Educational attainment gap – role of the third and private sectors: Universities Scotland response

- Universities Scotland welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence on the role of the third and private sectors in improving pupil attainment and closing the educational attainment gap.
- For the purposes of this submission we include universities as part of Scotland’s third sector.
- We have followed the format of the questions posed, answering only where we have a relevant contribution to make.

1. The scale of the third and private sectors’ involvement in schools, in terms of improving attainment and achievement and the appropriate dividing line between their role and the role of education authorities

- Scotland’s 19 higher education institutions (HEIs) have significant involvement in and relationships with schools across the country.
- As can be seen from the examples below, a close partnership between the University and the relevant local Council(s) is often integral to the establishment and success of a project. This reinforces Universities Scotland’s call for Scotland to take a joined-up and system-wide approach to widening access which recognises the role of all players in improving attainment.

Engagement with schools

- The national programme for school and university relationships, called the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP), 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.¹
- SHEP targets schools which have less than a 22 per cent rate of progression to higher education.
- SHEP has evolved into a national programme with Scottish Funding Council (SFC) involvement from regional partnerships that started over twenty years ago.
- Across the country SHEP works with over 100 schools with low progression to HE rates to provide additional support, guidance and encouragement for pupils from S3 upwards. Local Councils are also key partners in these regional initiatives.

Support for curriculum delivery

- Many higher education institutions now play a direct role in supplementing or supporting the provision at Higher and/or Advanced Higher level which is available to Senior Phase pupils within a certain area.
- The additional choice ensures that pupils can study subjects which directly relate to their post-school ambitions and also helps to improve their attainment. As this model involves delivery on university campuses it can serve as an intermediary step towards higher education.
- Glasgow Caledonian University’s Advanced Higher Hub, in partnership with Glasgow City Council and the SFC, enhances provision for around 120-200 Senior Phase pupils each year by offering Advanced Higher subjects that could not be accommodated within school timetables. 60 per cent of the first year’s intake of pupils were from SIMD20.²
- Dundee University runs the Dundee City Campus project with Dundee City Council and local schools to address a Council challenge of falling demand for some subjects at Higher level by delivering them at the University. Around one-fifth of Dundee city’s S6 roll engages with the Dundee City

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² Glasgow Caledonian University Outcome Agreement 2014-15
Campus at any one time. If some schools had lost the capacity to offer pupils Maths and English at Higher level then this would have limited the progression opportunities of their students.

- The University of Aberdeen runs S6@Uni across Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire schools to complement or supplement choices in S6 and lead to UCAS accreditation that can help with progression to HE.
- The Queen Margaret University Edinburgh Academy Model, the University of the Highlands and Islands and the Open University in Scotland’s Young Applicants in School Scheme (YASS) are additional examples of HEIs delivering supplementary provision at S5/S6 level.

Raising aspiration as well as achievement and attainment

- The ECC inquiry understandably places its emphasis on improving attainment and achievement. However, raising the levels of aspiration amongst Scotland’s young people is also an important part of widening access to university.
- The motivational influence of this can have a major impact on the young people involved, and on their families. An important strand of universities’ outreach work is to build confidence, expand horizons and break down self-imposed barriers with the goal of motivating and supporting pupils and their parents to develop and achieve higher ambitions. Various evaluative studies have also shown that of all the work universities do to widen access and raise aspiration and attainment, this outreach work may be particularly effective.³

2. Whether their approaches have been particularly successful in improving achievement and attainment for school pupils and, if so, whether their methods could be more embedded in the curriculum

- There is a lot of evidence to suggest that universities’ widening access programmes are successful in improving achievement and attainment for the school pupils they are able to reach. As the goal of university outreach is most typically to widen access to HE, universities most commonly use progression to HE as the metric by which to judge success. However, there will be other positive impacts resulting from university activity that are captured less easily, like improved exam performance, achievement of a greater number of (or more relevant) Highers/Advanced Highers.
- We 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. This is why Scotland needs a concerted and coordinated effort involving all partners in education.

Success with SHEP

- SFC tracks progress of SHEP at a national level. Last year over 1,400 entrants to undergraduate studies in Scotland’s 19 HEIs were from SHEP schools, which equates to 4.5 per cent of all Scotland-domiciled entrants, up from 4.3 per cent the previous year.⁴
- The impact felt at a regional level is more interesting. Focus West has increased the progression rate to HE across its seven core schools by an average of seven per cent, which is all the more significant when many secondary schools started with progression rates below 10 per cent. Similarly, Lift Off has seen an average of 39 per cent of its pupils progress to HE over the last three years compared to an average 17 per cent progression rate across the 13 schools it works with.

