Inquiry on the Educational Attainment Gap - Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce
Education and Culture Committee

Written Evidence from the Scottish Youth Parliament

Background to the Scottish Youth Parliament

The Scottish Youth Parliament is the democratically elected voice of Scotland’s young people.¹ Our vision is of a stronger, more inclusive Scotland that empowers young people by truly involving them in the decision-making process.

Among the strongest youth representatives structures of its type, we provide young people with a democratic platform to affect change, based on a mandate, by facilitating engagement with key decision makers.²

In working towards our aims, we support the following values:

- **Democracy** - All of our plans and activities are youth-led, and we are accountable to young people aged 12-25. Our democratic structure and the scale of direct participation across Scotland give us strength and set us apart from other organisations.

- **Inclusion** - We are committed to being truly inclusive. The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that all young people have a right to a voice; it doesn’t matter who we are or where we come from. We celebrate our diversity.

- **Political independence** - We are independent from political parties. Only by working with all legitimate political parties can we make progress on the policies that are important to young people.

- **Passion** - We believe that drive and energy are key to successful campaigning. We are passionate about issues and believe that young people are part of the solution, not the problem.

¹ The Scottish Youth Parliament is comprised of 160 Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament who meet three times a year in national sittings to represent the views of their constituents by selecting campaign priorities, formulating policy and participating in Subject Committees. In the last Scottish Youth Parliament national elections, 67,000 votes were cast. In addition, there were almost 43,000 responses to the consultation on your 2010 youth manifesto, “Change the Picture”. You can find out more information about SYP here: [http://www.syp.org.uk/who-we-are-W21page-66](http://www.syp.org.uk/who-we-are-W21page-66).

Summary of Recommendations

1. The Scottish Youth Parliament supports placing attainment at the heart of the implementation of the Wood Commission recommendations. We believe the recommendations will have a positive impact on attainment, and giving attainment a particular focus during implementation will further this progress.

2. The Scottish Youth Parliament recommends consideration be given to the risk of marginalising young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the practical delivery of the recommendations, which could have no effect or an adverse effect on attainment.

3. The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that addressing the perceived split between academic and vocational pathways is extremely important, as is placing vocational education on equal footing with academic education. We believe this will decrease negative stigma, and open up more opportunities for all young people.

4. The Scottish Youth Parliament supports a culture change both at an educational level and at a national economic level, in order to ensure young people take up high level vocational qualifications that have a strong currency in the labour market.

5. The Scottish Youth Parliament supports placing an emphasis on pupils’ socio-economic inequality in the implementation of the recommendations, believing that this would have a positive effect on attainment. Actions such as an attainment mapping exercise and forming links with local authority educational attainment advisers should be considered.

6. The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that further investment is required to fully implement the Wood Commission recommendations, but that this investment is inherently preventative, in line with the Scottish Government’s budgetary priority.
Introduction

The Scottish Youth Parliament welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Education and Culture Committee’s inquiry into the educational attainment gap. In addition, we welcome the Committee’s decision to consider the recommendations made by the Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce as an important step in reducing the educational attainment gap.3

Educational attainment, and its impact on child and youth poverty, is a key area of focus for our current national campaign, POVERTY: See It Change It.4 We fundamentally believe that addressing the current gap in educational attainment is crucial to eradicating child and youth poverty.5 By improving the education and employability pathway for young people, they will be better equipped with the skills and experience to move onto successful and sustainable employment destinations.

While the Scottish Youth Parliament is fully supportive of the recommendations made by the Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce, we believe that attainment should be at the heart of its implementation.6 We believe that the recommendations will have a positive impact on attainment. However by giving attainment a specific focus during implementation, there is an opportunity to make further substantive progress.

In addition, we note the recent report published by Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People, entitled “How Young People’s Participation in School Supports Achievement and Attainment,” which acknowledges the positive impact that pupil involvement and participation have on achievement and attainment.7 This provides an empirical evidence base which demonstrates the need to meaningfully involve young people in the practical outworking of the Wood Commission recommendations. We believe this is an issue the Committee could consider as part of its inquiry.

Our submission to this inquiry is based on the policies selected and passed by our democratically elected Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs) at our tri-annual

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3 The Scottish Youth Parliament coordinated an event with the Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce in March 2014 which provided around fifty young people with the opportunity to feedback their views for the final report.


