

LEAPS 20 Years On – Evidence of Effectiveness

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Abstract

LEAPS is a successful and unique widening participation programme, funded by its higher education institutions and local council partners, to increase progression to higher education in South East Scotland. LEAPS is also supported by in kind contributions from Skills Development Scotland. From 2010 LEAPS has also implemented the Scottish Funding Council's widening access policy 'Schools for Higher Education Programme', in the South East of Scotland.

LEAPS has been in existence since 1995. The aims of the programme remain consistent and are contained within this paper. The paper looks back at LEAPS and examines why it has endured, concentrating on two areas:

- How membership of LEAPS helps the partners to meet institutional and governmental strategic commitments, and
- Improved student progression to higher education.

By taking a long view, the paper records changes in the strategic demands for partners; and how membership of LEAPS helps them achieve this. Changes in progression to higher education are presented as evidence of impact. LEAPS works as a combination of outreach, intensive advice and guidance, brokering, and an access Summer School. These activities are underpinned by structural contextual admissions policies. The programme seeks to change the culture in schools with low progression to higher education. Further, it aims to facilitate greater social mobility, and increase the numbers of disadvantaged and under-represented students entering higher education. A review of programme structure, strategy and outcomes is provided. Initial evidence is provided of our evaluation activities.

Introduction

LEAPS (Lothian Equal Access Programme for Schools) is now twenty years old. It is a widening access programme to Higher Education for school students. It is

funded by local authorities, universities, and more recently the Scottish Funding Council. It specifically serves to widen participation to higher education in South East Scotland. This paper presents evidence of impact to date.

National Strategy

The LEAPS partnership was established in 1995 to build on the success of a four-year pilot project at the University of Edinburgh. LEAPS was constructed to facilitate systematic widening of access from local schools to universities. The report *'From Elitism to Inclusion'* (Woodrow, 1998) explored good practice in admissions and highlighted that access to Higher Education was not fair across all social classes. It provided supporting evidence that work undertaken by LEAPS was in harmony with the National agenda in this respect. In Scotland, twenty years later, widening access remains a priority. For example, the First minister stated "I want us to determine now that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities, by the time they leave school should have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities" (Sturgeon, November 2014).

What are LEAPS Objectives?

LEAPS is a partnership between schools, universities, local authorities and Skills Development Scotland in the South East Scotland. Its objectives are stated as:

- Provide young people and their parents with advice, information and encouragement to consider higher education, accessed directly or through a college articulation route, as an attractive and attainable option
- Provide impartial information and advice about courses and routes to higher education
- Raise awareness of widening participation issues and challenge traditional assumptions about admissions criteria within (a) higher education institutions and (b) schools.
- Enhance the prospects of young people fulfilling their academic potential by promoting positive attitudes to learning and acquisition of learning skills to ensure effective transition to and success in higher education
- Monitor and evaluate student progression into and through higher education.

Stakeholders, Schools and Young Learners

LEAPS has many stakeholders. Which include: local authorities (Edinburgh City Council, West, East and Mid-Lothian Councils, and Scottish Borders Council), 59

schools, five universities (Edinburgh Napier University, Heriot-Watt University, Queen Margaret University, The Scottish Rural College, and the University of Edinburgh), Skills Development Scotland (a Scottish Government supported careers service), and parents/carers and students. A management board oversees strategy, while LEAPS staff deliver the programme. There are eleven core staff, which are further supported by a network of collaborators.

The LEAPS Process

LEAPS seeks to meet its objectives by raising aspirations, providing information, advice and guidance; along with practical interventions. In summary, there are three key activities,

i) events, ii) interviews, and iii) Summer Schools.

- i) Events (e.g., workshops and on-campus activities) are initially delivered at twenty priority schools. These schools have been identified by historically lower progression rates to higher education. Interventions mostly occur during the third and fourth years of High School. Typically, there are approximately 80 events, with around 2000 students participating. Events vary from half day interactive projects, school seminars and workshops. To illustrate, most activities involve volunteer-led sessions, frequently with ex-LEAPS University students. During the final two years of school, the programme is expanded to incorporate students from the remaining 39 schools. The potential beneficiaries at this stage is now typically between 6,000-8,000 students and their parents.

