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## GOVERNMENT

# More funding needed to widen access to HE

*Government must increase spending to help pupils get into university, says report*

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THE SCOTTISH government must rethink its spending priorities in education if it is to achieve its ambitious goals of closing the attainment gap and widening access to university, according to a new report.

Higher education is receiving "relatively generous funding" compared with others areas of education, the study says, but channelling more resources towards universities may not be the best way to boost the number of disadvantaged people studying degrees.

According to the report "Access in Scotland", published by the Sutton Trust social mobility charity, current funding allocations across early years, school, college and university education do not support the goal of widening access to university.

**'This is about the investment in early years, primary and secondary'**

Speaking to TESS, author Lucy Hunter Blackburn, from the University of Edinburgh, said: "Are we putting our money in the most effective places? This is about the investment in early years, primary and secondary." She added that increased funding for these must not come at the detriment of universities' budgets.

The report states: "The distribution of funds across educational sectors reveals a great deal about implicit policy priorities.

"In Scotland, higher education receives rela-

tively generous funding compared with other sectors. While £1 billion was allocated to higher education teaching in 2012-13, further education teaching in colleges and pre-schools sectors received much less generous funding."

Official figures from Audit Scotland back these findings up, showing that councils' spending on education fell by 5 per cent in real terms between 2010-11 and 2012-13, as a result of employing fewer staff. But over the same period, university funding was maintained in real terms.

John Stodter, general secretary of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, agreed that further investment into early years and early intervention would be vital to close the attainment gap upon starting school, but said this was yet to materialise. School education, he said, had experienced five years of "quite significant budget reductions".

"Teachers have the most impact but all those other workers and agencies also contribute," he added.

### **'Deficits everywhere'**

Dame Ruth Silver, who chaired the Scottish government's Commission on Widening Access, which published its final report earlier this year, agreed that more support was required earlier on in children's education.

"That is why we decided to go for a whole-system approach. There are deficits all over the system, and what you get then

is a compound deficiency. That makes it more difficult," she said.

The Sutton Trust report stresses that there is strong support for the principle of widening access among Scottish policymakers.

But it also highlights that the commitment to free higher education tuition has failed to significantly increase the number of students from the most deprived communities.

The report says that despite the trebling of tuition fees in England, university participation rates in general – and among poorer students more specifically – are higher south of the border than in Scotland.

It adds: "Other Scottish policies, such as the creation of ring-fenced university places

for those students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and the expansion of sub-degree programmes in colleges, may have had a more powerful impact on increasing the rates of higher education participation [see box, above]."

Universities Scotland said that teaching funding for home students had not met the full costs of that tuition for some time and had been cut again this year.

"The reality is that universities have been teaching greater numbers of students over the last decade and teaching is not funded at full economic cost," a spokesman said.

"This means that universities have been delivering more and more for less. The quality of a Scottish higher education is world-renowned and it is important that we maintain our teaching quality so as to produce the high-quality graduate talent pool that attracts employers and high-skilled jobs to Scotland."

And Ms Hunter Blackburn stressed that additional funding for other parts of the education system must not be drawn from university funding.

The Scottish government said that it would "scrutinise" the analysis and recommendations of the report. "Education is a key priority for this government, as clearly outlined by the first minister. Our investment in education aims to increase attainment and improve the life chances of every learner. Each element of education provision receives a level of investment that will help achieve this, and ensure that we make the greatest possible contribution to our ambitions," a spokesperson added. ●

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## 'Only FE is improving access'

Further education colleges have done "all the heavy lifting" in terms of increasing access to higher education for those from poorer backgrounds, the author of the Sutton Trust report says.

Figures show that 90 per cent of the improvement in access in recent years has been down to the expansion of HE-level sub-degree programmes such as HNDs.

Around 17 per cent of Scotland's HE currently takes place in the college sector, compared with 6 per cent in England and 1 per cent in Wales. The process, called

"articulation", allows students to have credit for their

HE-level studies completed at college once they move on to university.

Lucy Hunter Blackburn, author of the report, "Access in Scotland", said: "What we are seeing is a reliance in the last decade on the college system to open its door to people who want to get into HE. Colleges have done all the heavy lifting in terms of increasing the opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds."

However, her report adds that there is a danger that students from less advantaged backgrounds could be diverted away from more selective universities.

The type of teaching and learning taking place in some



college sub-degree programmes is based on developing practical and vocational skills, and students might struggle with the demands of a university degree, she warns. This could make them more likely to drop out.

Dame Ruth Silver, who chaired the Scottish government's Commission on Widening Access, said: "If it was not for colleges and the widening access places at universities, widening access would not be happening."

Total spending  
on Scottish primary  
and secondary schools:

**£3.8 billion**

Drop in council spending  
on education between 2010-11  
and 2012-13 (in real terms):

**5%**

Source: Audit Scotland



## 'More money equals more time to invest in our children'

Despite the funding squeeze across education, many schools are working hard to promote university to pupils from all backgrounds.

Shelley McLaren, curriculum lead for English at Craigroyston Community High School in Edinburgh, said that putting faith in young people and giving them support is key to helping them prepare for higher education.

"The thing we have to have at the school is the belief in our children," she said.

When she arrived at the school six years ago, none of the pupils achieved Higher English and no one gained the qualifications required for university. The school now has a tutor group for the most able pupils, with 33 young people meeting with her for 15 minutes every morning.

The support group aims to ensure that children continue with the courses they started at the

beginning of the year. It also means that learners have someone to motivate and help them daily.

"In terms of putting people forward for exams, this year has been the most successful. We now have got 25 children achieving English Higher, and even some sitting Advanced Higher," said Ms McLaren.

However, she said that students also need help as they settle into university: "What we often find is that they get a place and then when they get there, they flounder."

Additional funding would allow the school to provide more targeted support in getting pupils ready for higher education, and even to help them once they have left school. "It would be brilliant to have money. More money equals more time and that is what we need to be able to invest in our children," she said.

