

An aerial photograph of a formal garden featuring complex, symmetrical topiary hedges. The hedges are meticulously trimmed into various shapes, including spheres, cones, and rectangular blocks, creating a maze-like pattern. A central path winds through the garden, and the overall scene is a vibrant green. A small yellow horizontal line is visible in the upper left quadrant of the image.

# Alternative pathways

To what and for who? Sub-degree study in Scotland

Dr Lucy Hunter Blackburn

# What makes Scottish higher education distinctive?

- Four year degree
- Free tuition (T&Cs apply)
- High take-up of well-recognised forms of short-cycle higher education

## How is HN study different from degree study?

- Overwhelmingly in colleges not universities
- More local: delivered across many more sites than degrees
- Quicker: 1 or 2 years vs 3+ for a degree, normally at least 4
- More vocational/practical focus
- More direct teaching
- *Student funding is the same as for a degree, and different from further education*

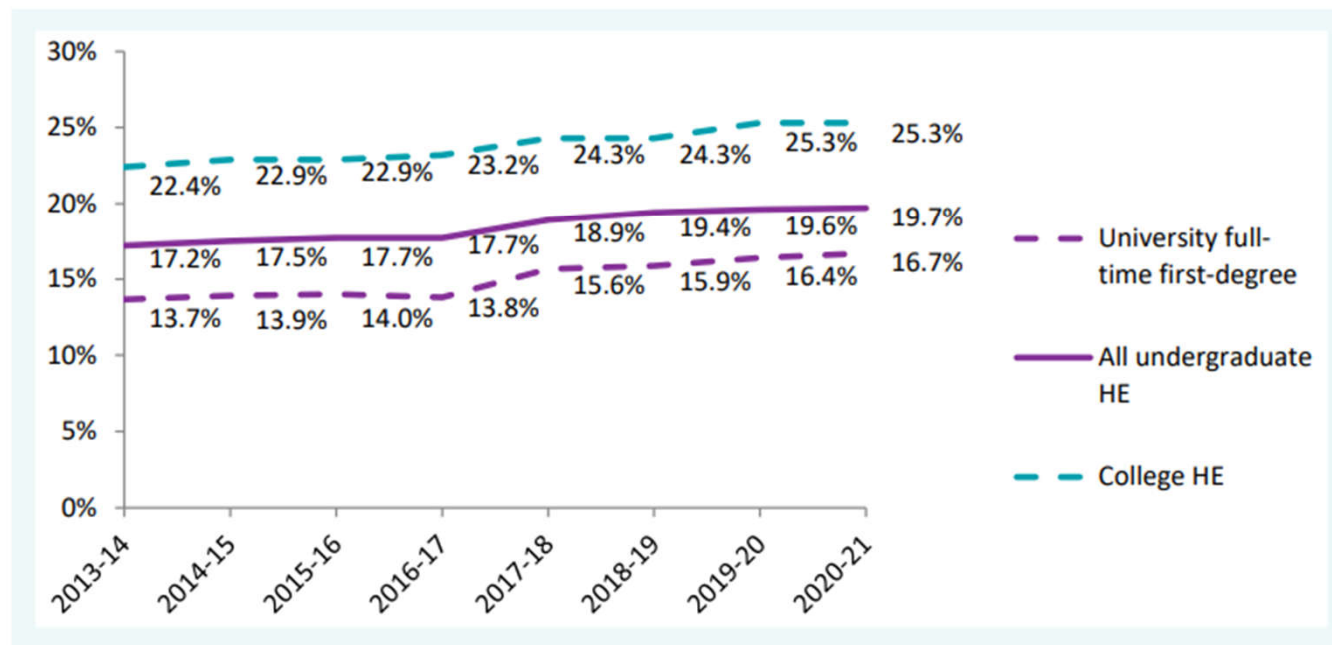
# How many students?

