



University and College Union

‘Further, higher, better’

**Submission to the government’s
second Comprehensive Spending
Review**

Section 21

21 Widening participation

Further education

General further education colleges have a higher proportion of their entrants from lower socio-economic groups (34%) compared with 25% in Sixth Form Colleges, and 21% in maintained schools.¹¹⁴ As the Foster Review says: 'FE colleges have a strong commitment to social inclusion and inclusive learning ... They have been particularly successful in helping to achieve government targets for basic skills and have an increasing role in learning for offenders both in custody and in the community. As a result they attract a higher proportion of disadvantaged learners than the local population average.'¹¹⁵

FE colleges deliver higher education programmes to well over 100,000 adults, usually on a part-time basis. They are also taking a leading part in developing foundation degrees and widening participation to higher education current initiatives in the sector. The government's target for 50% of all those under the age of 30 having a higher education experience by 2010 will only be met if FE colleges continue to play a significant and growing part in delivering HE programmes.

There is a strongly two-fold focus to the further education sector in Scotland, with its 'fundamental importance to driving forward both our skills and social justice agendas'.¹¹⁶ Nicol Stephen, Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, said in 2005: 'We ask colleges to be at the forefront of preparing people for complex jobs in an increasingly competitive labour market. At the same time we ask colleges to reach deep into our most disadvantaged communities, bringing opportunities, encouragement and self esteem to people who might never before have aspired to further education and training.'¹¹⁷

Comment

It is crucial that FE colleges are adequately resourced to undertake the widening participation mission, one which will continue and grow, given the likely demand for education and skills over the next decade. Staffing levels need to reflect the extra demands which involvement in widening participation bring with them.

There is a risk that the decision by the DfES, in the 2006 further education White Paper, to follow the lead of the Foster Review and prioritise skills for employability, may undermine some areas of the widening participation programme in further and adult education, particularly by making colleges focus strongly on learners to the age of 25, and in diverting resources from adult and community learning to the skills imperative. Nevertheless, the White Paper says: 'This strong focus on economic impact does not come at the expense of social inclusion and equality of opportunity – the two reinforce one another.'¹¹⁸

UCU urges that higher education be of good quality and similarly resourced wherever it is delivered.

Higher education

There is a gulf in class participation in higher education between those from the higher and lower social classes.

While the proportion of young people from social classes I, II and III (non-manual) participating in higher education rose to 50% by 2001-2, the proportion of young people from classes III (manual), IV and V in higher education had only reached 19% by 2001-2. Between 1991-2 and 2001-2, the higher social class participation rate rose from 35% to 50%, an increase of 15 percentage points; over the same period, lower social class participation from from 11% to 19%, and increase of 8 percentage points.

Social class participation in higher education, Britain

	Social class I, II and III (non-manual)	Social Class III (manual), IV and V
	%	%
1991/92	35	11
1992/93	40	14
1993/94	43	16
1994/95	46	17
1995/96	47	17
1996/97	48	18
1997/98	48	18
1998/99	45	17
1999/2000	45	17
2000/01	48	18
2001/02	50	19

Source: Department for Education and Skills; published in Social Trends 34: 2004 edition, p45.

The table below measures what proportion of students in HE are from which social classes (the age participation data in the previous table measure proportion of young people in the population from each social class going to HE).¹¹⁹ In 1997-8 to 2001-2, the proportion of students in UK HE from lower social classes (III, IV and V) remained unchanged. The adoption of the new National Statistics socio-economic classification from 2002-3 increased the proportion of students in HE from lower socio-economic groups (4: Small employers and own account workers; 5: Lower supervisory and technical occupations; 6: Semi-routine occupations; 7: Routine occupations) from 26% to 29%, but this increase may reflect the change in methodology rather than a genuine growth in the proportion of working-class students in UK higher education. Since 2002-3 the proportion of students from working-class backgrounds has stayed unchanged.

Proportion of young full-time undergraduates from a disadvantaged background, UK

	England	Wales	Scotland	NI	UK
	%	%	%	%	%
1997-8	25	27	24	34	26
1998-9	26	27	24	34	26
1999-2000	26	27	25	34	26
2000-01	26	27	25	33	26
2001-02	26	28	25	34	26
2002-03	28.6	30.5	29.6	41.6	29.2
2003-04	28.8	30	27.5	42.8	29.2

Young = aged under 21 at 30 September of the academic year in which they are recorded as entering the institution
 Disadvantaged = from socio-economic groups 4: Small employers and own account workers; 5: Lower supervisory and technical occupations; 6: Semi-routine occupations; 7: Routine occupations
 Source: Performance indicators in higher education, published by HEFCE to 2001-2 and by HESA from 2002-3; data are from Table T1b 'Participation of under-represented groups in higher education – young full-time undergraduate entrants'

Public spending on widening participation

Since 1997, public spending in England on supporting widening participation through Access Funds to help students in financial hardship, and through recurrent allocations by HEFCE to HE institutions, has grown from £22m to £410m in 2006-7 – a total spend of more than £2bn over the period.

Public spending on WP, England

	DfES access funds*	HEFCE recurrent funding for WP**	Total
	£m	£m	
1997-8	22		22
1998-9	39		39
1999-00	82	18	100
2000-1	87	25	112
2001-2	88	36	124
2002-3	97	47	144
2003-4	98	265	363
2004-5	78	273	351
2005-6	74	277	351
2006-7	66	344	410
Total	731	1285	2016

* as indicated in DfES annual report 2005 table 12.2, and DfES reports for preceding years
 ** annual HEFCE circulars on grant allocations

Comment

We strongly support the government's policy of widening participation in higher education. But despite prioritising this in recent years, there has to date been little impact on admission to higher education in terms of social class. We note the comment of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills in her 2006 grant letter to the Higher Education Funding Council for England, where,

referring to widening participation in HE for people from low income backgrounds, she said: '... in spite of the recent progress we have made we do not perform well enough. Low rates of participation in HE among the lowest socio-economic groups represent entrenched inequality and in economic terms a waste of human capital.'¹²⁰

We are aware that widening participation depends closely for success on long-term improvement in pupil achievement in schools and further education. We urge the government over the next decade to effect a deep-rooted improvement in educational attainment, to enable higher education institutions become places which more closely reflect the make-up of the UK population. To this end we welcome the funding being put into the Aimhigher programme, and urge that in relation to improving aspiration, attainment and applications to HE, the government continues to promote partnership working between HEIs, FECs, schools, employers, parents and community groups, rather than a model of inter-institutional competition.

However, we also recognise that HE providers themselves have a key role to play in outreach and curriculum change, mode of provision and effective student support, in order to facilitate student retention and success. To this end it is vital that institutions are not disadvantaged in terms of funding or prestige by taking a high share of less academically well-prepared students or by offering flexible and part-time provision. Whilst we welcome the increase in the widening participation premium paid to institutions, and initial changes in support for part-time students, the premium is still too low, and the funding model still penalises students (and their institutions) who do not progress according to a rigid and increasingly outdated model of a full-time, three-year degree. Above all, such institutions and their students must not be disadvantaged by a funding regime that relies more and more heavily on rising fees and rising levels of student debt (see next two sections)