- ii) Interviews also take place in the final two years of High School. They have two parts, initially, 700-800 students are followed up with the twenty priority schools in their penultimate year of secondary education; and subsequently, again embracing the remaining 39 partner schools. The goals of the interviews are to advise, guide and broker with Universities regarding admission. During an eight-week period in the final year of secondary school, approximately 2,200 interviews take place in the 59 schools participating. The scope of the advice and guidance offered typically relates to an individual's potential higher education choices. For example, realistic options regarding grades for specific courses. The final, and a key component of the interviews is a brokering activity. Usually, this involves a pre-application enquiry, and action plan. Acting as an advocate in this way for the students, has several substantial potential benefits.

“...assisting students in the making of choices; being clear about what is on offer; ensuring adequacy of resources; and managing the transition into higher education such that students gain an early appreciation of what higher education is asking of them.” (Yorke and Thomas, 2003, pp. 63-74)

Such advocacy leverages the established relationship between LEAPS and University admissions staff through negotiation regarding potential admissions criteria (four months prior to our National Admissions System, UCAS). Further, it presents in a clear, friendly and concrete fashion, the requirements of the student. For example, in some cases, a university will require an additional demonstration of the potential to succeed in higher education; which may be evidenced by successful graduation from the LEAPS Summer School.

- iii) The LEAPS Summer School is a seven week pre-admissions access programme. To attend, students must be holding a University offer. Frequently, this will have followed on from the brokering process, and will specifically require Summer School graduation. In terms of its structure, all partner Universities contribute to the delivery of 14 academic courses targeted to specific degrees. Additionally, all students must complete an academic skills programme. Student feedback suggest this prepares them well for the rigours of undergraduate study. In 2014, 165 students participated, with 154 graduating; of those 123 progressed to University with a further 24 accessing HNC/Ds at college.

In non-priority schools, student eligibility for LEAPS support is based on individual factors. Specifically, low family income, 1st generation application, students without parents or carers, or those with caring responsibilities for others. In contrast, all those attending priority schools with potential to access higher education are eligible for LEAPS support. These criteria match those of the University partners with respect to their contextual admissions policies.

Evidence

Evidence is presented below concerning progression to higher education from schools in the LEAPS portfolio. Data is separated by school type (historically

low or high progression to higher education). For those schools with historically low progression, findings are further divided into long term school partners and recent additional schools. Specifically, these are schools that have entered LEAPS since its remit has broadened to encompass SHEP. Institutions with traditionally higher progression are also shown as either those broadly above or below the national average for higher education admissions. Criteria for low progression have changed. In 2001, the threshold for the low progression category was 16%. From 2010, the threshold has been 22%. Five year averages are adopted to account for annual variability.

Figure 1 shows progression data from LEAPS schools with traditionally low progression to higher education. Five year averages are presented from prior to 2000 with prior to 2015. Clearly, the green area portrays a generally positive picture of increased participation. For one school, progression is not demonstrated. Considering this in more detail, the school previously had a history of reasonable progression. However, weaker recent data have led to the school becoming a priority one for LEAPS. Early indications suggest that additional support is paying dividends.

In Figure 2, several recent additions to the LEAPS portfolio of schools are presented. These schools joined the programme as part of the broadening remit under SHEP. Consequently, available data is more limited, as shown; and while generally positive, it would be premature to draw substantive conclusions regarding improved progression.

