Closing the attainment gap in Scottish Education

NUS Scotland’s Position

NUS Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Scottish Parliament Education and Culture Committee in relation to its Review on the attainment gap. We believe fair access to education at all levels is absolutely crucial to realising the fairer society we want to see. We have brought together this paper as a general position paper and will add short annexes for each of the Committee’s deadlines in relation to Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce (DSYW), the role of the voluntary/third sector, and the role of parents/guardians.

We have many reasons to be proud of the Scottish education system – our tuition free universities and high-quality college and school education provide great outcomes for many of our pupils and students. However, if we are to provide all our young people with the best education and life opportunities, we must address the large attainment gap that persists among pupils from more deprived socio-economic backgrounds, and those from wealthier background.

In recent years, we have seen some encouraging developments in school attainment and retention levels (albeit at a very slow pace), an increase in articulation from college to university. As well as an increase in the numbers of student from more deprived backgrounds going into university again, only very slow progress only a 0.5% increase from the SMID 20% from most deprived background and 0.4% increase from the SMID 40% most deprived background.¹

Post-16 System

We believe some of this (slow) progress has come through the priorities of NUS Scotland’s work in recent years in relation to post-16 education. Tuition fees have been abolished, and university places have increased. We have fought college budget cuts, and prioritised the protection of full-time equivalent (FTE) places in colleges. The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for young people has been protected and the levels of higher education student support have helped to open doors to students from less wealthy backgrounds. Most recently, Outcome Agreements stemming from the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act, have seen institutions setting targets for improving access and outlining activity with current and prospective students to improve rates of widening access in Scotland. Additional funded places for widening access and articulation students have also seen the door opened to greater numbers of students from deprived backgrounds. Finally, the work of the Wood Commission on vocational education and training, as well as the focus of the Scottish Government on widening access and improving educational attainment, in particular through its Widening Access Commission, have brought these important issues to the fore.

However, while these developments are welcomed, more work needs to be done by the post-16 education sector and our schools to ensure that young peoples’ education and employment destinations are not determined by their socioeconomic background. We need to maintain and build on the widening access system created at the post-16 level, but we must now also see as much of a focus on school education, with closing the attainment gap at the core of our mission. Only then will we begin to see the progress we want to see on building fairer access to education, but also building a fairer society in Scotland.

¹ Measures of Success: Learning of All Eighth update – statistics for 2012-13
**School-level education**

The Scottish education system still faces significant challenges in terms of levelling out education opportunities for all our young people. According to a report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014), the attainment gap between young people from the most deprived backgrounds and the least deprived backgrounds is particularly stark at the end of compulsory education. After leaving compulsory education, young persons from the most deprived backgrounds are less likely to end up in positive destinations (including further education, higher education, employment and training). Furthermore, there is a clear link between the socio-economic background of students and the type of post-16 education they will pursue, with pupils from more deprived backgrounds more likely to end up on further education.

In short, we know that pupils enter formal education with an attainment gap, and this generally increases over time meaning that a barrier at aged four, continues and deepens to become barriers to attainment at National 4 and 5, at Higher level, at Advanced Highers, between college and university, FE and HE, undergraduate and postgraduate, and crucially a huge barrier between the careers and life chances offered to people beyond education.

This link between school attainment, education destination and socioeconomic background is an injustice and a disadvantage to both individuals and the society at large. Our education system should tackle inequality, not simply reflect or entrench it.

While much of the work to close the attainment gap needs to be undertaken in schools, this does not mean it needs to be schools themselves, or local authorities themselves that are tasked with undertaking this work. For example, we believe that the further and higher education sectors also have a crucial role to play, in working with schools. In essence, the attainment gap at school should be a problem owned as much by colleges and universities as it is by schools. This would see even greater activity undertaken by universities and colleges with schools in this area than is carried out now.

