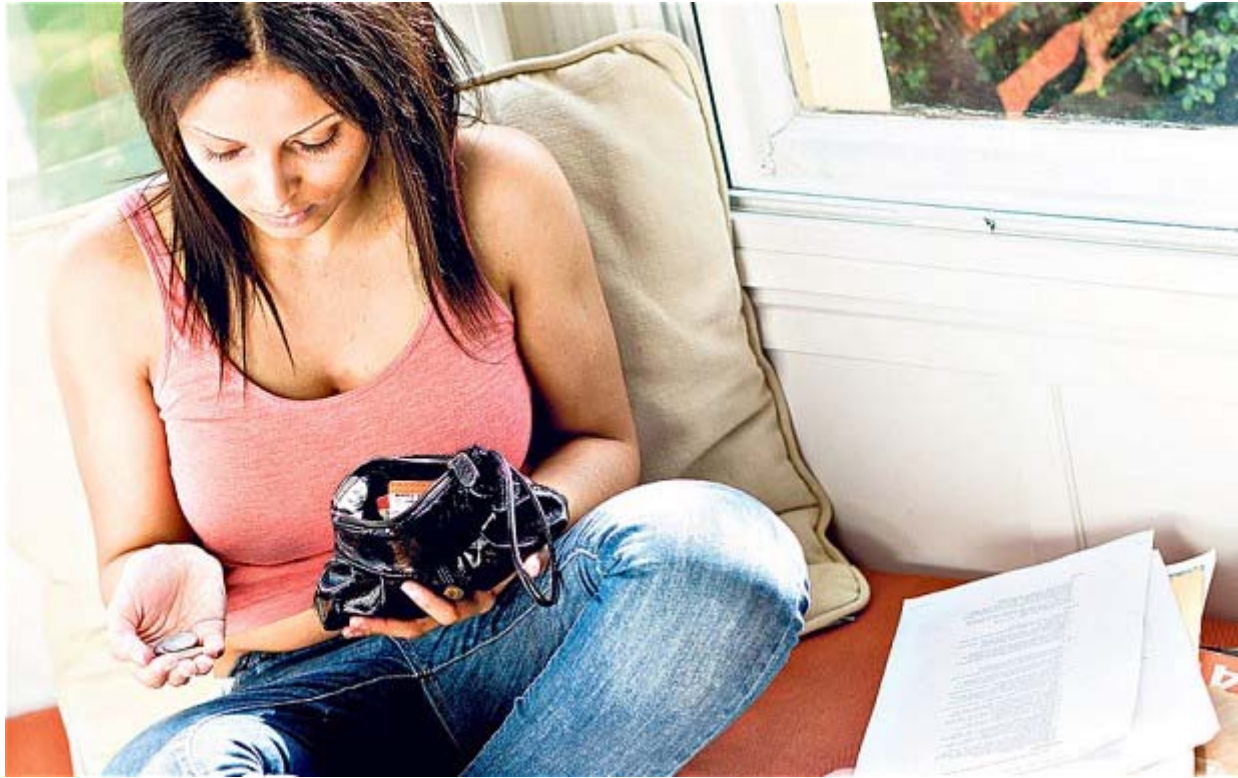


SNP minister defends free university tuition despite bursary cuts for poor

Angela Constance insists university tuition must remain 'free' for wealthy Scots as figures show a drop in grants and bursaries for poor youngsters.



Students from poor backgrounds are receiving fewer bursaries and grants Photo: Chris Rout/Alamy



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By Simon Johnson, Scottish Political Editor

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The SNP's Education Minister has insisted that university degrees must remain "free" for wealthy Scots after it emerged that youngsters from poor backgrounds are receiving fewer grants and bursaries to fund their studies.

Angela Constance said there was a "principle that education has to be free" despite official figures showing children from the poorest families are becoming increasingly reliant on loans rather than non-repayable grants and bursaries.

She initially appeared to admit that a higher proportion of poorer students go to English universities, which charge tuition fees but offer more generous bursaries, before backtracking by questioning whether that was the case.

But Lucy Hunter Blackburn, who was formerly the Scottish Government's most senior civil servant dealing

with higher education, said the system was skewed towards better-off children.

She told ITV Border that children from poorer backgrounds suffered most from cuts to bursaries and grants and the new figures showed they are now taking on a disproportionate amount of loan debt.

In contrast, she said wealthy children graduate with little or no debt. The Scottish Tories said the ‘free tuition’ policy had backfired on the poor and described the SNP’s record on social mobility as “deplorable”.

The figures, published by the Student Award Agency Scotland (SAAS), showed that the number of students receiving grants and bursaries fell by two per cent in 2014/15, with the total amount paid out falling to £63.6 million.

This compares with a total of more than £100 million paid out in 2012/13. The average bursary or grant has dropped by £640 over this period, from £1,860 to £1,220.

Youngsters living in the poorest households, with incomes of up to £16,999, took on an average loan of £5,870 in 2014/15 compared to £4,600 for those with the wealthiest families.

Students eligible for the maximum bursary, who are generally the poorest, had average annual borrowing of £6,650 compared to £4,560 for those ineligible for a bursary.



Alex Salmond unveiled a monument in his final days as First Minister promising tuition fees were gone for good Photo: Gordon Jack/ScotImage

UCAS, the university admissions body, recently published figures showing 17 per cent of disadvantaged students had been accepted to sit a degree in England compared to just 9.7 per cent in Scotland.

Challenged that more children from poor backgrounds were going to English universities, despite the existence of tuition fees, Ms Constance told ITV Border: “Of course, but what we have in Scotland is a

principle that education has to be free.”

However, she then denied that the English system was performing better, saying: "I'm not sure that is the case because we have to be careful to ensure that the figures are comparing like with like."

SNP ministers have previously argued that the UCAS figures are not comparable as they do not include Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) undertaken at Scottish colleges.

However, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework gives these qualifications less weight than a university degree and academics say they do not open the door to the same range of well-paid professions.

Ms Hunter Blackburn, of Edinburgh University, has previously published research showing the free tuition fees policy benefits the better-off most and has been funded by pushing poorer students further into debt.

She said the SAAS figures “confirm that in Scotland the poorest students are carrying far more of the growing student debt than their numbers in the system would justify...

“What the system does is mean that students from better off backgrounds are less likely to take out a loan so they are the ones coming out of the system with the least debt and often no debt at all.”

Liz Smith, Scottish Tory young people spokesman, said: “The SNP’s record in helping less privileged young people is deplorable. Youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds are being failed in the classroom thanks to the Scottish Government’s failure to close the attainment gap.

“The SNP’s formula for funding free education for those who can well afford to pay for it is harming the very people it professes to want to help.”

Iain Gray, Scottish Labour’s opportunities spokesman, said: “Since the SNP took office in 2007 the budget for bursaries and grants has been slashed by £40 million and student debt has soared.”