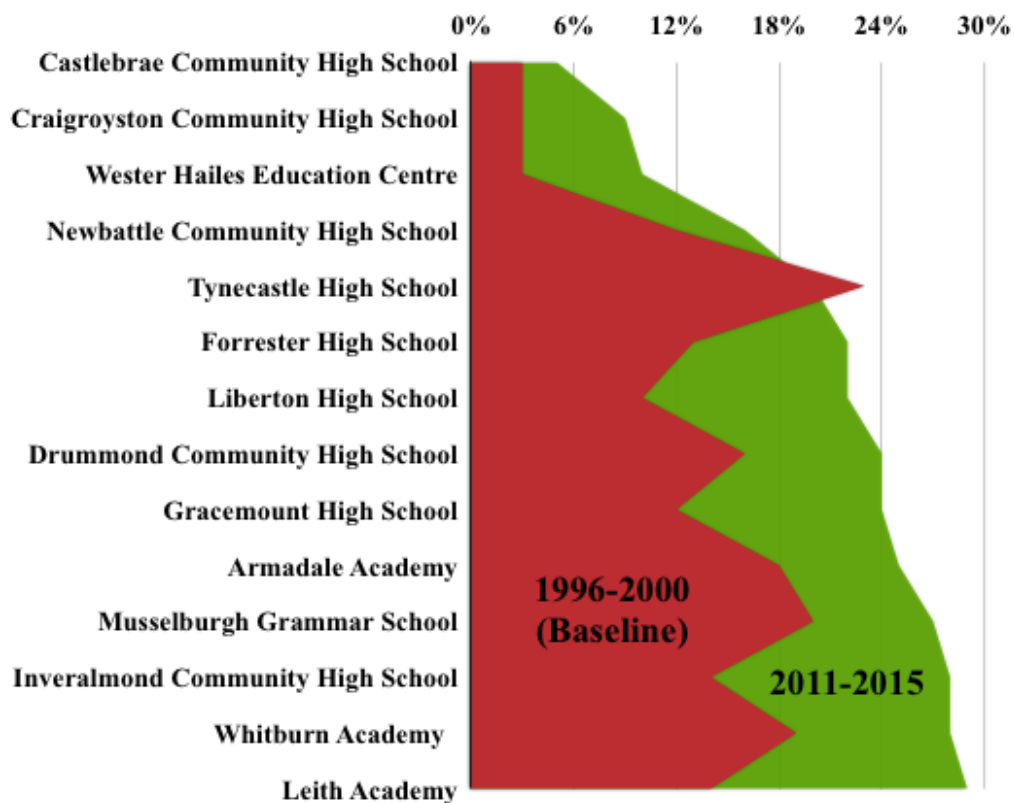


Figure 1. Percentage change in progression to higher education (Schools with historically low progression, national average = 38%)

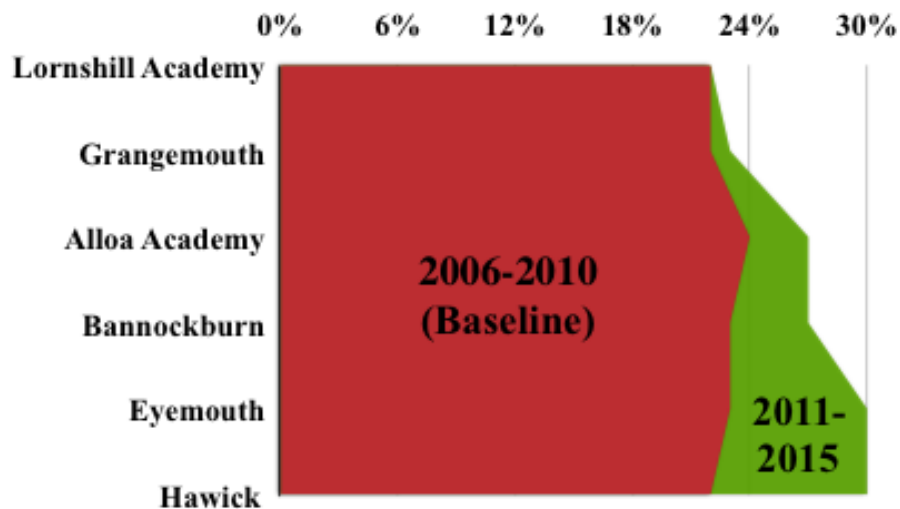


Figure 2. Percentage change in progression to higher education (Recent additions to LEAPS schools with historically low progression, national average = 38%)

Data is shown in figures 3 and 4 for schools with below or above national average progression to higher education respectively. Both groups are non-

priority LEAPS schools as a consequence of historically better engagement with higher education than the priority schools. In consideration of Figure 3, it should be noted that Ross High School, Dean’s Community High School, Holy Rood Roman Catholic High School, Preston Lodge High School and Broughton High Schools were previously classified as priority schools. However, during their interaction with LEAPS results have improved sufficiently for them to migrate into the non-priority group.