- Main sub-degree qualifications for new entrants are Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds), Level 7 and 8 in the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF)
- Looking at HN and undergraduate degree students in Scotland as a group
- HNC/D in 2020-21
  - One-fifth of all such students
  - One-third of all entrants and all qualifiers
  - One-quarter of those in receipt of student funding
- Much higher than in rest of the UK: 7% of all UK undergraduates are sub-degree, all types

# Who studies at HN?

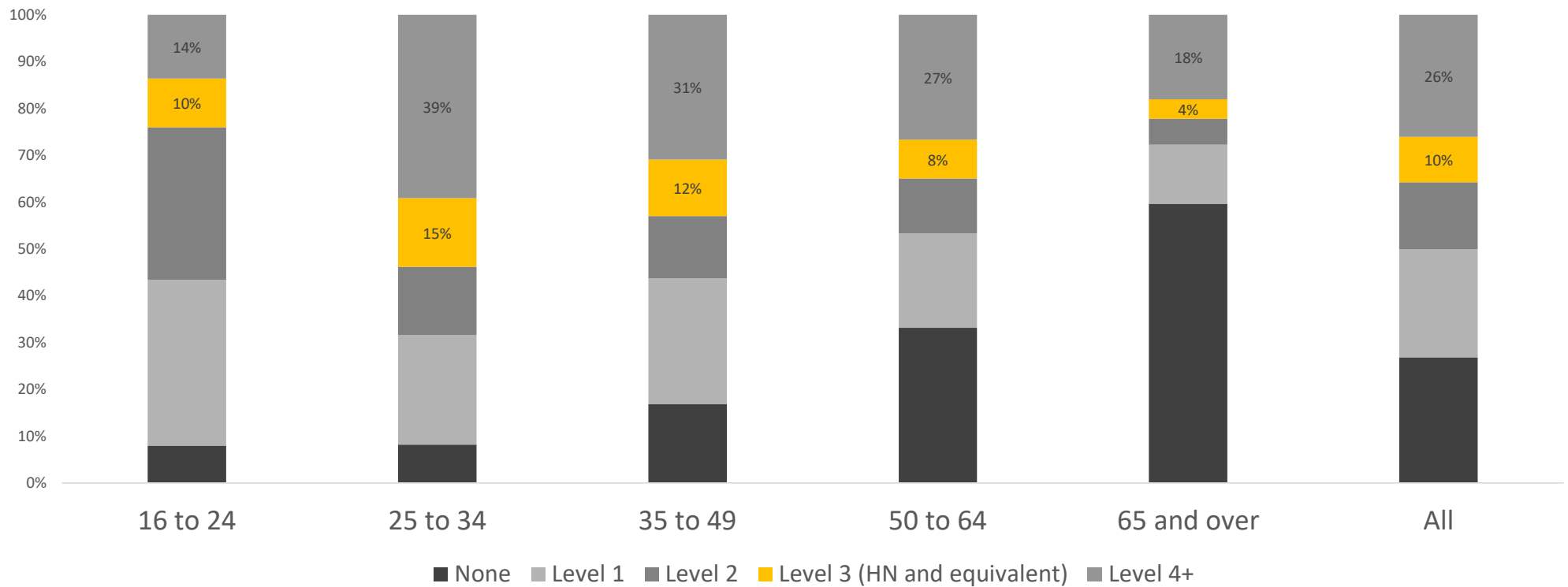
Source: Report on Widening Access 2020-21, SFC

**Figure 1: The proportion of Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants, college entrants and all undergraduate HE entrants from SIMD0-20 areas, 2013-14 to 2020-21.**



# Highest level of qualification in Scotland

Source: 2011 census



## Costs of sub-degree study

- Sub-degree study is not a zero debt activity
- Sub-degree students are less likely to borrow for living costs than degree students, but they still borrow. HND students more likely to use loans than HNC.
- Lower total borrowing, more likely to be repaid in full at lower earnings
- Opportunity costs: all full-time study means years out of labour market (matters more for women than men)