6 Scottish Youth Parliament (2014), Wood Commission findings could have significant impact, http://www.syp.org.uk/blog/2014/06/03/wood-commission-findings/

National Sittings, where MSYPs meet in plenary to debate policy issues of importance to their constituents. Our contribution is further grounded in the policy statements contained in our youth manifesto “Change the Picture,” which received almost 43,000 consultation responses. Therefore, our remarks are shaped by the genuine views of young people.

In addition, in order to provide further insights into the views of young people on the specific themes of the interest to the Committee, we conducted a detailed online focus group with the MSYPs who sit on our Jobs and Economy and Education and Lifelong Learning Subject Committees.

1. “If the Wood report were fully implemented, what the likely impact on attainment in schools would be and which pupils would benefit most?”

As previously stated, the Scottish Youth Parliament believes that the full implementation of the Wood Commission recommendations would have a positive impact on attainment. We believe that an education that is more linked to future employability destinations, that has parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways and further and higher education, and that focuses on addressing specific equalities issues, will have a positive impact.

One MSYP commented:

“I think young people would feel more confident and ready to leave school knowing there are many opportunities out there for them, regardless of their wealth. Students wouldn’t feel held back by their background…”

However, we note that there is a significant risk of marginalising young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the practical delivery of the recommendations, which could have no effect or an adverse effect on attainment. For example, the basic costs of sending a young person on good quality work experience may inhibit choice. Associated costs with undertaking vocational pathways, such as additional materials, may reduce the ability of students from poorer backgrounds to take up these subjects.

The discrepancy between opportunities available to young people from urban and rural communities should also be considered, as transportation and access may limit opportunities available to young people in rural areas.

2. “The report aims to significantly enhance vocational content “without splitting young people off into separate streams at school age”. What the disadvantages of such an approach would be and how it could be avoided?”

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8 The online focus group was facilitated through SurveyMonkey, and contained eight questions based on the consultation document. The questions were adapted to ensure they were conducive for consultation with young people. The survey was sent to all MSYPs, who consulted with their constituents before responding.
On a practical level, we do not view splitting up young people as a negative. In fact, for the practical delivery of a range of subjects, it is reasonable and necessary to do so. The key issue is the perception of the split between academic and vocational pathways, and the negative stereotypes surrounding “streaming”.

According to the young people we consulted during our discussion day on the Wood Commission’s Interim Report, the perceived inferiority of vocational pathways in comparison to academic pathways is a key issue. MSYPs surveyed believed that young people may hesitate to take up vocational education for “fear of being judged” and “negative stigma.” Traditionally, vocational education has often been viewed as a suitable option for young people with less academic ability. This needs to be challenged.

We believe there needs to be a stepwise change in culture that places vocational pathways on a power with academic pathways through education and communication about the value and merits of the former.

Encouraging young people to seriously consider both pathways could reduce this stigma. One MSYP commented:

“It would be good to have all young people learn about vocational options. Some young people may think they have to go to university, when really they could be well-suited to a more vocational job. Giving everyone the same information could also make young people feel as though vocational and academic paths are equal, which they are.”

Another noted that if vocational studies were more fully integrated into the education system, young people may stop viewing vocational pathways as inferior to academic pathways.

One participant shared experience from her high school, in which pupils are able to choose one vocational subject instead of an academic subject, and spend two afternoons per week at a local college. Facilitating this allowed young people to explore both vocational and academic studies, and reduced negative perceptions of “streaming.”

3. Whether any measures other than those advocated in the report are needed to ensure more young people leave school with “high level vocational qualifications which have strong currency in the labour market.”

In addition to a culture change in education in relation to the credibility and profile of vocational pathways, the young people we consulted felt there needed to be a similar culture shift at a national economic level. In order ensure high level vocational qualifications have strong currency in the labour market, they need to be fundamentally valued by the economy and by employers. This involves challenging the traditional mindset that, for example, requires a university degree for many job opportunities.
The MSYPs also stressed the importance of career advice and work experience, asking that more opportunities for meaningful and quality work experience, internships, and apprenticeships be made available.

The importance of reducing stigma was raised again, with one MSYP stating:

“Young people need to be taught that all jobs/careers are respectable, and have information about what careers are hiring, which aren’t, which make money, which may not, and which they have the right skills for.”