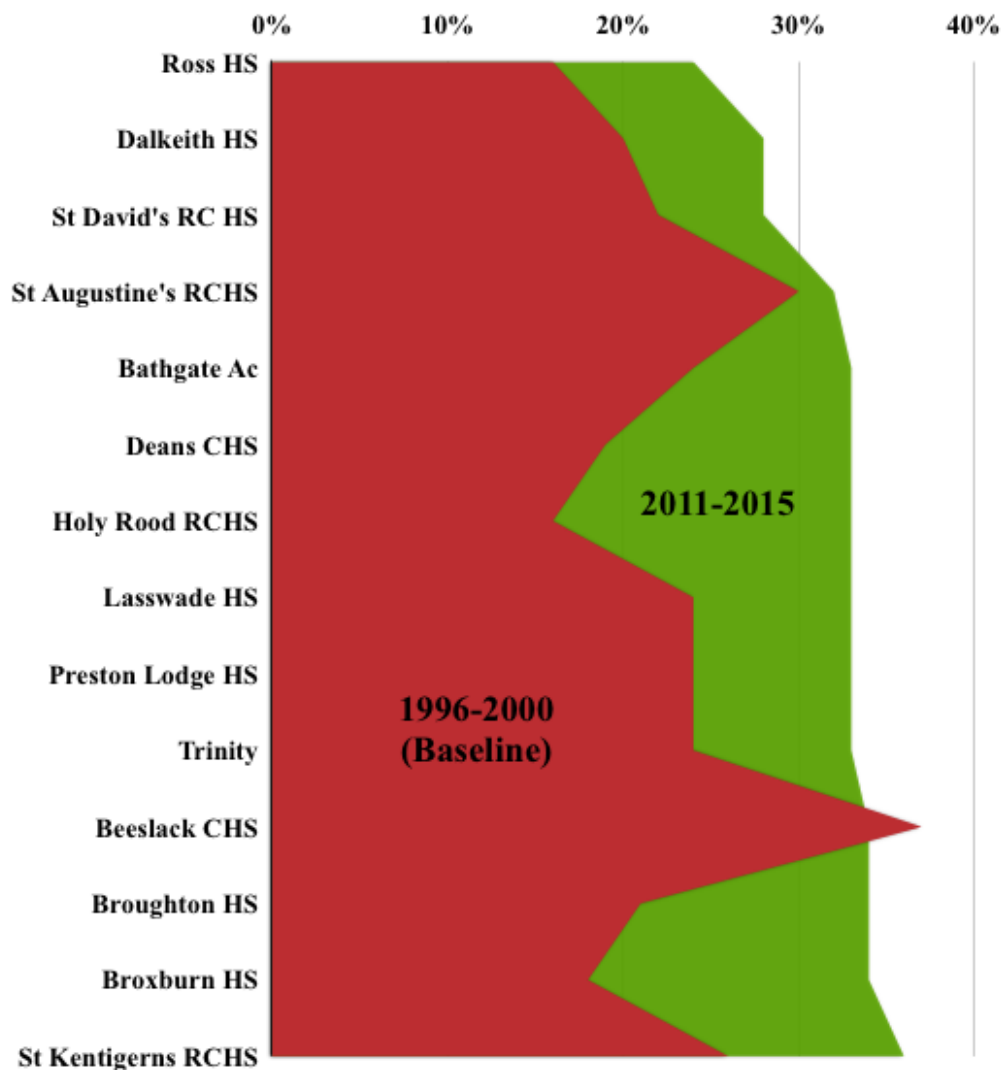


Figure 3. Percentage change in progression to higher education (Schools with broadly below national average (38%) progression)

Figure 4 shows schools that are performing as well as any in the Scotland. Within this group, James Young High School was also previously a priority

school, but is now performing at around the national average for progression to higher education. Within the non-priority schools, several have effectively doubled their progression rates over the fifteen-year period.