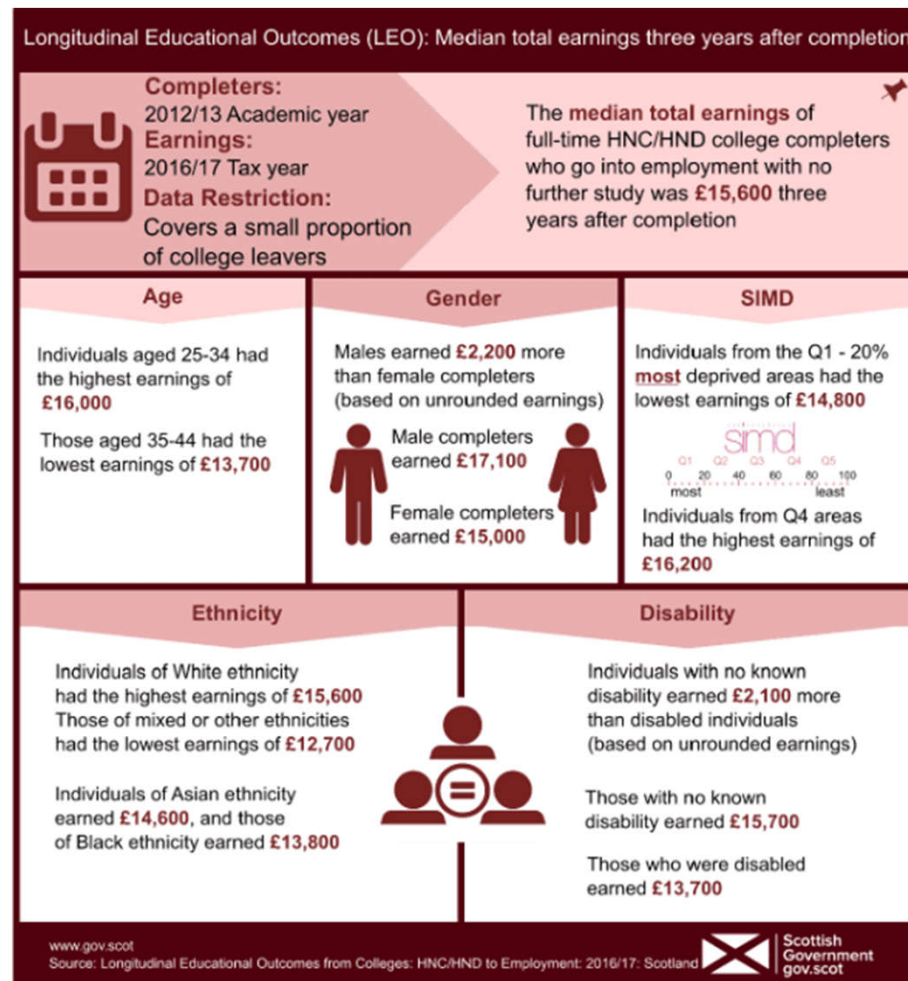
Benefits:  
classic list for  
higher  
education

- Earnings
  - Employment
  - Job satisfaction
  - Life satisfaction/wellbeing
- 
- Much more limited information for sub-degree than for degree graduates



