves. Many will have experienced a degree of trauma in their home lives and in the challenges of simply surviving in edgy areas.

Fiona Spence, from Port Glasgow, was pleasantly surprised, though, at her initial experiences among Glasgow University’s student body.

“I did think initially the class thing might be a factor, but I haven’t experienced any judgmentalism at all. Everyone’s been very friendly and welcoming, although they all knew from the outset who the GAP students were. I was a bit scared that I might not fit in, but it just hasn’t been an issue. I also feel that what’s for you won’t go by you and that it was simply a case of keeping at it and taking the chances as they arrived.”

Professor Matthew Walters, head of medicine, dentistry and nursing at Glasgow, has been impressed by the attitude of the students from the widening access programmes.

“The students have been a delight to teach; they’ve engaged fully on this and have done well in the exams. The difference has been the desire and the commitment of the students themselves. We give them the basic science they need and clinical contextualisation of that science. Not just the science of medicine of medicine but the art of medicine.

“All we’ve done really is target the committed students and given them the extra year to help them get here. We’ve taken into account those circumstances that might previously have prevented them getting here and blocked them out and provided them with a route to get here.”

Here again, programmes such as these come up against opposition stemming from entrenched attitudes.

Surely, it’s claimed, that if you ease the entrance tariff for medicine and the law then you risk undermining intellectual integrity?

At worst this can lead to obvious catastrophes. In law and medicine there can surely be no room for sentiment or reduced rigour? Professor Walters counters this
easily and has the proof to back him up. “We have been inspected and commended by the General Medical Council for our widening access programme and for our contextualisation processes. Not so long ago our medical school lagged behind at the lower end of the UK’s 34 medical universities.

In the last couple of years we have been rated second overall, behind Oxford, and it’s no coincidence that this has occurred as our widening access programme has begun to bear fruit. There is absolutely no question that students who have come through widening access deserve to be here and have the ability to thrive. We have just injected some fairness into the selection procedure.”

Initially the university encountered a degree of incredulity from teachers in the inner-city comprehensives who had long ago resigned themselves to their pupils rarely being able to access the anointed and elite courses of our top universities. Now, it seems, a small revolution has been achieved here too.

Dr Croll said: “They point-blank refused to believe us when we said we wanted to do this. They felt they had been here before with us and been let down; we had to gain their trust too. So we took account of what we were hearing from schools and the local authorities and constructed our programmes around this.”

Although the GAP students can get onto the courses with slightly lower qualifications, there is a recognition at the university that an A pass at St Roch’s or Springburn Academy is worth more than an A at Williamwood or St Aloysius.

These children can also act as role models for others from similar backgrounds and the schools now believe it’s worth their engaging with the university. Dr Croll smiles as he recalls a recent meeting with some South Lanarkshire schools.

“One of the head teachers who had been a scathing and cynical critic of this in 2010 came up to me at a university funding council event, gave me a big hug and said: ‘You’ve changed the outlook of my school’. It was brilliant.”

In a small tutorial space in the smart new medical building at the foot of University Avenue, Joshua Hewitt, a former pupil of Springburn Academy, is reflecting on his life-changing moments.

“Many pupils who attended schools like mine are conditioned into believing that they can’t reach certain things. There’s a lack of belief that they can actually do a course like this because of where they live.”

Joshua and his new friends are from similar backgrounds, each with back stories of social challenges and obstacles overcome. Once they were told to expect little from life and not to get too far ahead of themselves; to know their place.

Now their lives are opening up with possibilities brought about by exposing them to nothing more than fairness and equality.
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