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³ See for example [http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/uploads/WideningAccessToHE-CREID.pdf](http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/uploads/WideningAccessToHE-CREID.pdf) and [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2013/wplitreview/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2013/wplitreview/) (e.g. p19)
Each of the regional SHEP initiatives provide detailed analysis of their impact on an annual basis, which can be found on their respective websites and in SFC reports.

**Improvements in achievement and attainment**

- Evaluations of university-run summer schools and similar initiatives have proven to be highly effective at improving achievement in that there are high progression rates into higher education for pupils who successfully complete these activities.
- Evaluations of the University of Glasgow’s taster weeks, a spin-off from the summer school, found them highly successful in positively influencing the attitudes of participants. 84 per cent of participants in the 2013 programme said they were more likely to apply to university and around one third of applicants actually did go on to enter the University.
- The University of Edinburgh’s Pathways to the Professions programme offers structured support and insight into highly selective courses such as medicine, law and architecture. Of the 2012 cohort of participants 96 per cent of Pathways Plus participants that applied for a Pathways subject entered university, with 72 per cent starting one of the professional courses.
- However, analysts have questioned whether the success of this type of intervention is simply easier to measure as it has a more immediate outcome than longer-term interventions.\(^5\)

**Determining success – the importance of evaluation**

- Universities are now much more effective at monitoring and evaluating the success of their widening access initiatives than they were ten or twenty years ago.
- Universities Scotland’s evidence-based assessment of what works in widening access recommended that HEIs should ensure that all widening access initiatives have appropriate and sufficiently rigorous processes of evaluation built into their design. This is important for performance monitoring purposes, but also for improving the possibility of objectively determining what actually works in widening access. Where appropriate, suitable elements of these evaluations should be published, at intervals, as a matter of public interest.\(^6\)

**Evaluating success longitudinally**

- Where university initiatives engage with pupils at a young age it is difficult to identify causal links between the project and post-16 destinations because of the generational time factor and because of the amount of variables that shape a young person during this time.
- Glasgow Caledonian University has established a longitudinal survey to track the journey of young people through the Caledonian Club to 2030; evaluating numeracy, literacy and communication skills as well as levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. Numbers are small at the current time but intermediate indicators suggest that young people are not only more likely to go on to higher education having been in the Club, but also more likely to stay on their courses.\(^7\)
- Determining what constitutes ‘success’ should be an important consideration. A widening access initiative run by one university may have been a success for an individual student if it encouraged them to post-16 learning in an FE college or at a different university rather than the institution

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\(^7\) Glasgow Caledonian University Outcome Agreement 2012-13.
which ran the initiative. This is why tackling attainment and widening access at an all-Scotland level is important rather than pitting institutions against each other to compete on performance.

3. Whether the full potential of the third and private sectors in helping to improve children’s attainment and achievement is being realised

- Looking at the higher education sector we see a well-established track record of partnerships with schools and local authorities focused on increasing achievement, with the measure of achievement being progression into higher education. LEAPs and other programmes which form part of the SHEP programme have been in existence for 20 years.
- We also note a recent increase in innovative and collaborative initiatives between universities, colleges, schools and local authorities to address challenges in attainment and achievement (many of which are listed above) including the Academies model at Queen Margaret University and the Advanced Higher Hub at Glasgow Caledonian. This would indicate that the potential is there and is being realised in many cases.
- Projects to raise attainment and achievement work best when they are borne out of a clear need and have been developed to address the specific context in which they operate. It is not always possible or desirable to transplant a successful initiative in one place to a different school or university to try and replicate that success. Scotland should look to learn from best practice but should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to this highly complex challenge.
- It is worth saying that the establishment and subsequent success of innovative initiatives to raise attainment and achievement can often rest in the strong motivation of particular individuals as the driving force and the openness and enthusiasm of certain local councils. This is not always found uniformly across Scotland.

4. How successful schools have been in reporting on pupils’ wider achievements (i.e. not just examination results) such as those the third sector helps to deliver. Whether such achievements are valued by parents, employers and learning providers as much as formal qualifications

This answer focuses on the latter half of the question and does so from the perspective of universities as learning providers.