**Attainment gap does not mean a gap in academic potential**

Finally, a key principle that NUS Scotland would like the Committee to consider is the idea that a gap in exam attainment, may not by any means be the same thing as an attainment gap or a gap in academic potential between school leavers. We are very supportive of measures taken by universities to undertake differential offers through admissions systems, and to offer top-up of school grades, so that the underlying academic potential of people who have faced educational barriers, is not masked by an exam results gap on paper. We may not need to wait until the attainment gap is closed fully, before we can fully closed the opportunity gap between people from different backgrounds. We should not risk taking the pressure off in terms of the many more things that universities can do, in particular, to ensure fairer access to post-16 education.
Paper 1 - Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce

NUS Scotland has been highly supportive of the work of the Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce (DSYW), and in particular, of its focus on improving the quality of the further education and training sector in Scotland and its attempts to achieve a parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes. This sector provides an important education route to many of our young people, and in particular, for students from more deprived backgrounds. We also welcome the increased recognition of FE education as a path to high-quality job opportunities, and as a vital part of the Scottish economy.

We believe recommendations in relation to vocational education, equality within subject and skill areas, careers advice, and the role of school, college and employer partnerships made by the DSYW could help to mitigate some of the impact of the attainment gap on young peoples’ education and employment destinations.

In order to make sure that both the FE and HE sector are doing their utmost to mitigate the impacts of the attainment gap on educational and employment destinations, we would encourage the Education and Culture Committee to consider the following areas.

Improving access to college education

We are highly supportive of the emphasis in DSYW placed on the need to improve parity of esteem between higher education and further education. The lack of understanding of and value placed on further education has meant that colleges have been widely viewed as a fall-back for students who are not attaining high enough to university. In reality, colleges provide a highly valuable education route to accessing further, articulation to higher education, and entry to employment in particular for students from more deprived backgrounds.

However, in order to provide the best possible opportunities for students with low attainment levels in school, colleges need to receive enough funding, and college students must have access to sufficient student support to take them through their education. Figures released by the Scottish Funding Council in December 2014 showed a huge shortfall in the amount of FE student support funds required by students, and the amount of money available to colleges. Colleges stated they needed £14.7m more than the original budget provided by the SFC to provide support to their students, with the SFC responding with £3.5m, leaving £11.2m of unmet demand. This was a 128% increase in unmet demand, rising from £4.9m of unmet demand last year.

Following a joint effort between colleges, the SFC and the Scottish Government, this unmet demand figure was brought down to around £7m, with the Scottish Government committing to provide the necessary funding to meet the shortfall. We welcome this reassurance for the coming current year, but have serious concerns about future pressure on college budget in the face of unmet demand for student support. We believe that in order to provide the high-quality education routes we want for students with lower attainment levels at school, our colleges must receive the funding they need to support these students.

More flexible learning pathways

While, as stated above, colleges and apprenticeships provide a valuable education destination in themselves, they also enable many pupils with lower attainment levels at the point of leaving school to find an alternative route into higher education at a later date. A key principle of DSYW, is the need for better integration of learning pathways between school, college and the workplace, articulated through Recommendations 1-11. The Scottish Credits and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has already created a system where the building blocks for achieving these flexible pathways can be reached.
Between college and university the articulation route allows young people and other students who did not originally consider going to university the chance to pursue that opportunity. However, this path is not utilised or implemented as well and consistently as it should be. According to SFC’s Learning for All report for 2012/13 there has been an increase of 450 advance standing entrants from college HE to university (to 3469). There has also been an increase of 88 advanced progression entrants from college HE to university (to 729). These statistics show us that although some improvement has been made there is still a way to go to avoid students unnecesarily repeating levels of study. This is true for all levels of SCQF including the vocational qualifications. In order for the principle of fairer and more accessible pathways of DSYW to be realised, ensuring that pupils who have lower attainment levels when they leave school, or enter a vocational profession, are able to progress at a later stage we need to ensure that the SCQF levels are being recognised and implemented by all institutions and employers.

### Vocational Education, work placements and Modern Apprenticeships

A priority for DSYW is the need for more vocational learning and particularly within the senior phase of school, allowing young people to get going with their career earlier. NUS Scotland would like to see better blended routes so potential and interest dictates the young person’s route, not administrative divides.

A positive aspect of the different experiences that young people will have in the senior phase is that it may allow them to make more informed choices. However, these work and college experiences should not limit a young person choices into further education, rather it should widen those choices. Success would see a balance of pupils from all backgrounds taking on this vocational route at the senior phase, anything else will be a failure.

