

STUC Submission to the Call for Evidence from the Education and Culture Committee on Student Support

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 590,000 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/Minority Ethnic (BME) members, LGBT members, and members with a disability, as well as retired and unemployed workers.

Introduction

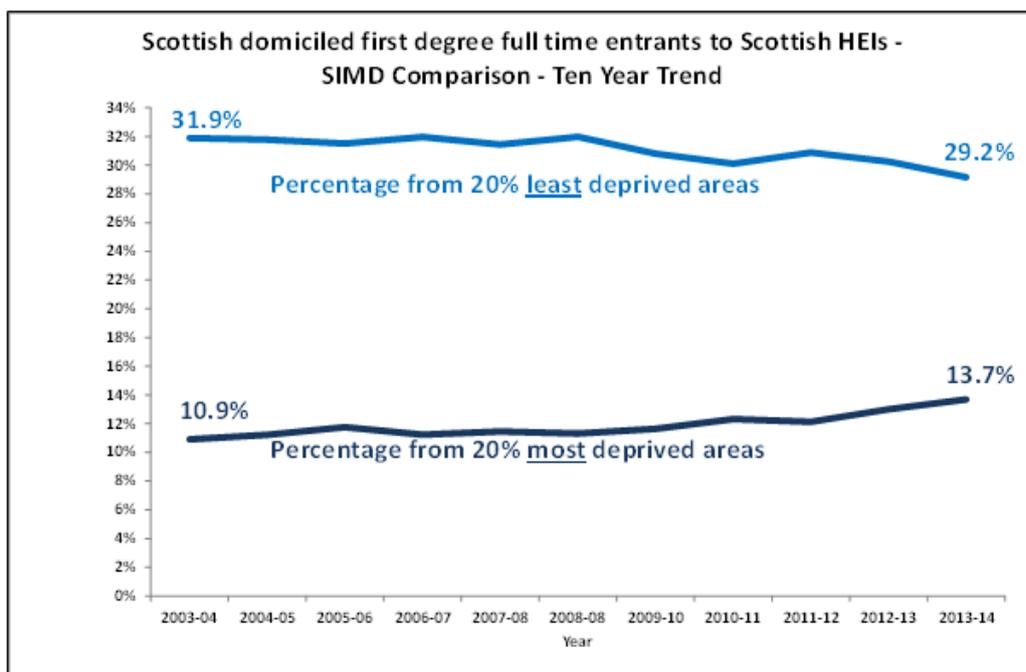
The STUC supports the principle of free education and is committed to seeing free education maintained in Scotland. We are, however, concerned about the development of a policy discourse that equates free education and widening access to higher education. Free education is important as it allows us to develop a knowledge economy, support the skills of workers, and gives our young people a good start in life without being saddled with excessive debt. Free tuition alone, however, cannot be seen as a widening access strategy, as the issues around widening access are complex and require both a systems and an educational response. A systems response is necessary to consider things like: learner journeys; articulation routes between colleges and universities; subjectivity and bias in the admissions processes at universities; and contextualised admissions. While an educational response is required to tackle the attainment gap within schools and to support early childhood development.

It is reasonable, however, to consider student support within the tertiary education system and the contribution that it can make to improving access to education, help students complete their education and reduce the level of debt faced by students when they leave education. Student support has an important role to play in improving how our education

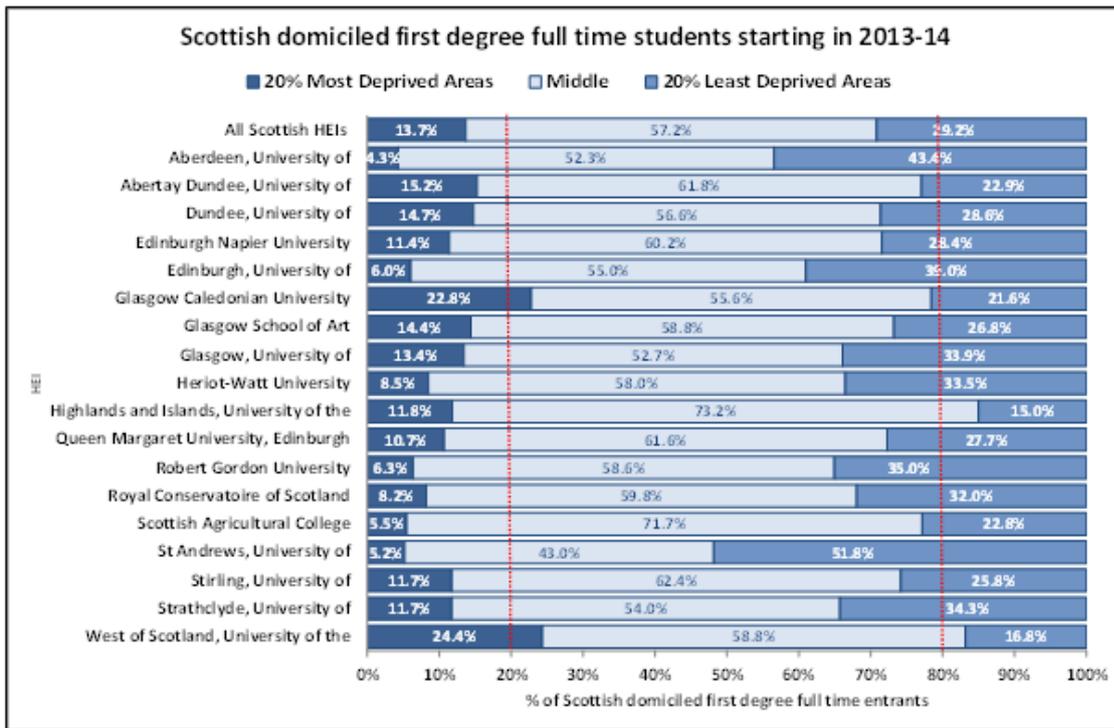
system works for all students, particularly those from the lowest income households. The STUC therefore welcomes the Committee's attention on this issue and welcomes the opportunity to participate in this call for evidence.

