



# news release

**For immediate release**

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**FAO: Political Correspondents/Newsdesks**

## **Students facing bursary system 'meltdown' over funding cuts**

- Last year - almost 2/3s of colleges last year found bursary funds inadequate
- This year - College bursary budget £8.8m short this year compared to demand and £3.5m less than last year
- Next year - College bursaries to the poorest students facing real-terms cut of over £1.7m in draft budget for coming academic year

An NUS Scotland survey has found that the college bursary system in Scotland is failing colleges and students.

The survey, from an FOI request to college principals, found that 65% of colleges (that responded) reported that bursary funds were insufficient to cope last year. Colleges either had to dip into reserves (41%) or make cuts to student support per student (24%). With budget cuts to colleges and a £1.7m real-terms cut to college bursaries proposed in the draft Scottish Budget there are fears that the system is becoming entirely unsustainable.

College bursaries are up to £89 a week to provide help to the poorest college students to go into full time study. Many people who have given up jobs or been made redundant and have chosen to go to study at college would be unable to do so without this crucial lifeline. Unlike loans and grants for university students, college bursaries are discretionary, meaning that if colleges run out of the funds they stop.

Even before this cut, student hardship levels had rocketed among students. NUS Scotland's research shows that 68% of students are working far beyond recommended amounts of

paid hours per week, 50% of students have been forced to take commercial debt to get by, and 36% of students have considered dropping out due to money worries. Cutting funding can only make this worse.

The survey comes on the back of figures which show that bursary funds for the current year will be £3.5m less than last year. Colleges had requested additional funds of £12.3 but will only receive £3.5m. This means almost £9m of demand for bursaries will go unmet. Furthermore the total amount for bursaries this year will be £87.4m, some £3.5m less than last year's £90.9m total.

There are fears that a real-terms cut to bursaries plus cuts to colleges themselves could lead to a breakdown in the system.

Liam Burns, President of NUS Scotland, said:

"Protecting college places was absolutely right but there is little point in providing this funding to colleges if students can't afford to study in them. Bursaries are a vital lifeline for the poorest college students in Scotland. Making a cut of over £1.7m out of this budget at this time is entirely unacceptable. While we accept cuts have to be made, taking money out of the poorest students' pockets is surely the last thing we should be doing.

"College bursaries were already failing but with this cut we could risk a meltdown in the system. Even before these cuts bursary funds have been inadequate for the poorest college students to live on. To plug the gap many have already been forced into credit card debt, working too many paid hours during term time, or even into dropping out altogether. Rather than cutting bursaries we need to increase them to at least to the poverty line.

"The decision to cut bursaries must be reversed to avoid cutting off thousands of our poorest students from going to college. The Scottish Government announced some really positive things in last month's budget, things that we'd been working on for months. Saving the EMA is really good news and protecting places at university and college also welcome. However, a cut to college bursaries could undo all this hard work, particularly when colleges are in no financial position to make up any shortfall.

"Education should be based on someone's ability, not on their ability to pay. Bursaries are vital to make sure colleges don't become just the preserve of those that can afford to go. We'll be fighting to reverse this decision, working with parties across parliament to find the money college students need, and to make the fundamental, long-term reforms needed to improve our student support system in Scotland.

*...ends*

***For more information contact Russell Gunson, NUS Scotland's Head of Policy and Public Affairs, on 07811 370 623.***

#### **Notes to editors:**

#### **College FOI results**

29/40 colleges responded

12/29 colleges had been forced to use reserves (41%) to plug a gap in bursary funds last year

7/29 colleges had cut student support (24%) to make funds stretch further (this included allowing funds to run out, reducing support per student, cutting the length of courses so bursaries were paid for fewer weeks, increasing attendance rules to 100%)

19/29 colleges needed reserves or cuts to support to make ends meet (65%)

2/29 were fine with their initial allocation (7%)

10/29 were fine whether following redistribution or not (although some with waiting lists) (34%)