Educational attainment gap inquiry session 2:  
Role of the third and private sectors | NUS Scotland submission  

Introduction  
NUS Scotland welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the Education and Culture Committee’s ongoing inquiry into the educational attainment gap, focusing this time around on the role of the private and third sectors. For the purposes of this round of the committee’s inquiry we have focused on the general issues of educational attainment, including the role of the private sector and, specifically, our universities, each of whom in Scotland are registered charities, with one of their fundamental charitable aims being the advancement of education which we believe does not just extend to current students but also potential students.

In recent years, NUS Scotland and students across Scotland have achieved some extremely important campaigning and influencing successes, all of which contribute to ensuring that our post-16 education is more inclusive and equal. Tuition fees remain off the table for undergraduate students, university and college places have been protected (and indeed increased specifically for widening access and articulation), and we have seen significant improvements to student support, which we know plays a key role in supporting students into higher education and, perhaps more importantly, keeping them there. We have seen significant reversals of proposed college budget cuts, and maintained the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for young people.

Most recently, outcome agreements, stemming from the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act, have seen institutions required, as a condition of grant, to set ambitious targets for improving access and outcomes for students from our most deprived communities. In further and vocational education, there have been matched by a strong focus on improving the opportunities available to our young people through the work of the Commission on Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce. And, through the Scottish Government’s most recent legislative programme, we have seen a strong focus on the issue of inequality in Scotland, with clear proposals for how to ensure we do much more for those in poverty, with education at the heart of this. In particular, we have welcomed the creation of a Widening Access Commission.

However, while these developments are welcomed, more work needs to be done by the post-16 education sector, working in partnership with schools, sector agencies and, where appropriate, businesses, to ensure that young peoples’ education and employment destinations are not determined by their socioeconomic background. Ultimately, we want to see:

- Universities (and colleges) better fulfilling their legislation duties, through the Post 16 Education (Scotland) Act, by undertaking better targeted work on fair access, and ensuring that this is properly measured and evaluated to determine its impact.
- A clearer focus within education on not simply academic attainment, but also academic potential, with this recognised through alternative admissions processes.
• Increased articulation activity, with improved links and flexibility between schools, colleges and universities, as a means of offering alternatives pathways into higher education.
• A commitment to raising the minimum wage for apprentices across the UK and action from local authorities and businesses to pay a fair wage to all employees, including apprentices.
• Action from the businesses, local authorities and the Scottish Government on closing the gender pay gap within vocational education and apprenticeships.

The role of universities and colleges

In recent years, we have seen some encouraging developments in school attainment higher education entrants, and graduate outcomes—albeit at a slower pace than any of us should accept—supported in part by improving the flexibility between all parts of our education. This provides encouragement and support for the view that there is much more we can do across school, college and university to increase fair access for all of our young people, achieve by working in partnership. Across the period for which the most recent figures are available (2011/12-2012/13), for Scottish domiciled students, we saw:

• A 1% increase in university entrants from SMID 20% backgrounds (12.3%-13.3%)
• A 0.4% increase in university entrants from SMID 40% backgrounds (28.3%-29.4%)
• A 0.2% decrease in university entrants from SEC 4-7 (33.2%-33%)
• Modest, but encouraging increases in the proportion of school pupils from the most deprived backgrounds: staying on at S5 and S6; leaving with 3 A’s at levels 6 and 7; and, 5 or more A’s at level 6 and A-C at level 7.

This link between school attainment, 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 will be undertaken in schools, this does not mean it needs to be schools themselves. We believe that further and higher education sectors also has a crucial role to play, working with schools. This would see even greater activity undertaken by universities and colleges with schools in this area than is carried out now.

The Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce (DSYW) report made useful recommendations regarding the need for an increasing overlap between further education and vocational training with schools. Too often employers, colleges and universities raise concerns that many school-leavers are not prepared for employment, or further or higher education. Thus, we welcome the call for increased involvement from colleges and employers in providing opportunities, information and support to school pupils. However, in order to mitigate the impact that the links between low attainment and socio-economic background has on education destinations, universities should match the increased engagement of colleges and employers by actively approaching school pupils and college students, with a particular focus on pupils from more deprived areas.

---

1 Scottish Funding Council, Learning for All: eighth update report on measures of success 2014
Universities in Scotland should be engaging more with their local schools and colleges, encouraging those that are displaying signs of potential to apply to the university and to engage with any bridging support on offer from the university. Going further, and giving a more formal, robust and automatic approach, to this could see schools, local authorities, colleges and universities working on a regional basis to share pupils’ exam results. This could work by students in each school within a local authority being ‘flagged up’ where they perform above a certain median point in exams, compared to their peers, especially where there is a cross match between higher levels of deprivation, judged either by free school meals or SIMD. This would serve to ensure they know their options and can engage with potential universities’ alternative admissions routes, bridging provision (summer school or access courses) or other widening access activity and equally to ensure universities proactively reach out to these students.