Work placement standards need to be high and at the appropriate level, which is exactly what DSYW recommends. In particular, Recommendations 37 and 38 are encouraging setting out proposals for young people with particular backgrounds to have a longer transition period. Care leavers are one group of people that fall into this category but another group would be those with caring responsibilities, among others that face additional educational barriers.

NUS Scotland welcomes Recommendation 8 in DSYW, prioritising the access to and progression from Modern Apprenticeships. The SCQF already includes apprenticeships awards up to the highest level, level 12; the equivalent of a PhD. We need to make these types of apprenticeships are more accessible, and for society and particularly young people to be aware that they can go that far, through vocational education. The SCQF has laid the foundation for high level professional apprentices at university, and these should be available to all of those who have previously completed an apprenticeship in that skill or subject area.

NUS Scotland recognises that apprentices are learners in their own right, and have a different learning experience from other learners at school, college or university. However, apprentices should be have a voice and be decision makers in their learning. Which is why NUS Scotland set up the National Society of Apprentices Scotland last March, to work with apprentices in colleges and training providers to develop apprentice voice forums, a space for apprentices to share their learning experiences and how changes could be made to improve their learning experience locally and nationally.

### Equality for All

NUS Scotland welcomes the cross cutting equality issues highlighted in DSYW. Equality for all the protected areas relevant to young people need to be advanced in schools, colleges, universities, and the work place. The inequalities and barriers to even taking a particular subject is a different form of attainment gap. Young people need to be free to

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2 Measures of Success: Learning of All Eighth update – statistics for 2012-13
choose a profession based on their ability to learn and their particular interests, rather than being excluded because of the ethnicity, disability or gender.

In particular, we welcome Recommendation 28 to redress gender imbalances across all the occupations. According to figures from 2012-13 only 12.9% of men studied social work at colleges, and 14.7% of men in health related subjects. Women in STEM is also of particular interest to NUS Scotland, especially in light of the expectation that our economy will rely on greater numbers of STEM graduates in the future. Currently in colleges 7.4% of computing students are women, 5.7% of engineering students are women and 5.3% transport students are women. These trends continue throughout the higher education journey for both genders. Men at university are less likely to study health related subjects only 15.5% enrolled and social studies is 31.3%. For women in STEM subjects at university 13.8% study engineering, 26.6% technologies and maths and computing sciences at 23.9%. These subject imbalances spill over into the workplace and must be reversed. NUS Scotland is encouraged that both SFC and SDS will be implementing Gender Action Plans for the colleges and Modern Apprenticeships. We hope that this Gender Action Plans will provide real impact, visible to students across the board, and that adequate thought is given into the evaluation of these Gender Action Plans.

Again, we believe unequal participation in subjects at university or college, stemming as they often do from unequal rates of participation in particular subjects at school level, is a different form of attainment gap, that the Committee should consider. The gap between men and women, for example, in relation to participation rates in STEM or social care and health, is also a gap in opportunities that should be tackled with urgency.

**Better careers advice**

Careers and guidance service perform a specific function for young people at school or college. NUS Scotland welcomes Recommendation 2 calling for a more comprehensive career’s service and guidance. As part of developing our response to the Wood Commission, NUS Scotland, along with the Scottish Youth Parliament and YoungScot, held a discussion event with young people to hear directly from them their views and perceptions of school and post-16 education, which included a session on IAG. There were a number of common themes throughout the discussion, and in particular many young people reported that they felt a more personal, individual pathway for careers education, starting at an earlier age, would be beneficial as careers advisors would have an opportunity to learn more about them. Equally, many participants felt that careers education was too narrow in scope, and that vocational pathways were portrayed as “non-academic” pathways and higher education pathways are prioritised. Finally, there was a feeling that the relationship between schools, colleges, universities and employers could be strengthened, so that young people are getting the most relevant and up-to-date information about what skills and practices each look for and expect.

Providing better information and guidance (IAG) will increase a young person’s chances of making an informed choice on what route of post-16 education and work is appropriate for them, and again open up routes based on your talent, potential and interests, not based on your background.

**For more information please contact:**
Megan McHaney | Policy and Public Affairs Officer | NUS Scotland
Megan.McHaney@nus-scotland.org.uk

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3 Measures of Success: Learning of All Eighth update – statistics for 2012-13
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