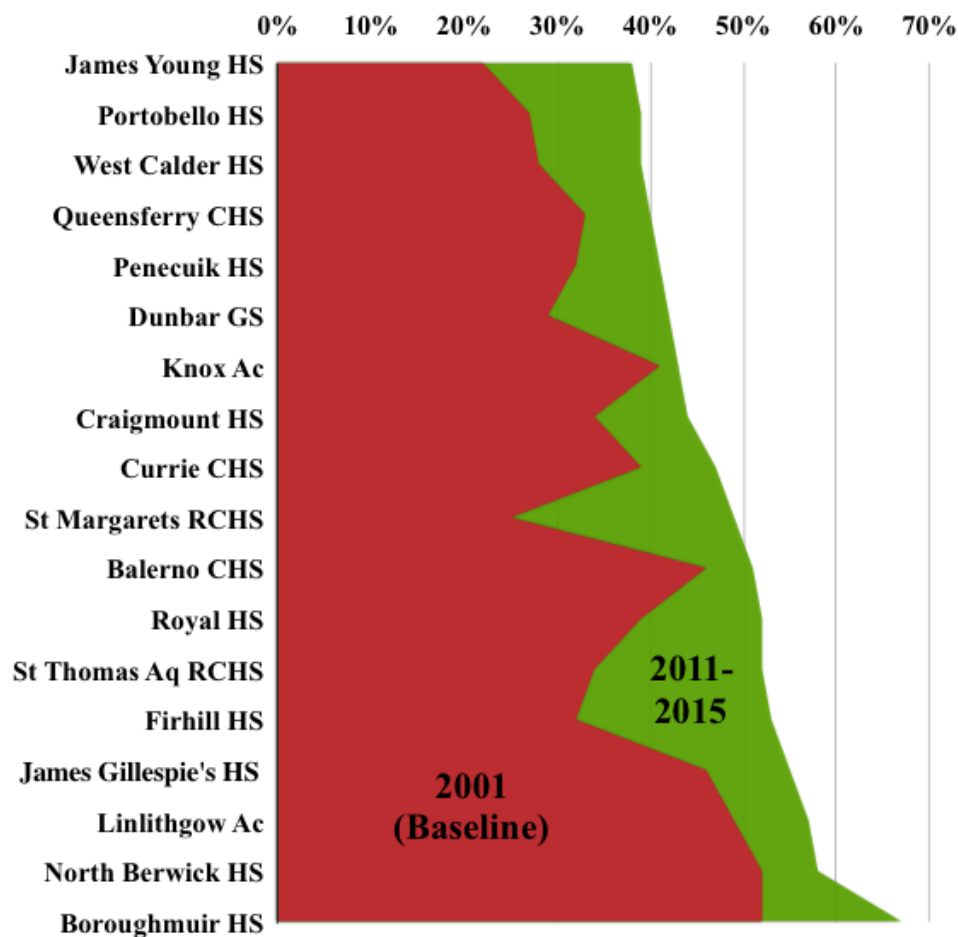


Figure 4. Percentage change in progression to higher education (Schools with historically high progression, national average = 38%)

Partnership and Strategic Interests

LEAPS partnership has many benefits. For example, in Scotland universities and colleges are required to commit to widening access policies through established ‘outcome agreements’. Membership of LEAPS allows partners to demonstrate this commitment in a tangible fashion through, financial support, resource sharing, and contributions to good practice. In the recently published report ‘A blueprint for fairness’ (CoWA, 2016) one of the major recommendations was:

‘[the] Universities, colleges, local authorities, schools, [and the] SFC [Scottish Funding Council] funded access programmes and early-years providers, should work together to deliver a

coordinated approach to access which removes duplication and provides a coherent and comprehensive offer to learners.'

Over the last twenty years, LEAPS has delivered just such a co-ordinated programme. Since 1995, it has had partnerships between Local Authorities, universities and Skills Development Scotland. From 2010 LEAPS has additionally delivered the SFC-funded access initiative named the 'Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP)'. The substantive addition here is the inclusion of Colleges as partners and stakeholders. Considering the CoWA (2016) report with respect to LEAPS strategy; the missing piece of the puzzle remains the links with early-years schooling. Practitioners are starting to explore mechanisms by which such relationships may be formalised. LEAPS seeks to audit and rationalise such activity within an evidence-based framework to meet this requirement. Any development in this area, will require greater local authority input. From the perspective of the local authority, partnership with LEAPS allows them to address strategic quality and policy requirements for, equality of opportunity and more positive higher education destinations.