Wider achievements

- At present, UCAS personal statements are the main way in which pupils report their wider achievements to universities. Universities consider the content of these statements alongside academic qualifications, references, portfolios, auditions or interviews, contextual data and, in some cases, information gleaned from admissions tests (such as the UK Clinical Aptitude Test) and interviews, so that they can consider applications in an holistic way.
- Whilst prior attainment is by far the most important single factor determining academic potential and success, universities do not admit students on the basis of grades alone. The personal statement, therefore, provides an important opportunity for applicants to demonstrate their individual suitability for admission.
- There is an important equality issue with regards to the opportunity to acquire a wider set of experiences and achievements and also in the presentation of that information in a UCAS personal statement. Evidence by Jones for the Sutton Trust found “carefully crafted” statements packed with “high status, relevant activities” from independent school pupils compared to statements from pupils at state schools, who “appear to receive less help composing their statement, often
struggling to draw on suitable work and life experience” and contain three times as many writing errors.  

- This is why information, advice and guidance forms a major part of universities outreach activity to students in the Senior Phase. Significant levels of pre-application support and guidance are made available to pupils (and sometimes their parents) from underrepresented groups, including help with applications and mock-interview preparation.  
- The Senior Phase of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) puts a stronger emphasis on extra-curricular activity and skills development, and whilst this is positive it is important to recognise that not all pupils have an equal opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities. Universities Scotland addressed this issue to some extent in 2012 when looking ahead to CfE Senior Phase implementation and suggested that in order to report on pupils’ wider achievements fairly a school-level record of achievement might be useful to universities. It could help institutions to understand the particular Senior Phase models implemented by different schools; it could capture pupils’ achievements more broadly than the grades they obtain (and in a more objective way than personal statements); and provide additional contextual information that could assist universities in fair decision-making.

Diverse routes

- All 19 higher education institutions recognise and welcome the increased diversity of pathways through learning provided by the Senior Phase of CfE. This can involve the achievement of Highers over two years instead of one as well as the acquisition of a broader range of achievements in addition to academic qualifications.  
- Every HEI has published a statement on the senior phase on its website.  
- Universities also have policies and practices to recognise prior learning. This is where applicants can get credit for their prior learning when that learning may not have come with a formal qualification – e.g. it might be experiential learning. This is part of universities’ life-cycle approach to widening access – it provides second chances for mature entrants who were perhaps did not achieve the grades necessary to go to university (for whatever reason) when they were at school.

Contextualised admissions

- Universities do not just consider wider achievements in addition to exam results, they also use contextual information as part of their admissions processes to consider the context in which applicants have achieved. In doing so they help to level the playing field for applicants, recognising that not everyone has an equal opportunity to demonstrate their potential because of circumstance.  
- 17 of the 19 higher education institutions in Scotland now operate systems of contextualised admissions. Data used to help contextualise achievement in admissions decisions can include geodemographic data, deprivation levels of the postcode area in which a person lives or attends school, progression rates of the person’s school, care leaver or looked-after status, whether

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9 Universities Scotland (2012) Beyond the Senior Phase. P.17. A record of achievement in schools would complement the Higher Education Attainment Record (HEAR) in universities which documents students’ co-curricula and extra-curricula activities as well as academic attainment.  
10 The Open University in Scotland has an open admissions policy, so the use of contextual data and information in the admissions process is unnecessary. The other university which does not make direct reference to contextual admissions already has the most diverse student body in terms of SIMD. Different institutions are at different stages of contextualised admissions use.
someone has participated in a widening access programme and/or summer school. In some cases it enables institutions to make adjustments in the selection and/or offer-making parts of the admissions process for applicants whose individually strong performances are achieved in challenging circumstances, which may include (for example) differential offers at lower rate (though applicants will still have to meet minimum entry requirements).

5. **Given the strong policy focus on the early years, whether the third and private sectors have been able to work equally effectively with pupils of all ages**

- Historically, the emphasis of university widening access activity has been concentrated on the later years of secondary school, typically S3 onwards.
- More recently, Scotland has seen the development of a number of university-run initiatives that look to engage with younger pupils, even including pre-school age children. Examples of this include Glasgow Caledonian University’s Caledonian Club, which works with pupils from nursery right up to S6, and the Children’s University run by Queen Margaret University.
- The University of Strathclyde also offers a Children’s University aimed at promoting social mobility and raising aspirations by giving children the opportunity to visit university, attend special lectures and engage in other educational activities. It involves children aged 7 to 14 (and 5 and 6 year olds with their families), who gain credits for taking part in activities such as after-school clubs, drama groups, sports teams or learning experiences at museums, parks and community centres. Strathclyde’s Children’s University Glasgow now has 19 member schools with over 900 pupils participating upwards.
- The University of Strathclyde Students Association’s StrathGuides – winner of NUS Scotland’s Community Relations Award – also encourages and trains University students to offer one-to-one mentoring to schoolchildren.

**ENDS**

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