



PRESS RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL:
00:01 6 October 2008

ASC calls on Calman to remember poorest students

The Association of Scotland's Colleges (ASC) will today (Monday 6 October) call on the Calman Commission to review an area of devolution that is failing Scotland's poorest students.

The ASC has already written to the Commission to highlight that, due to a lack of co-ordination between Westminster and Holyrood, Scottish students who depend on welfare are facing an increasing number of financial barriers to education. The ASC will be giving evidence to the Commission today to discuss the issue in more detail.

Because the welfare system is managed by Westminster but the student support system by Holyrood, since devolution the two systems have moved further apart. The resulting situation means that choosing to study can actually leave welfare recipients worse off than they are outside education.

This situation is particularly relevant to college students; in comparison to their University counterparts they are poorer, with 22% of college students coming from the most deprived 20% of Scotland's population (only 10% of University students come from the same group). Almost one in five students in Scotland's colleges is in receipt of benefits.

Howard McKenzie, Acting Chief Executive of the ASC commented: "Choosing to come to college is a brave move for many of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society. For many, just being eligible for a student loan will actually have an adverse affect on the amount of welfare they receive, regardless of whether they choose to accept this debt. Many students also face difficult decisions when it comes to living arrangements with partners, as household income is taken into consideration in the calculation of benefits. A couple who choose to live together may find themselves considerably less well off.

"At the moment, the average HNC or HND student in Scotland, who is 31 years old, is forced to juggle up to nine separate income streams and survive on a household income of less than £18,000. We are deeply concerned that this level of complexity, alongside the threat of actually being worse off, is a huge deterrent to study for society's poorest people – in other words, those who need education the most. This absolutely has to change."

In addition to highlighting the problem to the Calman Commission, the ASC is also currently working on a detailed submission to the forthcoming Scottish Government's consultation on student support, proposing the introduction of a bursary system in place of the current loan system. This system would be administered locally by colleges, rather than nationally through SAAS (Student Awards Agency for Scotland) as loans currently are.

Howard McKenzie believes the proposed bursary system would remove many of the current barriers to education faced by students on welfare. He commented: "Introducing bursaries would allow students to progress seamlessly across the different levels of college provision, through FE and onto HE, without having to worry about how the change of course might impact on their family income, or whether their course will force them into thousands of pounds of debt.

"This proposal will also help the huge problem that students claiming welfare currently experience, when their benefits are cut according to the loan entitlement – whether they take it or not."

Notes to Editors

Case studies are available upon request

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