Key to achieving increased activity, and success, has been the creation of college and university outcome agreements; a key means of fair access being better talked about, targeted and, ultimately, evaluated. As NUS Scotland’s research report into fair access, Unlocking Scotland’s Potential, found, Scotland continues to have one of poorest rates of access to higher education in the UK for students from poorer backgrounds, with the progress we have seen largely coming as the result of increased numbers in college higher education. As such, a legislative standing for the outcome agreements was a key recommendation of Unlocking Scotland’s Potential. We have long believed that it is important to create a defined link between the public funding universities receive, and the public benefit they provide. All the evidence shows what happens to fair access when we don’t challenge ourselves to do more and go further. When we’re quite rightly investing hundreds of millions of public money into our universities, we must make sure they’re benefiting the whole of the public, and this is an opportunity none of us should squander.

The difference between attainment and potential
A key principle for NUS Scotland is that a gap in exam attainment does not mean the same thing as a gap in academic potential among school leavers. We believe young people need to be judged much more on their academic potential, not simply their academic attainment. 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. Contextualised admissions could go a long way to make universities admissions more equal.

Contextualised admissions are when universities take into account other life factors, usually including factors such geodemographic indicators, socioeconomic background, and school performance of the applicant. Ultimately, we believe that admission into higher education should be based on learning potential not solely on past performance. If we can improve our access rates, bringing those talented people into our institutions who are currently missing out on higher education—despite having the potential to succeed—this will be of huge benefit to our education sector, our country and our economy, ensuring that an individual’s talent not their school or background determines how far in education they can go.

For many institutions, differential and/or adjusted officers are a natural extension in the use of contextual data. Some institutions have prerequisites for making differential offers, such as participation in an access scheme, summer school, or the requirement to attend an interview. However, all institutions do this for the same reason: research has shown that those who have faced significant educational and social challenges can still hold the ability to succeed at university at the highest level, even when they have (comparatively) underperformed at school. Differential offers are clearly hugely important in ensuring those with the most academic potential gain places at our universities, adjusting offers to take into account the context in which grades were achieved.

It seems clear that Higher or A-Level grades cannot be seen in isolation from the school or the background of the applicant who achieved that grade, and this should be factored into admissions. Indeed if it is not, then we would argue institutions could be missing out on some of the most talented applicants. We want to see a higher education sector where access and success are based on genuine merit, so that it is those with the greatest academic potential who are given the precious opportunity of a place at university or college. It is our contention that there are large numbers of people with the talent, with the aspiration, and with the qualifications, that are missing out on a place at university, due to a lack of focus or best efforts. However, as Unlocking Scotland’s Potential showed, it is clear from best practice across the UK that by offering contextualised, differential, or adjusted, offers, we can ensure the recruitment of the most talented students and increase graduate attainment. Even more importantly, on the basis of existing evidence, far from lowering quality or being ‘social engineering’, alternative admissions processes can actually improve the attainment that a university’s students achieve.

Curriculum matching for smoother learning journeys

A key role for universities is to work with colleges to ensure that articulation agreements are working, that students can enter with previous education qualifications and access all courses. Articulation agreements have grown over the last couple of years between colleges and universities, which is a really positive indication of institutions beginning to work with each other, to ensure more individuals have an opportunity to access higher education. However, some universities are selective about the courses that students can articulate into. Through the regional hubs it has been identified that it is sometimes difficult to know what students have achieved in courses, and therefore limit courses to ones that make a direct match to courses offered at university; College Connect, at Glasgow Caledonian University, is an example of this. NUS Scotland’s Learning Journeys report found that students who entered through direct entry found settling into academic life the most challenging.\(^3\)

To help avoid these challenges and to ensure that individuals have the most choice from the beginning of their studies, NUS Scotland believes that universities and colleges need to work even more closely together, so that higher national diploma and certificate (HNCs and HNDs) courses include core curriculum content that is transferable to other related subject matters. This is key to students who have not decided where their HN will take them when they complete the course. Some students who begin an HNC will know that they want to go to university, but many will not.

\(^3\) NUS Scotland 2013 ‘Learning Journeys students experiences in further and higher education’
It is critical, to keep in mind, when designing and delivering these courses that not all students are clear about their destination and need all options to be open to them.

With tens of thousands of students studying higher education in Scotland’s colleges, attracting greater numbers of college students to university should be a key way for all universities to improve their widening access rates. For many people taking a route straight from school into university simply won’t be the right one for them. We shouldn’t just accept that, but celebrate it and encourage it, as a distinctive element of Scotland’s diverse education system and an absolutely valid choice for the individual.

As our research report Unlocking Scotland’s Potential showed, students entering university through articulation were almost twice as likely to be from the most deprived communities in Scotland, compared to all university entrants. We can safely assume that many more of them could come from a looked after background, and provide those first steps towards a university degree. Just as importantly, the figure show clearly the much larger numbers of looked after young people who go on to further education college courses. Importantly, students who articulate also have a great record of success, as their drop-out rates have been shown to be lower on average than other students.

