Educational attainment gap – involvement of parents and guardians. Universities Scotland response

Universities Scotland shares the Scottish Government’s ambition that every person in Scotland is able and supported to achieve their full potential in a fair and just society. Universities Scotland believes that an open, joined-up and system-wide approach to raising attainment is required. One which recognises the role of all players in catalysing improvement. Critical to this is the role of families.

Underpinning attainment is aspiration and nurturing a love of life-long learning. Universities Scotland research shows parental and grandparental aspiration for children and grandchildren is very high regardless of socio-economic background; A survey commissioned by Universities Scotland in 2014 using the Scottish Public Opinion Monitor showed that 87% of respondents from the 20% most deprived areas of Scotland (SIMD20) wanted their children and/or grandchildren to go to University, compared to 86% of respondents from all backgrounds. University education is universally valued.

However, we also know that the attainment gap between Scotland’s most and least deprived pupils remains stark and is evident as young as five years of age. Family is known to be one of the key determinants of future attainment:

‘Parents and families play a key role; there is clear alignment between what the parents say they want for the young people and what the young people aspire to themselves. For policy, supporting aspirations then means working with parents as well as young people, particularly where parents face disadvantages themselves’.2

Family experience of higher education, alongside their involvement in, and understanding of, transitions through the education system are critical to growing the ambition of young people. A major study3 supported by the Nuffield Foundation in 2012 tracking over 36,000 young people in four English-speaking countries (USA, Australia, England and Canada) found that:

‘young people with university-educated parents are significantly more likely to go on to higher education and attend an elite institution -- even after prior attainment has been taken into consideration’.

Research by Office for Fair Access reflects the importance of access to higher education experience and demystifying the routes to higher education.

‘The most successful programmes of Information, Advice and Guidance interventions for under-represented groups appear to be those which start early, are personalised, integrated into outreach and other support, and address priority information needs, including HE finance, HE applications processes and requirements and employment opportunities.’4

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1 Joseph Rowntree Foundation report found an attainment gap of 10-13 months is evident in children as young as five: www.jrf.org.uk/publications/closing-attainment-gap-scottish-education.
3 http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/sharp-social-class-divide-university-entry-rates-also-found-state-schools
The onus is therefore on a concerted and coordinated effort involving all partners, including families, to build aspiration from an early age, including awareness of the pathways through education and help young people realise these aspirations.

We have structured our response to highlight the ways the higher education sector currently works towards raising attainment through supporting parents, and through close interaction with the education of their children at all levels and to set out the measures which we believe would lead to further success.

**A Partnership Approach to Ensure Access and Inclusivity in Support**

Scottish Universities have built an extensive network of partnerships with schools, colleges, local communities, researchers and employers to encourage a love of learning and accessible lifelong skills development for everyone, regardless of age, family circumstances or background.

The examples given below set out how universities actively engage parents and/or guardians in the activities alongside the young people and in separate parent-specific events. These are intended to encourage parents to see university as a path for their child (when it may not have been their experience), to support learning as a family, to dispel myths about university and to support parents support children through transitions e.g. applications to university:

- Scotland already has two well-established *Children’s Universities*[^5] (CU) run by the University of Strathclyde and Queen Margaret Universities respectively, and two newer centres in Dundee and Aberdeen, which offer pupils aged 7 to 14 (and 5 and 6 year olds with their families) the opportunity to learn with their families beyond the classroom - everything from child-friendly lectures about anatomy to city treasure hunts to street dance workshops, delivered by accredited partners such as museums, sports clubs, universities, community partners and after-school clubs.

  In 2013-14 CU Scotland recorded over 2500 hours of learning.

- The national programme for school and university relationships, the Schools for Higher Education Programme, operates in four regions across Scotland through Focus West, the Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS), Lift Off (Fife and Tayside) and Aspire North[^6]. The Programme works with over 100 schools and local councils to provide additional support, guidance and encouragement for pupils and their families from S3 upwards in schools with low progression rates to higher education. For example, Focus West employed a Families and Schools Partnership Officer to support parents to foster and develop their children’s learning in turn. Parents are supported via seminars, workshops, one-to-one consultations and telecommunications to engage with their child’s homework and future planning. Between January and June 2010, 165 parents from eight FOCUS West schools were fully engaged in the new FOCUS on Families pilot. FOCUS West delivered 12 interactive workshops, gave six FE/HE presentations at school information evenings, attended four parent evenings, and contributed to several parent council meetings during that time.