Scottish, United Kingdom and European Co-ordination Activities

It is considered that the weight of evidence suggests the LEAPS process meets its objectives and is constructive in widening access to higher education. Relationships exist with the other three SHEP teams in Scotland. Under SHEP good practice is exchanged with the other LEAPS-type initiatives, Aspire-North (North Scotland), Lift-off (Fife and Tayside) and Focus-West (West of Scotland). Knowledge exchange is facilitated via seminars, informal meetings and workshops. The Scottish Funding Council hosts an annual conference 'Learning for All' which aims to focus on shared practice throughout 'widening access' in the broadest sense. While a constructive step, the breadth of this event limits its effectiveness in addressing the future needs of the current four SHEP activities. Considering the National perspective, there are two networks, NEON (National Education Opportunities Network) and FACE (Forum for Access and Continuing Education). These operate as practitioner and research platforms to share experiences and training opportunities within the UK. As Europeans, the EAN (European Access Network) provides a structure to exchange practice, research, evidence, and opportunities. It is considered that a European framework is required to facilitate concrete, evidence-based exchange of good practice; in order to improve widening access in our society. Such a framework

could provide opportunities for research and dissemination of evidenced effective activity.

Evaluation

LEAPS recognised several years ago the importance of optimising its activities. To address this a programme of evaluation research was commissioned. The initial research has four aims, i) to audit and optimise student entry to Higher education, ii) to quantify performance of LEAPS students with respect to the non-LEAPS student cohort, iii) to identify factors predictive to success (or failure) from the LEAPS process, and iv) to disseminate findings.

In summary, the Evaluation Process had two phases. In the first phase, LEAPS data was compared to institutional data from one Higher Education Partner to test the general feasibility of the process. The intention of the project is to specifically consider one cohort, i.e., those entering Higher Education in academic year 2010/11. To achieve the Phase One aims, several important steps were required. One institution, Heriot-Watt University acted as the Data Analyst for the project, acting under contract on behalf of LEAPS.

Subsequently, a Data Sharing Agreement was developed. This requires each contributing partner to agree to, along with LEAPS and the Data Analysts; to ensure minimal, reasonable, and proper handling of individual data. For example, encryption, anonymity, and storage. Additionally, partner-specific processes were required concerning individual student consent for information sharing. For example, participating LEAPS students have previously agreed to have their progress tracked through Higher Education. However, partners had differing interpretations regarding specific implementation of requiring student consent.

Results from Phase I showed that 98% of LEAPS students could be successfully matched to the institutional records systems. 96% could be matched from full name, date of birth and application year alone. Ambiguities existed in 20% of the dataset. The nature of these was largely typographical errors and inconsistencies, e.g., transposed figures in dates. The remaining four unresolved students were either, rejected, deferred entry, offer declined, or in one case, not matched. One emergent outcome concerned the need for consistency of terms in discussion between partners and LEAPS. For example, the institutional 2010/11 cohort were identified in LEAPS systems as the 2009/10 cohort of school leavers.

During the second phase of the project, the remaining partners are invited to collaborate and share data. Specifically, the data sharing encompasses, i) matching of LEAPS student and institutional data, and optionally ii) sharing of non-LEAPS control data from other students on the same degree programmes, see Figure 5. To date, two of the five partners have data sharing agreements in place, two further are in the process of negotiating specific details, and one has elected not to participate.

