

COMMISSION ON WIDENING ACCESS

SUBMISSION FROM STUC

The STUC is Scotland's trade union centre. Its purpose is to co-ordinate, develop and articulate the views and policies of the trade union movement in Scotland; reflecting the aspirations of trade unionists as workers and citizens.

The STUC represents over 570,000 working people and their families throughout Scotland. It speaks for trade union members in and out of work, in the community and in the workplace. Our affiliated organisations have interests in all sectors of the economy and our representative structures are constructed to take account of the specific views of women members, young members, Black members, LGBT+ members, and members with a disability, as well as retired and unemployed workers.

Introduction

The STUC is committed to achieving the best possible educational outcomes for children in Scotland and believes strongly that education has a crucial role to play in promoting social mobility and supporting all children to reach their potential for the benefit of the child and the wider Scottish economy. It is a continuing scandal that parental income remains a strong predictor of the outcomes of children. The STUC is committed to addressing this issue and was pleased to have the opportunity to be represented on the Commission for Widening Access.

The Commission for Widening Access made a series of valuable recommendations and the STUC is pleased that a Commissioner for Widening Access has now been appointed. It is essential that this Commissioner now considers what specific actions should be taken to advance access to Higher Education for students within low income households. The Commission for Widening Access correctly identified that a sector wide approach to tackle this problem should be pursued, focusing not just on universities but on colleges, schools and early year's provision. The targets within the report are particularly useful for driving change forward and the minimum entry threshold for university offers a real and useful tool within the system that can begin to tackle this persistent injustice that has a material effect on the life chances of Scotland's young people.

It should be noted, however, that the Commission for Widening Access took evidence and made recommendations on the system as it existed at that time, and made little attempt to take into account future budgetary pressures or consider where changes or reduction in provision might occur. It also did not look in detail at closing the attainment gap as work was ongoing on this issue in other parts of Government. While this was entirely appropriate for a short-life Commission that already had a large remit, it cannot be the approach taken by the Commissioner. The Commissioner must seek to understand, and indeed work to eradicate, issues that arise due to financial pressures in the system. It is simply unrealistic to expect to

widen access without considering how young people are supported throughout their whole educational journey.

This evidence therefore, is designed to highlight some of the concerns that exist due to reduced budgets in education. It is not designed to question the work of the Commission but rather to contextualise it within current and real pressures in the system.

Pressures within the System

It is increasingly clear that Scottish education is facing challenges and negative impacts as a result of austerity. Audit Scotland's 2014 Report, School Education set out that, in real terms, Council's spending on education reduced by 5% between 2010/12 and 2012/13. This itemised a 2% drop in teachers, 5% in Admin and Clerical Staff, 2% in Classroom Assistants, 22% in Business Managers, 12% in Laboratory Assistants and Technicians and 22% in Quality Improvement Officers. The Audit Scotland Report did not report cuts in Instrumental Music Teachers and Educational Psychologists. The Scottish Local Government Benchmarking Framework (January 2016) has reported a reduction in real costs per pupil since 2010/11 of 10.8% in primary and 4.1% in secondary.

This corresponds to analysis by the Fraser of Allander Institute that reports that more than £1 billion over the last five years has been taken out of local authority budgets.¹ It is also estimated that over the same period there has been £300 million in cuts to schools.² Schools are clearly negatively impacted by the direct cut to their budgets, as the Audit Scotland Report highlights, but the cumulative impact of the wider local authorities cuts should not be underestimated, reducing the wider support services that families rely on. A report by SPICe, the Scottish Government's information centre, shows that almost 50% of the savings made by Scottish Councils come from services used most by lower income groups.³ In this context the Scottish Government's commitment to closing the attainment gap looks admirable but unlikely to be achieved due to the reality of budget cuts.