The University of Edinburgh’s Educated Pass\(^7\) initiative aims to reach some of the groups least likely to apply to university, to raise aspirations and attainment, and to encourage early awareness of employability. 13–16 year old boys are targeted through their local football clubs, and their football coaches.

Parents are engaged early on, with a session aimed specifically at parents discussing typical academic progression from S2 to S6 and learner pathways. This allows both parents and coaches to reinforce the ethos of Educated Pass, and introduces the scheme as a reliable future source of guidance.

The programme is succeeding in its goals. Of the first cohort of boys to participate in the initiative in 2006–7:

- 67% progressed to higher education compared to the national average of 36%
- Five members of the original cohort went onto study at the University of Edinburgh, and one joined a professional football team in Scotland.

Glasgow Caledonian University established the Caledonian Club in 2008 which works with children from nursery age upwards, their teachers and their families to raise educational aspirations through tailored activities and projects such as drama for nursery pupils with follow up sessions for parents, to ‘a day at university’ shadowing experience for S5 and S6 pupils and a pupil and parents evening covering university applications and support.

The Open University works alongside Glasgow Caledonian in supporting the Caledonian Club, specifically to raise the educational aspirations of parents in areas with low progression rates to university. In the first instance, parents with a child at one of two schools in Glasgow are offered a free five-week course based around the OU open educational resource, the Reflection Toolkit\(^8\). This is facilitated by Caledonian Club staff and student mentors, and includes IT support and in situ childcare. Parents can then elect to take a 20 week ‘Openings’ short course, which offer a gentle introduction to study at higher education level. Parents who register on OU courses are supported by staff to meet in study buddy groups to build the confidence of participating parents, through offering peer support in an informal setting. The Open University is currently developing a new resource and website which will guide parents from informal to formal learning, starting with free, on-line OU material and moving to Open Courses.

Aim4Uni at the University of Aberdeen supports parents within low progression target schools to ensure that pupils with the potential to study at university are encouraged and supported to do so. The University offers support both through in-school events such as parents evenings and Careers information sessions and through bespoke parents’ events throughout Scotland. These cover the application and offer process, finance planners and funding information, and current student guides covering accommodation, student life and support. For parents who cannot attend in person, the University also holds online events covering the same information at times that parents may find it easier to attend.

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Scottish Universities undertake world-class research in the field of education, shaping national and international policy and practice in early years education, teacher training and parental support. For example, recent research by the University of Edinburgh\(^9\) identified some parental difficulties in successfully resolving disputes around additional support needs for pupils in school. ‘Qualitative case studies revealed that young people and parents, particularly those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, lacked access to advocacy services charged with helping them to realise their rights’. The university-led project aimed to raise awareness of parent’s and children’s rights in relation to additional support needs and methods of avoiding and resolving disputes with schools and local authorities and support parents involvement in their child’s education.

The research directly informed legislation - the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 - relating to school and local authority duties on data gathering and access to information for parents and young people with additional support needs, and has resulted in an increased take-up of mediation services.

**New Measures for Success in helping Parents, Teachers and Children Raise Attainment**

The Scottish HEI sector actively supports lifelong learning and development through direct provision and partnership activities (linking schools, colleges, local communities, employers and parents/guardians) from pre-school age upwards.

Scotland’s HEIs are eager to continue to build on this success. Universities Scotland would ask that:

- Recognition of parental aspiration and awareness of opportunities (alongside their own attainment) as key determinants in a young person’s aspirations
- That current activities undertaken by universities to break down barriers and engage young people and their parents in university are recognised (and financially supported to continue and expand these)

**Further information**

Dr Louise Ker, Policy Officer (Learning & Teaching) Universities Scotland

louise@universities-scotland.ac.uk

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\(^9\) [http://results.ref.ac.uk/DownloadFile/ImpactCaseStudy/pdf?caseStudyId=23997](http://results.ref.ac.uk/DownloadFile/ImpactCaseStudy/pdf?caseStudyId=23997)