

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Widening access to higher education - informal participation session with pupils, students and practitioners

Monday 3 March 2025

Note of discussion

Committee member attendees

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Discussion on widening access to higher education with pupils, students and practitioners.

The Committee spoke with pupils, students and practitioners support staff from [Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners \(SCAPP\)](#), [HUB for SUCCESS](#), [\(HfS\) Passion4Fusion](#) and [The Robertson Trust](#) on their experience of widening access to higher education. Participants were split into two groups for discussions. The following summary is intended to provide an overview of the main themes that emerged from those discussions.

Notes from breakout group 1

What has been your experience so far of accessing higher education?

- There was a lack of information provided to pupils moving to Scotland from overseas regarding university requirements and the applications process.
- Support from Passion4Fusion, through the wellness app, had helped with confidence and improved communication skills.
- The Robertson Trust helped provide support to transition to university.
- Support was limited during the pandemic when teaching went online and had an impact on pupils' learning and support in consideration of longer term goals.
- Some remote schools had pupils who were initially apprehensive to travel far from home. Support from widening access and widening participation programmes, including Aspire North, encouraged those in remote Highland areas to move to the central belt for university. The opportunities offered via physically visiting universities to dispel myths and support the aspiration to

move were crucial to help young people see the possibilities available to them.

- A number of pupils had been surprised by the number of options open to them, which included the articulation route, allowing them to go to college first and then onto higher education at university. Students and practitioners said there should be more awareness raising of this and an expansion of the pathways website which currently only offers information on the east coast on selected college and university course pathways via articulation.
- BME students expressed concerns regarding the cost implication of going to university. They spoke of the requirements for SAAS funding - having resided in Scotland for at least 3 years, which meant many decided to go straight into work rather than higher education as they were not yet eligible for funding.
- In reality, many of the young people affected by the 3-year residency criterion also face significant challenges in accessing meaningful employment opportunities. This leaves them at risk of social isolation or exposure to negative influences due to prolonged periods of inactivity. The potential value of targeted waivers or fast-track pathways into apprenticeships and work could help highlight a key area for policy consideration and support.
- The cost implications of going to university was also raised as a barrier in relation to all students.

What support do you need to access higher education and what has been your experience of accessing support?

- There was a lack of awareness among pupils and students of the graduate apprentice scheme.
- One pupil said many pupils generally find out for themselves what the options for higher education course choices are, for example the Sutton Trust and the Robertson Trust, and end up educating school their school guidance teacher.
- Concerns were raised regarding the level of misinformation from a school career advisor on what pathways were available for accessing university. However other participants spoke very highly of the support and advice they received in school.
- More advice on what subjects should be taken at school would be useful for pupils who moved to Scotland from overseas who are not aware of the academic level of the National 5 and Higher qualifications.
- The Students' association in conjunction with student services at university offer help and advice to students who need ongoing support to remain at university.
- School guidance teachers work in collaboration with Student Development Services, Developing the Young Workforce and partners outside school including the National Schools Programme and individual colleges and universities, to offer support and advice on accessing higher education.
- Widening access transitions programmes moved online during the pandemic which made it more accessible for pupils in the Highlands to take part in widening access summer school programmes however now some have gone back to in person which makes it difficult for them to attend.
- The new intake of young people to the Robertson Trust Scholarship programme, which helps students overcome financial and social barriers, had

additional barriers and challenges transitioning to university following the pandemic where young people were not used to being at training and events in person.

- Continuous support for retention is needed to ensure students not only gain access to university but they stay in university, which should include additional mental health support.
- Engagement levels for FOCUS west programmes, which support pupils from backgrounds of socioeconomic disadvantage and underrepresented groups to access higher education in university, dropped following the pandemic where individual appointments were changed to group appointments.
- Support should move towards continuity of contact for advice and support where the pupils and students know the people providing support and follow up support.
- Digital poverty was a barrier for some during the pandemic as they could not partake in widening access programmes. This takes a variety of forms - access to Wi-Fi and appropriate devices and accessories but also skills and confidence to operate online in formal settings. It was also mentioned that this can continue once they are students.
- There is an inequity of access to information on further education pathways.
- Funding constraints and in some cases, reduced funding available for widening access and widening participation activities has led to reluctant cuts in in-person on campus activities which require travel and sometimes accommodation. This is undesirable as these activities are very impactful especially for those living in rural and remote areas.
- There should be networking and events, like the ones already provided by SCAPP, for those who support access to universities to share best practice.
- It would be useful to expand the graduate apprenticeship scheme to include more sectors and offer more places.

What do you think would help more students from your background access university?

- Greater awareness of widening access programmes available across Scotland for pupils, teachers and parents and carers of pupils aspiring to go to university.
- CPD for staff offering information advice and guidance, including school careers advisors.
- Greater financial support for students including help and advice in relation to student accommodation affordability and availability.
- Removing the myth that university is only for the select few.
- Support programmes should encourage pupils 'to be their best self' and promote positive actions and destinations.

Notes from breakout group 2

What has been your experience so far of accessing higher education?