It is also clear that the cuts are not falling equally across the sector. Recent reports from Enable Scotland and the Scottish Children's Services Coalition (SCSC) highlight the effect that cuts are having on disabled students and students with additional support needs. The SCSC state that the number of pupils with ASN had increased by more than 16% since 2013; however, the number of learning support teachers fell by 13% to 2,936 between 2010 and 2015, while the number of auxiliaries and behaviour support staff dropped by 9% to 17,498 over the same period.⁴ Enable Scotland's study looked at the policy of integration for students who would otherwise be in special school. This research carried out between February and September 2016 found that only 3% of education professionals said the policy

¹ <https://www.sbs.strath.ac.uk/economics/fraser/20160913/ScotlandsBudget-2016.pdf>

² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scotland/12132556/300-million-cut-to-Scotlands-schools-after-SNP-targets-councils.html>

³ http://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S5/SB_16-84_The_social_impact_of_the_2016-17_local_government_budget.pdf

⁴ http://www.childreninScotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/DECMag_new.pdf

was working for all children. While 60% said it was working for some, but not all and nearly a quarter, 22%, said it wasn't working. Of the parents and carers whose children attended mainstream schools, fewer than 12% said their child was receiving enough support to participate in all parts of school life.⁵

It is not possible to provide inclusive education for disabled young people, without a focus on resourcing this support. Teachers need specific training to support disabled children and crucially teaching assistants and additional support needs specialists must be in place to support the child. Without the vital role of these workers, the ability of the child to participate in education and to achieve their potential is reduced. Too often cuts are eroding support from the system, at a moment when it is essential for this support to grow in order to achieve the desired aims as laid out at Scottish Government level.

It is clear that there are pressures within the education system but the pressures on educational attainment are not simply impacted by decisions taken within the school sector nor can they be traced solely to the activities of schools. Differentials between learners can begin pre-birth through maternal health and lifestyle choices, with further impacts during early childhood when cognitive development is rapid. By age 5, the gap between children from low-income and high-income families can be 10-13 months.⁶

Access to resources at home and family support have a continuing impact on this gap, as can shocks to the family situation such as unemployment or problems with welfare benefits. Subsequent choices around further or higher education or vocational routes are then shaped by parental expectations and experiences, and students continue to be unduly limited by issues around social capital, including opportunities to gain work experience, often a pre-request for entry in certain high-profile degrees such as medicine. Increasingly young people, in the senior phase or in higher or further education, have to combine work and study and student support packages have been eroded meaning a reliance on paid work is increased. Unfortunately the work on offer to young people is increasingly insecure and low paid, which has a direct impact on the young person's ability to manage their finances and ultimately to maintain their study. Youth differentials in the minimum wage lock in poverty and disadvantage, particularly for those with no family support to fall back on.

The issues that impact a child's life-chances are therefore varied and can persist throughout school and into adulthood. The effect of poverty should not be underestimated and wider social issues around housing, welfare policy, and access to work will continue to affect the educational outcomes of children. It is clear, however, that schools are key factors in supporting children's outcomes and it is critical that they are supported to do so. Added to this the role of early years education is essential for ensuring effective early interventions and to close the gaps that have already started to develop by age 5.

⁵http://www.heraldscotland.com/NEWS/14946152.Flagship_policy_to_educate_pupils_with_learning_disabilities_in_mainstream_schools_is_not_working_/?commentSort=score

⁶ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/education-attainment-scotland-summary.pdf>

It should be remembered, however, that Scotland does still have a high quality education system and there is much within the system that is valuable and can be built upon. A key role of the Commissioner for Widening Access must be to work to ensure that schools, colleges and universities are providing sustainable routes through the education system and supporting young people effectively.

Student support packages need to be considered and a continuing focus on lifelong learning and routes back into learning for those who have left it, must also be a priority. The Commission for Widening Access identified the important role that colleges play with regard to articulation and bringing young people from low income households into higher education, yet this too is an area where severe budget pressures have been felt.

An Audit Scotland report found that between 2011 and 2014, when the mergers were taking place, Scottish Government funding to colleges fell by 12.3 per cent in real terms. It also found that there had been a reduction of 48 per cent in part-time students and a reduction of 41 per cent in the number of students aged 25 or older between 2008-09 and 2013-14. Equally staff numbers decreased by 9.3 per cent between 2011-12 and 2013-14.⁷ Here too reductions in additional support needs provision can be evidenced, and the reduction of part-time places particularly disadvantages those who combine study and care. Pressures within the system are creating barriers for certain types of students, particularly disabled students and young carers, and it is important that this equality dimension is not lost within the widening access agenda.

Conclusion

We must continue to work to improve access to Higher Education for young people from low income households. The Commissioner for Widening Access has an important role to play in ensuring a whole systems approach to this issue and must work to ensure that all students are supported to meet their potential. Determined effort must be made to counteract, mitigate or reverse budget cuts and we must strive to meet the targets laid down within the Commission for Widening Access report.

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⁷ http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/central/2015/nr_150402_scotlands_colleges.pdf