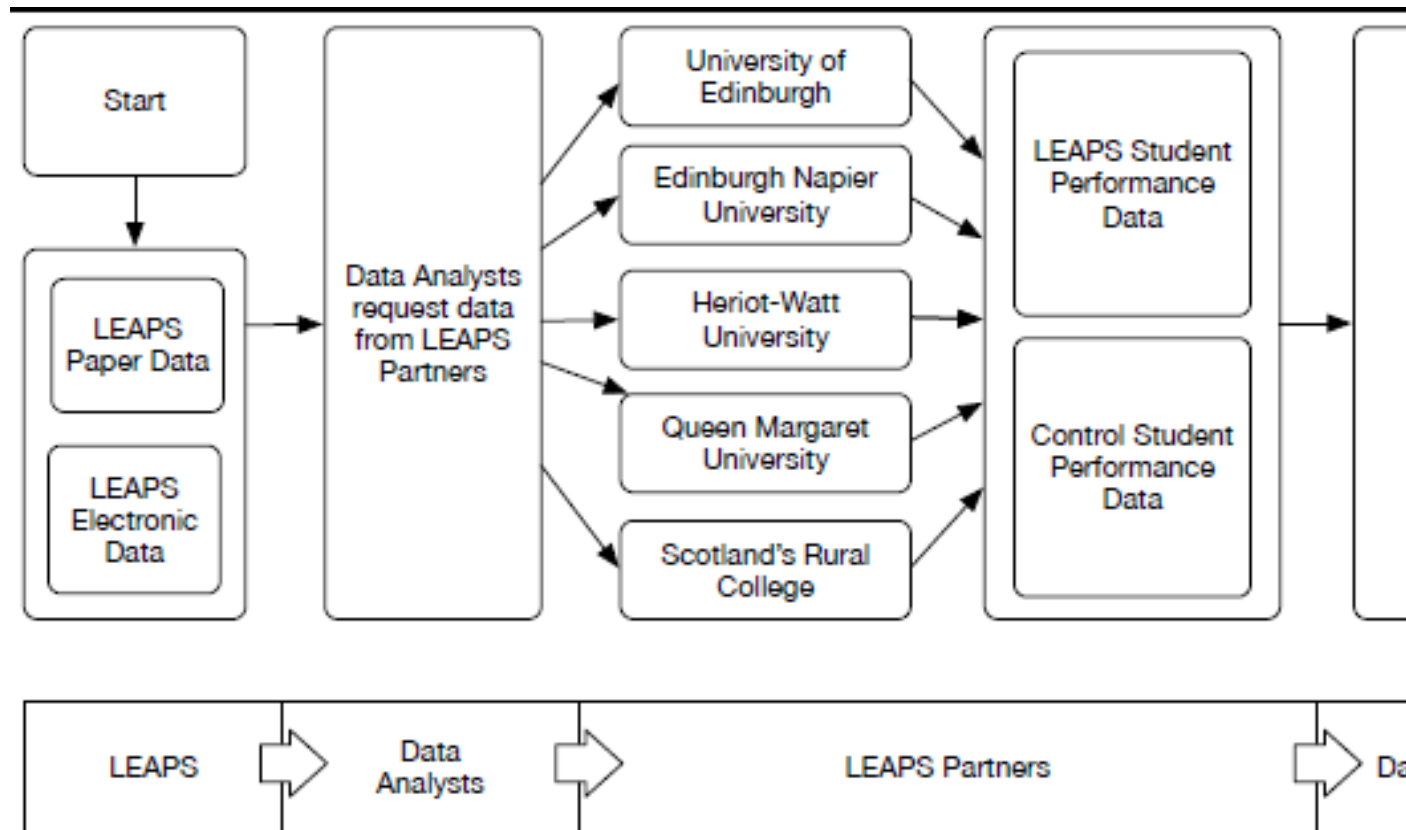


Figure 5. LEAPS 'Tracking' Evaluation Overview (information flow)

Prior to our evaluation activities, there was uncertainty regarding Higher Education destinations from LEAPS-eligible students. Students would state their intended destination, but there was no explicit feedback to LEAPS regarding their actual choices. Each partner has institution-specific student records systems, as do LEAPS, and the systems are disconnected. For example, one practical output from the initial evaluation work was to recommend adoption of the Scottish Candidate Number (SCN) as a consistent identifier for Scottish students. Subsequently, the CoWA report (CoWA, 2016) has also recommended this step. It is suggested that, with respect for personal privacy concerns, it would be possible to go further here to implement a European-level student identifier.

Some preliminary analysis of the Phase I results considered whether school type (historically high or low Higher Education progression) or Summer School graduation (Yes or No) were significant predictors of degree success. Logistic regression did not reveal either factor to be statistically significant $\chi^2 = 5.11$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.07$. Phase II data is in the process of collection, and consequently results are not yet available. The distribution of LEAPS student degree outcomes with respect to published institutional data can be seen in Figure 6. In considering interpretation of this data, it should be considered that Phase I evaluation data was analysed just prior to the availability of result for students in a 'fifth' year of study. For example, those on M.Eng degrees or those repeating a year.

