

Poor 'hit hardest' by student funding reforms



*Students across Scotland will see the amount they receive as a bursary fall from the start of the new term.
Picture: Jane Barlow*

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THE Scottish Government's revamped funding system designed to widen access for students in Scotland will burden those from the poorest homes with the greatest debt, it has been claimed.

Lucy Hunter, a former head of higher education and student support for the Scottish Government, said that the government's proposal to reduce student bursaries in favour of larger loans will lead to Scots from poorer backgrounds graduating with more debt than their peers from middle-class homes.

Last night, politicians and student leaders said that concern over mounting debt will discourage students from lower-income families from applying to university.

Ms Hunter, who has conducted research into the funding implications of the government's Post-16 Education Bill, states that the focus on fees has obscured the fact that grants, now commonly referred to as bursaries, will be cut for all students from the start of the next academic year. Writing in *The Scotsman*, she said: "Over our years, young Scots from lower-income homes will now need to borrow £22,000 to obtain their full state support for living costs.

"The Scottish Government is the only one in the UK which expects graduates from poorer backgrounds to end up with a higher government debt, and therefore a larger claim on their future earnings, than their peers from wealthier homes."

The Scottish Government has made widening access one of the key planks of its reform of higher education while preserving free tuition for all Scots.

Ms Hunter's comments came ahead of a debate in the Scottish Parliament today called by Labour over concerns about cuts being made to bursaries.

According to the Scottish Government, changes being brought in for 2013/14 will mean Scottish students will have the “best funding package available in the UK”.

Students with a family income of less than £17,000 will be guaranteed a “minimum income” of £7,250 a year made up of loans and bursaries, while all students will be eligible for a loan of £4,500 a year.

But Ms Hunter said non-repayable bursaries would “fall sharply”, with those from lower income homes forced to borrow more to cover day-to-day costs, leaving Scots with similar or higher levels of debt than those studying in Northern Ireland or Wales.

She said: “From this autumn, the value of non-repayable grants in Scotland will fall sharply and students from lower-income families will need to borrow more to cover their day-to-day costs. For young students from households below £25,000 studying in Scotland, the grant loss will be between £890 and £1,640 a year.

Her comments come after Professor Sheila Riddell, of Edinburgh University’s School of Education, said scrapping tuition fees had failed to widen access to the country’s universities, with the number of those from the poorest backgrounds actually falling over the past decade.

Ms Hunter added: “With universal free tuition at the centre of its political universe, Scotland appears uniquely willing to allow student grants to melt away, at the expense of the least well-off. If we care about addressing inequality, and given what Sheila Riddell has shown, shouldn’t we be talking about this more?”

While the Scottish system will remain the cheapest in the UK for the better-off, Ms Hunter said that for those with a family income of £25,000 or less, [loan debt](#) will rise by between 45 and 60 per cent, but spending power by between 2 and 17 per cent.

At lower incomes, Scots will still need to borrow less than their English equivalents, but national grants in England worth up to £3,354 a year and widening access top-up schemes run by universities mean the gap can narrow to an “unexpected extent”.

Labour education spokesman Hugh Henry, who will lead today’s debate at Holyrood, said: “It’s a disgrace that bursaries for lower-income students have been cut and they are now being forced to borrow more to survive.

“The other parts of the UK are making determined efforts to support these students, why are we not doing the same in Scotland?”

Labour has previously said that free tuition is “not sustainable” and called for a return to the graduate contribution to be considered.

Robin Parker, president of the National Union of Student (NUS) in Scotland, said: “Our research shows that student hardship, and not having enough money to live on, is one of the largest deterrents to starting and staying at college or university.

“That’s why it’s so important to see the huge investment being made into [financial](#) support from this summer, worth an additional £140m per year in the money students receive in their pockets, with increases for the poorest students worth almost £1,000 a year each.

“While, of course, it would have been best if this had come in the form of grants rather than loans, worst of all would have been failing to increase student support at all.”

In return for generous funding settlements from the Scottish Government, universities are now required to sign up to outcome agreements, which set targets for widening access.

A spokeswoman from Universities Scotland said: “Every university in Scotland is fully committed to widening access and they are all due to set out their plans for this in outcome agreements very shortly.”

A Scottish Government spokesman added: “The student support package is about [cash](#) in pockets, and that is exactly what the NUS have told us that their members want. As part of the best package of student support in the UK, every student has been guaranteed a loan of £4,500 a year. The poorest students are also guaranteed at least £7,250 annually.

“We also pay the fees for all Scottish students who study in Scotland and are taking forward a number of actions through the Post-16 Education Bill and university outcome agreements to not just further widen access to the poorest students, but to support them to make the most of their higher education.”

Referendum lesson packs are ‘exploiting children because they are still in education’

THE head of the country’s largest teaching union has accused campaigners of attempting to “exploit” school pupils ahead of next year’s independence referendum.

Larry Flanagan, general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), said schools would ignore information packs being sent out by the pro-Union Better Together campaign.

Mr Flanagan, who will address his union's AGM later this week, said: "Our general view is that we would prefer Education Scotland to produce support materials for schools around the skills associated with the debate.

"We're not looking for branded material trying to persuade people one way or the other – that's not the role of schools. In the absence of any material from the Yes campaign, I don't see anybody using the No campaign stuff – that would potentially leave them open."

Commenting on Better Together's decision to send material to schools, he added: "It's a lazy approach to think, 'we've got the kids in schools, let's hit them (with campaign literature)' – it's almost exploiting the fact kids are still in education."

Mr Flanagan's comments came as the pro-independence Yes Scotland campaign called on Better Together to suspend its plans to send lesson packs to schools.

Chief executive Blair Jenkins has written to Alistair Darling asking him to await guidance from the Electoral Commission and Education Scotland before proceeding with the initiative.

In his letter, Mr Jenkins confirmed that Yes Scotland will be producing information packs for schools ahead of next year's independence referendum, but will only do so after receiving appropriate guidance and advice.

Yesterday, The Scotsman revealed Edinburgh city council has already provided guidance to its teachers telling them not to express political views with pupils when discussing the referendum. Further guidance from national agency Education Scotland is expected to be published later in the summer.

The discussion of next year's referendum in schools has taken on added significance after it was agreed that 16- and 17-year-olds should be able to take part in the vote.

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