Widening Access

The graph below shows that Scottish Universities have made modest progress with regard to widening access to students from the most deprived communities in Scotland. It is clear, however, that you are still twice as likely to go to university if you are from an area in the top 20% of income distributions than if you are from the poorest 20% of areas in Scotland. This fact is simply unacceptable and wastes the talent of young people from our poorer communities.



If these headline figures are broken down by institution, it is clear that there are quite significant differences between the performances of different institutions on the widening access agenda. Within the graph the red dotted lines represent the point at which universities would have accepted a proportional intake of students from the least deprived and the most deprived areas. The graph clearly shows that there are certain institutions that are not only under-representative of the lowest income groups, but vastly over-representative of the highest income groups.



It is also important to consider that those from the lowest income groups are likely to enter higher education later than other age groups. They are more likely to either use articulation routes from colleges, which can potentially elongate their student journey, or enter employment then return to education later in life. It is therefore important that the student support system not only encourages a widening access agenda but takes into account the different routes into higher education that can often be taken by students from more deprived backgrounds.

Student Support and the Provision of Grants

Recent research suggests a worrying lack of understanding in Scotland amongst young people and their families about how the student support system functions. The discourse around free tuition and the juxtaposition of the Scottish system with that of the English system has led to a situation where many students fail to realise that they are likely to leave education with a level of debt; and that 'free tuition' refers to the absence of tuition fees rather than the availability of grants. Further many are unaware of the benefits of using the student loans system over using other forms of credit.

The student support system in Scotland, has on the whole, received little policy examination and it is clear that the level and availability of grants

provided here are simply too low. The effect of this is that students from the lowest income households are leaving with the highest levels of debt which sets them at a disadvantage when entering the labour market¹. With the unpaid internship culture growing within our labour market, young workers who lack disposable income and already face high levels of debt can simply find themselves locked out of their chosen profession, regardless of the academic excellence they have achieved.

NUS has repeatedly highlighted the link between student support levels that adequately meet the needs of students and student retention at university. Research from England also suggests that where grants are increased, a discernible increase in retention can also be identified.

It is clear that a range of factors can put pressure on a student's income, including housing costs, travel costs and other basic living costs. It is also clear that students can and do augment their income with part-time work. The security and rates of pay associated with this work can vary significantly, with many young workers exposed to poor employment practices, including the use of zero hours contracts, the routine practice of being sent home in the middle of shifts if the shift is considered 'slow', and many young workers can face deductions in wages or tips for a variety of issues, at the discretion of the employer. These practices increase the pressures on students who are trying to make up the short fall between living costs and their student loan, as their income can vary widely from month to month. This type of financial stress has a real effect on educational outcomes and can even prevent students from finishing education, and of course these stresses weigh more heavily on those who cannot rely on their parents for financial support.

It is therefore essential that the student support system functions in a way that recognises the particular challenges that exist for poorer students. The STUC would favour an increased use of grants within the system with support particularly targeted at those most in need.

Supporting Students while at College or University

Student support should not begin and end with a consideration of the financial provisions for students but should also consider the wider institutional support that exists for students.

¹ More info available here

http://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/sites/default/files/papers/workingpaper3_fairstothemall_creid.pdf

Currently cuts to budgets are creating pressures on parts of education that are not considered 'essential.' In this way, careers guidance, student support and financial planning services, and support for disabled students are being cut back. Lecturers who have previously devoted time to tutoring students and providing them with a degree of support both educationally and more widely, are also reporting that workloads and other pressures in the system are simply making it impossible to play this role effectively.

Colleges which have already faced substantial budget cuts and are likely to face further financial pressures going forward are a particular area of concern. It is clear that colleges have a very particular role in supporting the education of the most disadvantaged students, with many students from lower income households attending colleges before university. Despite this cuts are falling heavily on this sector, and within this sector are falling heavily on careers guidance services and on services designed specifically to support students with additional support needs. STUC affiliated unions report that in certain colleges there is now little or no dedicated support for students with additional support needs. This is of serious concern and is likely to impact on the retention rates and future career prospects of some of our most vulnerable learners.

Delivering Learning for Workers

The debate around tertiary education has tended to focus on full time provision for students coming directly from school. Little focus is given to those who need to study part-time or adult returners to education. In recent years the provision of part-time college courses and courses for adult learners has simply collapsed given the cuts to the sector and the reorganisation of colleges under the regionalisation agenda. Universities have also been cutting back on adult education courses, however there has been some improvement in the area of online and distance learning.

Those from the most deprived backgrounds are more likely to enter work then return to learning than those from wealthier backgrounds. In any widening access agenda, it is therefore important to have a lifelong learning agenda and to support learning in the workplace to bring workers back to learning, to give them confidence in their ability to learn and ultimately to encourage adult returners to further an higher education.

Conclusion

The discourse around 'free tuition' should not be allowed to dominate the debate on education to the detriment of issues around student support and the responsiveness of our education to system to different types of learners. It is also necessary to ensure that students in Scotland understand the system in Scotland and are not distracted or confused by debates that are happening in England. Greater focus should be placed on providing grants for poorer students and funding for careers advice and support for students with additional support needs must also be given greater priority within the system.

STUC

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