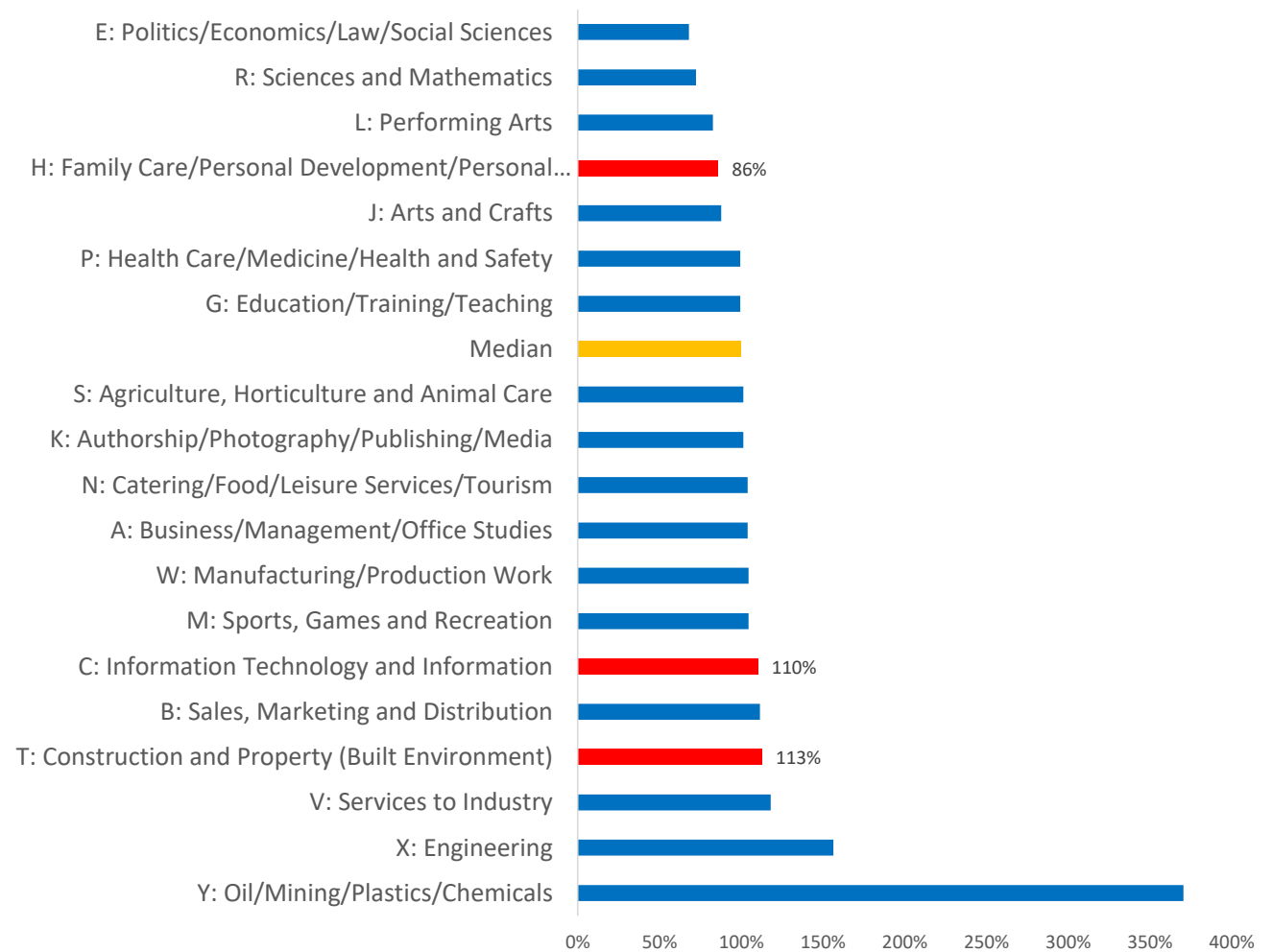
# Earnings (1): LEO 2016-17

Full-time study, 3 years after finishing, no further study	Median £15,600 vs £24,600 degree
Highest performing SIMD vs SIMD1: +9% 15% degree (after 5 years)	Men vs women: +14% 12% degree (after 5 years)
No disability vs disabled: +15% 9% degree (after 5 years)	White vs lowest earning ethnic group: +24% 16% degree (after 5 years, in later cohort)