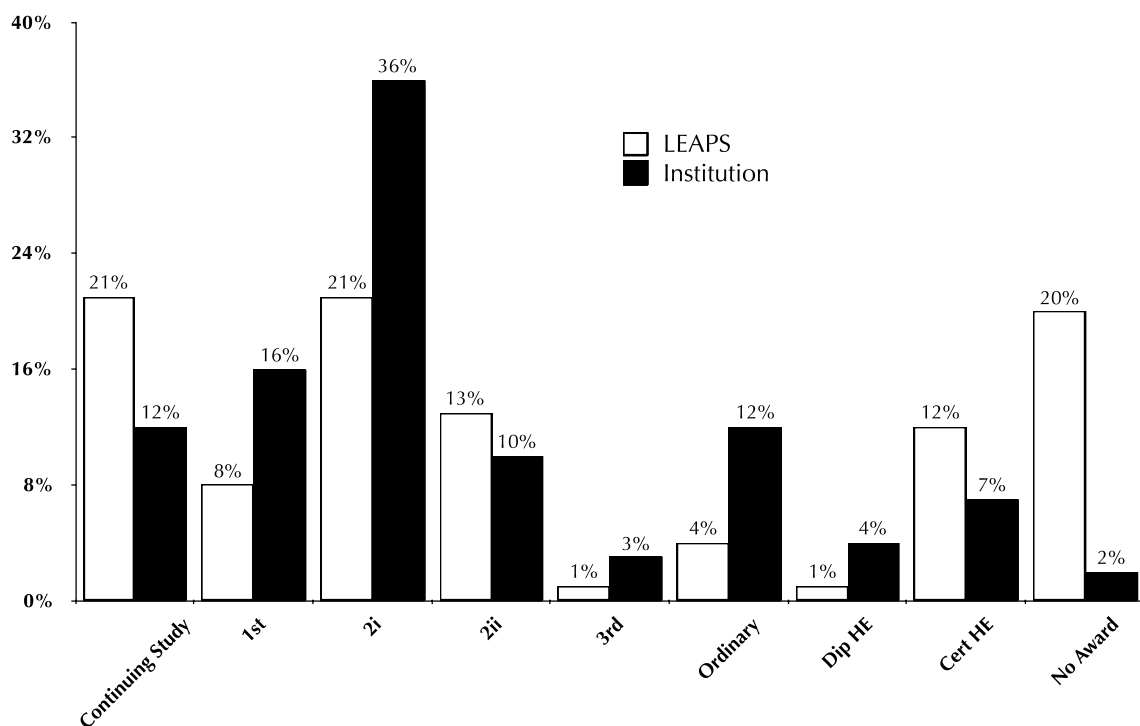


Figure 6. Phase 1 Preliminary evaluation data: LEAPS student degree outcomes

This paper marks the start of the evaluation dissemination activities. We believe that a strategic framework is required to share good practice at Scottish, United Kingdom and European levels. The exchange of evidence-based practice, 'coal face' experiences and collegiate debate promises to jump start a more co-ordinated, effective and supportive widening-access agenda.

There are no quick fixes and this has been a sustained and committed effort by LEAPS partners in local authorities and higher education institutions but the culture in schools is changing. There are potential higher education students in all of the schools in Edinburgh, the Lothians and across the South East

Scotland. The partnership continues to identify, support, advise, guide and broker for students; to help them make the transition from school to higher education. It should be added that research has shown that the programme has also had a positive effect on retention (McLements, 2003).

Conclusions

LEAPS history, process and impact has been reviewed in this paper. Available evidence from the last twenty years, points to increased participation in higher education in Edinburgh and the Lothians, relative to pre-LEAPS and early LEAPS periods. The evidence presented here is argued to provide a strong case to suggest the LEAPS model has made a meaningful impact.

There are many other factors which help increase progression; increased attainment in schools, being the most important, school leadership and a changing culture in schools. LEAPS requires a strong relationship with school link teachers to ensure that students are able to access the support through the admissions process offered by the partnership.

LEAPS aims to normalise the idea that progression to Higher Education is attainable. This paper tries to make the case that common strategies in government, local authorities, higher education institutions, and schools; can meet our societal objectives. Importantly, we hope it provides indicative evidence that a 'joined up' approach can have a positive impact, if sustained over time.

References

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