



Response to Consultation: “Supporting a Smarter Scotland”

Equality Forward is pleased to respond to this consultation on supporting learners in higher education.

Equality Forward is funded by the Scottish Funding Council to support colleges and universities in Scotland in working to achieve equality of opportunity for their staff and students.

Equality Forward:

- Has an advisory and supporting role to institutions, both informally and formally
- Gives demand-led support to the college and college sectors
- Identifies the risks and challenges faced by colleges and universities in relation to equal opportunities
- Is a conduit for good practice
- Periodically gives advice to the Chief Executive of the Scottish Funding Council.

Equality Forward was established in April 2006 and its work is based upon the Scotland Act (Schedule 5) 1998 definition of equal opportunities:

‘Equal opportunities means the prevention, elimination or regulation of discrimination between persons on the grounds of sex or marital status, on racial grounds, or on grounds of disability, age, sexual orientation, language or social origin, or of other personal attributes, including beliefs or opinions, such as religious beliefs or political opinions.’

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We commend the Scottish Government's desire to move away from student loans to a fairer system of student financial support as we believe this will benefit those students most in need.

The current system of loans, grants and discretionary funds is complex and confusing for students. Despite increasing levels of information advice and guidance available in colleges and universities, students are often still unaware of what their entitlements are.

Before we look at the various options in more detail, one of the underlying issues which causes students frustration is the distinction between 'dependent' and 'independent' student and the criteria for assessment.

None of the options presented begin to address this, although it is acknowledged in the footnotes on page 12 that although the definitions of dependent and independent students have emerged from the Family Law (Scotland) Act 1985, they have no legal basis and are used as guidance by SAAS. We would support the age that parents are required to support their children to be lowered from 25 years to 21 years. If this proves too difficult, then it would be advantageous to lower the number of years of self-support which counts for an independent student to be reduced from 3 years to two. Students have often been refused independent status by an inability to provide evidence of self-support for the full three years, often missing that by just a few months.

Option 1a – Increasing the Young Student's Bursary (YSB)

Research by Scotland's Colleges has shown that lone parents, mature students and people from the most deprived backgrounds find the prospect of debt one of the biggest barriers to accessing higher education. This option would only target students under 25 years of age and increase the gap which already exists between dependent student on YSB and independent student who must rely completely on loans.

Option 1b – Extending YSB to more independent students

Extending YSB in this academic year to students under 25 responsible for a child is a welcome decision. However, there are no details given of how you would plan to extend YSB to more independent students. In this scenario, it would make more sense to abandon YSB all together and



introduce a general bursary fund, means-tested on the income of parents, partners or the students themselves.

Option 1c- Introducing full bursary support in colleges

This is an attractive option and would help to increase the progression of students from further education to higher education courses such as HNC/HNDs. The arguments are persuasive, particularly for those students on benefits and those from deprived backgrounds who find the different funding mechanisms for NQ and HN courses not only confusing, but in many cases a barrier to what should be a seamless transition.

We do not think there would be a great increase in the numbers of students opting to study HNC/Ds at college before progression to university, for purely financial reasons. There are a limited number of subjects and course choices on which students can articulate from college to university.

However, we believe that more thought needs to be given to how this option would be delivered. Bursary offices in colleges would require additional support to extend this service to all college students.

Option 2 – Increase the minimum level of income available

While this option would assist students from lower income households, by increasing the suggested parental or partners contribution, this exacerbates the situation of those students whose parents refuse or cannot pay the suggested contribution. A recent research report by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) on the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and trans staff and students in higher education noted that the parents of 4.9% of LGB students and 7.1% of trans students refuse to provide financial support for them. A further 3% of LGB students and 9.2% of trans students are, in effect, estranged from their parents, but do not know how to prove this legally and so receive no financial support.

Option 3 – Increasing income and reducing debt for a more focused group



Replacing the additional loan with a grant for those dependent students from the lowest income backgrounds is welcome, but it would be easier to amend the household income criteria for the YSB and increase that. Again this option does nothing to address those classed as independent.

In conclusion we believe that the present system of two-tier arrangements for dependent and independent students needs to be re-assessed and a stronger definition based on the realities of people's everyday experiences be progressed. If we want to truly encompass lifelong learning then age should not be a barrier to accessing support for study.

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