

UCU Scotland submission to the Education and Culture Committee on student support

The University and College Union is the largest trade union in the Post-16 education sector in the UK, representing 120,000 academic and related members across the UK, and is the largest union in the higher education sector in Scotland.

We are happy for this submission to be made publicly available and shared as appropriate.

The committee has invited views on the availability and balance of bursary and loan support in higher education and the availability of bursary support in further education and who they are helping to improve access and student retention, and to narrow the educational attainment gap.

UCU Scotland's members mainly work in the higher education sector and for that reason our comments primarily relate to that sector.

Bursary and loan support in higher education

We welcome the Education and Culture Committee's examination of student support in higher and further education.

UCU carried out research¹ in 2014 based on an analysis from the UK Treasury of relative spending on further and higher education in each of the devolved nations and the comparative results included statistics on widening access. Amongst the findings, it showed that Scotland had the lowest percentage of university entrants from the poorest backgrounds (26.2%), and the lowest proportion of entrants from state schools.

Clearly, such figures are unacceptable. In general UCU would prefer student support to be available to students requiring it in the form firstly of bursaries; then if necessary as loans as an alternative to driving students to commercial loans with less attractive rates and terms. While we wish to see increased student support, particularly in the form of bursaries, we do not believe that moving away from free tuition fees is the answer to funding such an increase. Moving debt from one group of students to another is not a sustainable answer. UCU has previously proposed funding for higher education from a business

¹ <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=7004#.VfbXK5PNKWB>

education tax² to reflect the financial benefits to business from higher education. Rather than arguments to simply penalise other students to pay for better student support we believe a case can be made to investigate more imaginative and socially just funding models.

We are pleased that the Scottish Government retained the Young Student Bursary and the Independent Student Bursary, but we would wish to see the reinstatement of bursaries making up a larger percentage of the overall package of support.

Many of our members work in student support services and have first-hand experience of the student support system. We know that the existing bursaries provide essential support to students' living costs, and serve to minimise the debt burden on students from lower-income households. Bursaries are a critical part of the widening access agenda and we would hope the committee are in contact with and reference the findings of their work on student support with the Commission on Widening Access currently sitting.

It is also the case that the support available to students via the Higher Education Discretionary Funds and the Higher Education Childcare Funds are additional key elements to the retention agenda. Audited returns of expenditure of these funds from Higher Education Institutions further supports evidence of how important financial support for living costs is as a deciding factor in whether students leave education or continue their studies.

UCU Scotland would not countenance any diminution from the current level of support, and while we acknowledge that an additional £125 will be given to students from lower income households in January 2016, we support an increase in the total package of support. We do not think, however, that this can realistically be met by students, as we remain concerned at the debt burden on all Scottish students and the impact this has upon students' lives post-graduation, eg the impact on being considered for credit, and mortgages etc.

UCU Scotland would support the Scottish Government re-visiting the most economically stable and socially just approach for students having access to an appropriate level of financial support to cover basic living costs; to consider support for students during the summer vacation; and, to minimise the debt burden following graduation.

UCU Scotland notes its grave concern of the current state of further education, particularly the numbers of places available to students and the financial support available to students also.

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² <http://www.ucu.org.uk/4473>