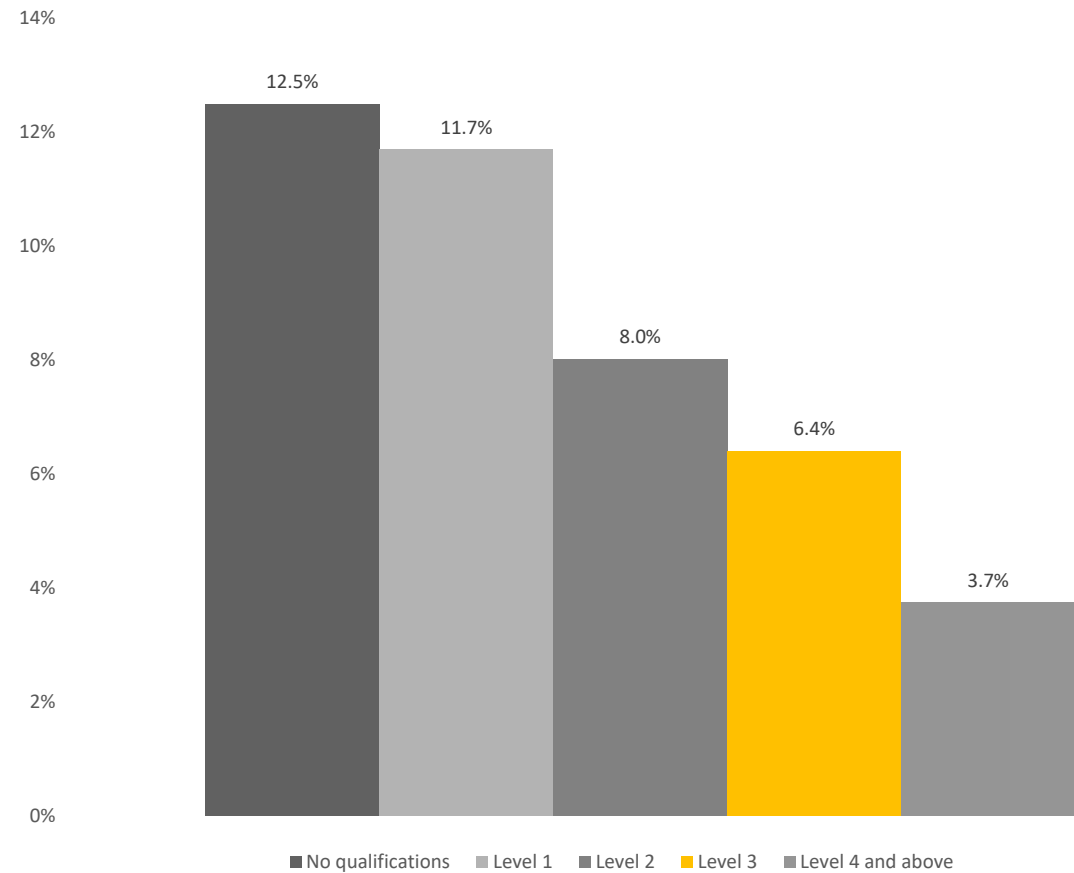
# Earnings (2): LEO by subject

Median earnings by subject as % median earnings all subjects



Benefits:  
employment  
status  
Source: 2011  
census

Percentage of economically active age 16+ in Scotland unemployed, by highest level of qualification