- Information variable, depends on teachers, support networks etc. This can have an impact on peoples' transitions into university.
- Support is case by case - tends to be about a good person stepping in. Needs to be consistency across the board. Available training and staff a factor - less support staff there to support students. Less time to build working relationships.
- Careers fairs could be a good way of getting universities, employers etc together but it depends on the quality of the information. Support needed to help learners access this info, as can be intimidating.
- Talks on applying to university to sixth year students are provided in some cases, but the support offered to pupils at school varies from school to school.
- Triangle of support - student - careers fair - parent/carer/or member of support staff - HfS highlight need for follow up with student following careers fair etc.
- Careers fairs are generalist - not the right forum for supporting fair access students.

What support do you need to access higher education and what has been your experience of accessing support?

- Scaffolding to ensure students are supported once at university. This is a concern for care experienced young people. Difficulties with retention of CE students are to do with support network/needs.
- Pupils need access to careers advice at school, with bespoke advice about support entitlement. Provision varies across Scotland.
- CE students see university as a risk - need to make effort to mitigate those risks. Signposting to support for wellbeing etc is necessary. Barriers to this was the info wasn't front facing and couldn't find the info. Bespoke support wasn't available. Finding people who had the knowledge was hard. Need consistent, named point of contact, as this can change a learner's experience. Where this happened, participants felt it was extremely important.
- Students need support with application process as well as once at university.
- Practitioners often supporting students over and above their role.
- Not knowing what it's like to go to university due to not having people around (family etc) who can pass on knowledge. Without that there is not as much incentive to go to university, especially when there are so many jobs available. Need to make sure everyone is given the same offer and same opportunities.
- Getting the information to care experienced/access students is a game changer. For example, a residential course was mentioned - this is intensive work with S4 pupils (taking about 40 learners) and encourages them to apply for university giving them the info they need.

- At the moment, it's not clear who will qualify for Minimum Entry Requirements (MERs) in certain cases - a student might apply to one university and get accepted on MERs and to another and be subject to standard entry requirements. St Andrews has a contextual admissions indicator on website - would be good to have national version of this if there is going to be a 'basket of measures'.
- Evidence that students who are supported by access teams are applying for jobs below graduate level - there is a limit on their ambitions. Need to get message across that the sky is the limit - and that could start at primary school. What is the aspiration beyond widening access.
- 'At what point does someone stop becoming a widening access student' is a question practitioners ask themselves.
- Issues facing one student are completely different to another - e.g. for student with childcare needs, this will be at forefront of their minds whereas for student with no childcare needs they will never think about this.
- CE bursary is a good example of funding that is effective - only have to disclose CE once, and there is a clear entitlement.
- SAAS used to presume CE students could provide info of their care experience, that stopped them accessing support. Finance is tough for all students, and it is harder to find part time work so when faced with tough option of work and study versus more straightforward option of full time work, then learners can choose full time work.
- Need for government to provide the resources for colleges and universities to support their students.
- Need to think of transitions - school and into university etc, but transitions are a continuous process. Students might also step back from university, need to be able to support them if they choose to come back. Also need to help them access support that goes beyond university/study info.

What do you think would help more students from your background access university?

- Having opportunities to join in with LEAPS/Lift Off, Skills Development Scotland and programmes like this are very important. Supporting the work that is happening is needed to ensure success.
- Info and support needs to be available at all levels - school, college and beyond.
- Some students are making decisions on what university to go to based on perceived cost. This can lead to choosing the 'safer' option. Need to be able to provide impartial advice and guidance beyond what the university needs and can provide.
- Hub for Success offers one to one bespoke support for CE learners in the east region of Scotland.
- There are other groups that are slipping through the net - estranged students are getting a raw deal (those who separate from their parents over the age of 16). Estranged students' bursary a lot less than CE bursary. Different agendas are progressing at different stages.
- Overall need to improve and protect support for all students, as finance is an issue for many.

- ASN learners - the language used at college and university is different (i.e. reference to 'reasonable adjustments'). People don't understand the terminology and that can be a barrier in terms of accessing support.
- Lack of support for ASN students around how to apply for DSA etc. Need to be proactive in tapping into support for disabled students - it doesn't join up between schools, colleges and universities. Exhausting for young people. Managing the systems is difficult and time consuming.
- Some SEEMIS tags [record management] are outdated, some could do with being added. Methods differ across the board.
- Need to highlight why information is needed, ticking a box doesn't always mean you will get the support you need but it should mean that. Application process for CE students going to uni is quite straightforward, but for some groups it is less obvious and there is no tick box for support.
- UCAS application process good as only have to disclose personal info once. Rolling this out to colleges would be positive too.
- Improving college access routes and ensuring HN pathways into all degrees would be a positive move and help move toward lifelong learning.
- Data is incomplete - might be easier for practitioners to prioritise fair access learners with more data.

What would you like to have known?

- That the support was there, it just wasn't accessible. Things like discretionary funding, staying over summer etc were not obvious to me. Just wanted same experience as other students. If students know what is available, they can access it. Information and support is often available but not knowing about it is the problem.
- SIMD20 targets don't necessarily mean those targets are right for the individuals. People should be able to come back to education later in life if they want to, college and university is not the be all and end all for everyone.