The above tables show the proportion of students entering university, via articulation, from the 20% most deprived communities, compared to all other entrants. Table 2 shows the retention rates for these two groups of students. Indeed, at times, retention rates have been higher for students from our most deprived communities. Clearly, if we’re going to get access right, we need to recognise that schools, colleges and universities all have a role to play. We’ve made huge ground on securing extra places and funding for fair access, and now we need to ensure the local efforts are in place to match that. Every university, from the newest to the oldest institutions, should recognise that working with colleges, and offering more chances to articulate, provides a huge opportunity to tackle our poor records on widening access.

Table 1: Articulating students, by deprivation status

![Graph showing data]

Source: Scottish Funding Council/NUS Scotland
Table 2: Articulating students retention by deprivation status

Source: Scottish Funding Council/NUS Scotland

Fair pay in the private sector
Apprenticeships are a crucial part of the Scottish Government’s plan to improve life chances for young people in particular, but also for improving certain areas of the economy. The Scottish Government’s annual target for 25,000 modern apprenticeship new starts, is an extremely important one to focus on improving employment opportunities for our young people. In February 2015, it announced it was on target to exceed this target, with 78% of places filled at the end of the third quarter of 2014/15, with half the new apprentices aged 16-19, slightly up on the previous year. This is a very encouraging progress, and it is important that these apprenticeships deliver good quality experiences and, crucially, support for those undertaking them.

Apprentices get paid significantly less than the rest of those people in work, with the national minimum wage for apprentices is £2.73 per hour.4 We believe is hugely unjust, leaving far too many apprentices reliant on parental, guardian or friends’ support, working a second job in order to have enough money to live on, or taking on unreasonable amounts of commercial debt, as opposed to having their work and training commitments properly recognised and rewarded. Even more worryingly, official figures show that, in Scotland, last year 4.6% of apprentices were paid less than £2.49 an hour and 1.3% were paid less that £1.99 an hour.5 This culture of paying exceptionally low wages to apprentices has to change, so that apprentices are valued in their workplaces, and are able to pay for life expenses.

Equally, there are a number of worrying gender disparities within apprenticeships, and those which low pay are endemic are often those done by women. The difference in hourly pay between male apprentices and women apprentices in Scotland is £1.16 per hour (£6.61 per hour for men and £5.45 for women), meaning female apprentices earn 17.55% less per hour.

4 Business, Innovation and Skills Apprentice Pay 2014
5 Business, Innovation and Skills Apprentice Pay 2014
When we consider the inherent gender divide that remains within many apprentice fields, these figures are even starker. In the heavily male dominated field of Electrotechnical engineering, average pay is £10.10 an hour (£3.49 more per hour than the average pay of all apprenticeships). On the reverse of that, fields where women are more likely to apprentices, such as children’s care, average pay is £4.23 an hour; £2.38 less per hour than the average pay of all apprenticeships.

At the same time, those men dominated fields are more likely to see a pay rise. In the most recently available year, Electrotechnical apprentices saw a pay rise of 94%; children’s care apprentices saw a pay of 34%. Overall, Last year there were 462 apprentices in Scotland paid £1.99 P/H or less (1.3%) and 1636 apprentices in Scotland paid £2.49 P/H or less 4.6%). At the same time, 29% of women received a pay rise during their apprenticeship whereas 60% of males received a pay rise during their apprenticeship.

Similarly, there is a clear and pressing need on business and the private sector to do more to open up opportunities to all our young people, regardless of background or circumstances. One recurring and worrying example of where this too all often is not case is within internships. Internships are a valuable way for people who are at college or university to gain experience of the workplace and develop skills which enhance their CVs. NUS Scotland is firmly against unpaid internships, as unpaid internships require individuals to have money or family connections to survive while completing the internship. A recent YouGov poll showed that 53% of the population thought unpaid internships disadvantaged people from poorer backgrounds and the government should do more to ensure that these groups were benefiting equally from internships.\(^6\) A further 62% of people believe that interns should be paid at least the national minimum wage.\(^7\)

**For more information, contact:**
Philip Whyte, Senior press and policy officer
[Philip.whyte@nus-scotland.org.uk](mailto:Philip.whyte@nus-scotland.org.uk)

Megan McHaney, Policy and public affairs officer
[Megan.mchaney@nus-scotland.org.uk](mailto:Megan.mchaney@nus-scotland.org.uk)

---

\(^6\) [https://yougov.co.uk/news/2011/04/14/internships-are-unfair/](https://yougov.co.uk/news/2011/04/14/internships-are-unfair/)

\(^7\) [https://yougov.co.uk/news/2011/04/14/internships-are-unfair/](https://yougov.co.uk/news/2011/04/14/internships-are-unfair/)