It was also noted that some young people may feel pressured from peers or their families to continue onto university, or may lack the support and information to choose a vocational path.

Another MSYP noted that placing as much emphasis on pathways into vocational careers as is placed on pathways into university could inspire more young people to earn high level vocational qualifications.

Finally, it was also suggested that schools and colleges adopt focus on employability skills for vocational students. MSYPs suggested that employers be involved in the design of the curriculum so that young people could be trained towards “the job climate and its requirements.” The young people also discussed the option of having employers offer guest lectures or training in schools and colleges to raise awareness of vocational opportunities.

4. “Whether the report - which includes a section on improving equalities - places enough emphasis on pupils’ socio-economic inequalities and how these could be overcome.”

The Scottish Youth Parliament would support greater emphasis on pupils’ socio-economic inequality, with 90% of those surveyed believing the report needed this.

One MSYP noted that:

“I was surprised it was not highlighted in the report more, as this crosses over other issues like gender, race, and disability. Teachers should learn how to best help students from poorer backgrounds, and extra effort should be given to help them succeed and find their path.”

The young people consulted believed that a pupils’ socio-economic situation had the greatest impact on their attitudes and attainment. They were supportive of equalities education in schools, and believed that this would reduce negative stigma and help pupils better understand poverty.
We believe an attainment mapping exercise could be carried out to monitor the effect of the Wood Commission recommendations on attainment. Changes that are found to increase attainment can be further promoted and emphasised, whilst those that may widen the attainment gap could be altered. One MSYP noted:

“Attainment is often linked to socio-economic issues, and therefore support should be targeted and increased in areas of deprivation and low-performing league schools.”

Additionally, links could be formed with the recently announced educational attainment advisers in local authorities to find ways of bolstering attainment. The attainment landscape may vary across Scotland, and localised approaches may be necessary to tackle socio-economic inequality to ensure it does not negatively impact a young person’s opportunities.

5. “Whether there would have to be significant reorganisation in schools to accommodate all the proposed changes (for example, to enable more links with colleges/ to have a greater focus on work placements).”

While there will be an inevitable impact on organisation and curriculum management to implement the recommendations, we believe that their successful delivery is more an issue of priority, will, and culture. The emphasis and ethos of the guidance on curriculum management at local authority and school level should focus on future employment destinations. There are already many examples of good practice that exist across Scotland in both formal and informal education settings, under the same budgetary pressures. Best practice models should be shared and celebrated.

6. What action and resources would be required to deliver the specific recommendations aimed at schools and teachers?

We note the very difficult budgetary pressures currently experienced at local authority and school level. In order to successfully implement the Wood Commission recommendations, further investment will be required. However, we believe that this investment is inherently preventative, in line with Scottish Government’s budgetary priority.

By investing in the successful implementation of the Wood Commission recommendations and improving attainment, significant resources are saved over the medium to long term. Not only would this have a positive impact in terms of poverty reduction, but it would also reduce spending in other employment intervention services.

The Scottish Youth Parliament supports many of issues raised in the evidence submitted by our partner, YouthLink Scotland. Specifically, we view the third sector, youth work, and other forms of informal education as critical to improving attainment. They have a significant role to play in the delivery of these recommendations alongside schools and local authorities.
Additionally, MSYPs noted that employability guidance and connections were crucial, and that resources should be dedicated to ensure work experience placements, links between colleges and employers, and quality career guidance operate effectively.

An MSYP from a rural community noted that, to ensure those from rural areas have parity of access to opportunities, more affordable transportation, awareness of opportunities, connections to employers, and development of rural industries were needed.

“Don’t forget those in rural areas. We need opportunities beyond fishing and agriculture, but do need vocational experience in those areas as an option. Young people in rural areas shouldn’t feel limited in what they can do.”

The young people also asked that more resources be given to teachers, stating:

“The best teachers are those who are informed on important issues...” and,

“Teachers need more time to be creative and look for opportunities.”

Finally, we would echo earlier comments about the importance of meaningfully involving young people in the practical delivery of the recommendations, noting its positive impact on attainment.

MSYPs suggested that more young people be involved in delivering the recommendations, perhaps having young professionals serving as mentors for pupils, especially women in traditionally “male professions.” The MSYPs believed young people, particularly young people with lower attainment, should be consulted to ensure the recommendations are effective and empowering.

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