## HNs as pathway to a degree

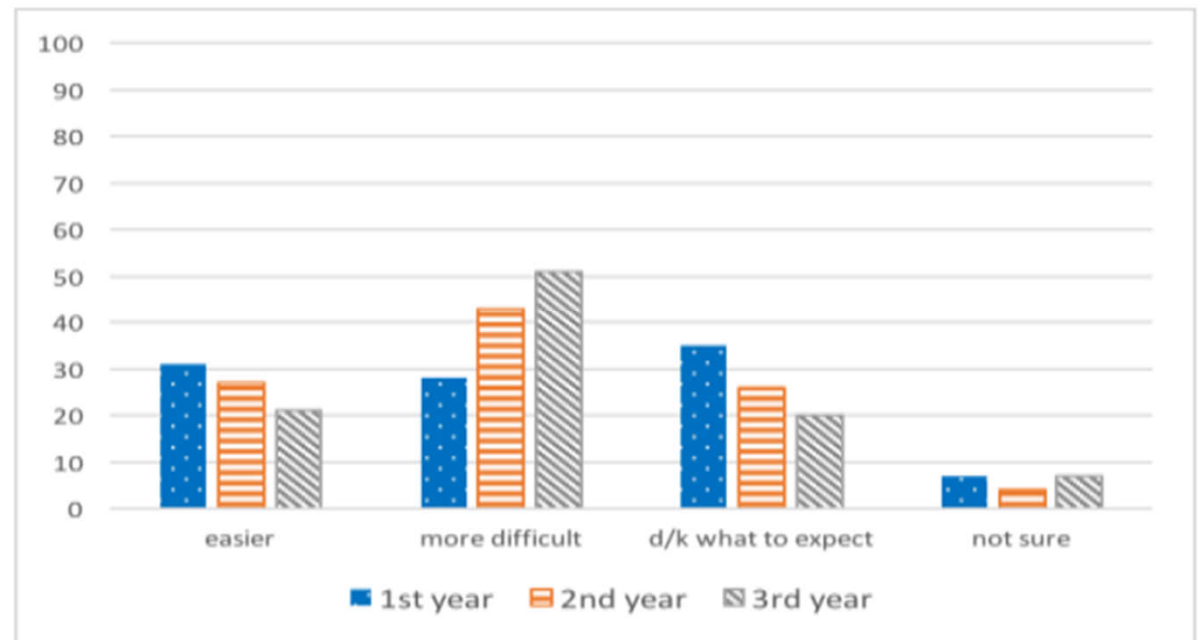
- Around half move on to degree courses
- Approaching 60% of those who move now obtain full credit; the rest repeat one or more years
- Starting with HN could mean a six year journey to an undergraduate degree (2+4)
- Repeat years a cost to the state as well as the individual

# Moving to degree study

Source: Howieson and Minty  
(2017)

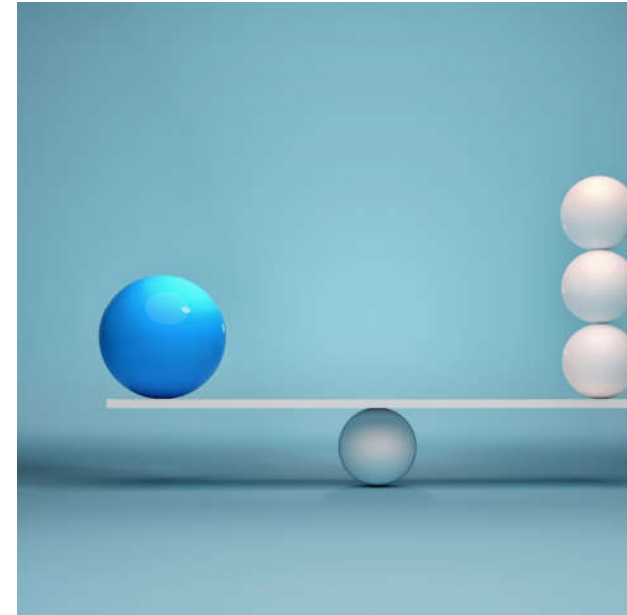
Access and Beyond Supporting  
Widening Participation Students in  
Three Scottish Universities

**Figure 2 HN students' views on the move to degree study by year of entry to degree (%)**



# Balance sheet

- Less time commitment
  - Easier physical access
  - Different range of subjects, more vocational
  - Different approach to teaching and learning
  - Wide recognition/familiarity - schools, families, employers
  - Well-structured articulation can provide best of both worlds
- 
- Lower earnings, earnings gap larger for some characteristics than for degree graduates, less unemployment protection than a degree
  - Lower non-earnings impact (example of MSPs)
  - Longer route to a degree, often
  - Moves to university more challenging in higher years
  - Managed articulation arrangements limit choice



## Alternative pathways: to what and for who?

- Value *and* challenge the place of short-cycle HE in Scotland
- Understand unequal outcomes along this path, for those who stop at HN and those who don't
- No-one else will do this analysis: in Scotland we need to invest in research in our own system – Jim's big theme