

Further and higher education evidence session

NUS Scotland summary of priorities

Overall investment in further and higher education

- Investment in tertiary education should not be a choice between colleges and universities but a decision to prioritise education as a whole.
- We have welcomed previous funding commitments to close any gap with England as a result of £9,000 fees (in universities) and to establish a minimum funding floor (for colleges).
- Resource for universities and colleges should be protected in future years, to ensure the funding gap remains closed and colleges have greater stability than perhaps they have in recent years, with a focus on further investment in students' places, discussed below.

Opportunities in further and higher education

- In universities, there has been considerable success seen through the creation of additional places for widening access; however, there persists a significant gap between application and acceptance rates between students from the most and least deprived backgrounds. 63% of applicants from the most deprived communities receive a university place, compared to 75% from the least deprived. The overall gap across all Scottish applicants and entrants is 66%.
- In colleges, we are pleased that FTE continues to be protected – however, while we recognise the importance of full-time study, this runs the risk of excluding some of the most in-need students, particularly women, disabled and adult returners. In the last 8 years there has been almost a 50% reduction in part-time opportunities.
- Articulation is a key driver of widening access, and an important route for many students; however, 51% of articulation students have to repeat years of study, resulting in additional debt, workload and opportunity costs. Particularly starkly, our ancient universities account for only 6% of students from the most deprived backgrounds moving from college to university – and of these 113 students just 12 receive full standing for their college qualifications.
- We would want to see continued investment in additional places for both access and articulation, in universities, and to increase the number of part-time places available in college. Investment in places is particularly important in reaching the targets for fair access set by the Commission on Widening Access – NUS Scotland figures suggest, on the basis of current trends, that these could be missed by decades.
- At the same time, widening access, and student opportunities as a whole, should not just be about supporting students into education – it must also ensure we support them to stay there and succeed – Scotland persists with a higher student drop-out rate than the rest of the UK and there remains a worrying gap in drop-out rates between the most and least deprived students. This must form a core part of the considerations of the forthcoming review of student support.

Fair access commissioner

- We welcome the announcement of a forthcoming Commissioner for Fair Access but believe that consideration needs to be given to the longer term position, with a recommendation that the position is legislated-for so that the Commission's full recommendations can be implemented effectively.
- We would support a role for the Education Committee in providing oversight of this appointment and in monitoring progress, not least as the Framework for Fair Access is developed, which will be important to ensure the bold and ambitious action necessary to achieve the progress we all want to see.

Review of student support

- We strongly welcomed the proposal to review and reform the current student support system. We believe that the review should be chaired by an independent expert, and with representation from across students, universities, colleges and wider stakeholders. We would hope to hear more about the review in the immediate future.
- Such a review should not forget about students studying here and now, either – it should have a remit to make short-term recommendations, and also have a view to long-term, systemic reforms.

Further education support

- Funding is from a cash-limited pot resulting in many colleges fully spending their full budget before all students have been able to access it, or having to top up the budget from other student support budgets, such as hardship and discretionary funds, or even teaching budgets, meaning a negative double hit to students.
- January 2016 figures from the Scottish Funding Council revealed a £2.4m shortfall in vital FE student support funds. There is an annual trend of FE student support being overstretched and underfunded.
- FE institutions can also pay different levels of support depending on age; those up to the age of 20 can be paid a weekly £30 education maintenance allowance while students over the age of 20 receive between £74 and £94 per week through their FE bursary.
- An NUS Scotland survey undertaken in 2015, found that 57% of FE students stated that they weren't clear how much financial support would be available to them. Of these respondents, 71% stated not knowing how much support would be available made their decision to undertake their course more difficult.
- Poor support also translates into much lower success rates in FE compared to university – more than a third of students either fail to complete their course successfully, or withdraw altogether.
- We remain committed to seeing a guarantee to bursary support for FE students of all ages. The weekly bursary rates should continue to increase with inflation so that they match living costs.

Higher education support

- NUS Scotland supported reforms in 2012, as they significantly increased the amount of support available to students – however, it cannot be escaped that this came through in the form of increased loans, rather than grants. Worst of all would have been no increases at all, however, now that the reforms have had time to bed in - and we have seen the take up from students of these increased loans, discussed below - we believe further increases must, for the poorest students particularly, come through in the form of grants.
- Students continue to struggle as shown by a survey of students by NUS Scotland, which found that 51% struggled to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finances and 79% worried about their financial situation. 49% of respondents had seriously considered leaving their course with the single largest reason given for this (by 62% of those who had considered dropping out) being financial difficulties.
- At the same time, figures obtained by NUS Scotland, from SAAS, show that:
- *Across all household income brackets 36% of students do not take any loan. Students studying higher education at college are significantly less likely to take on a loan compared to university students;*
- *In both the lowest household income bracket (up to £16,999) and the second lowest (£17,000-£23,999), 20% of students don't take any loan. Those figures rise to 26% of students, in each bracket respectively, who are studying higher education in college;*
- *66% of mature students (those in receipt of the independent student's bursary) don't take out a loan. Any of these students with a household income above £17,000 would receive no bursary support.*
- We hope to see continued progress on HE support but also call for consideration of the wider costs associated with being a student, and how we support students with those costs.

Additional areas we would welcome discussion with the committee on, but are unable to expand on in this summary, include:

- Improving access, support, and funding for postgraduate study, including responding to the review of postgraduate education, which reported in December 2015.
- Options - using new and existing powers available to the Scottish Parliament - to address the negative interaction between student support and the benefits system.
- Addressing low levels of support for student parents, where childcare costs greatly exceed the support available (and, given negative benefits interactions, there is little additional support available).
- Improved financial and wider support for apprentices, and continued action to address vast gender disparities across apprentice frameworks, which also leads to a large gender pay gap.