

Universities Scotland manifesto asks for the next Scottish Government

1. Increase the amount invested in teaching and wider student support for each Scottish domiciled undergraduate student.

An increase of 13% in the unit of teaching resource over the lifetime of the next parliament (to 2026) would cost £93 million. This investment would ensure that students retain the high-quality, rounded student experience they deserve. It would protect existing progress on widening access (including achievement of the 2021 interim goals) and support the further push needed to achieve the 2030 Commission on Widening Access SIMD20 targets, support wider student wellbeing and protect high value jobs.

Context:

- The amount invested in the free higher education of every Scottish-domiciled student has dropped by 13% between 2014/15 and 2020/21. This equates to £750 less invested in the education of every Scottish-domiciled undergraduate student at a university now, compared to in 2014/15.
- The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) estimate that public funding of university teaching in 2018-19 was £157 million per year below the full cost of provision.
- COVID has certainly exacerbated the funding challenges facing the sector but it's a chronic problem that pre-dates the pandemic and was highlighted as a risk by Audit Scotland in 2016 and 2019.
- This serious sustainability problem needs to be addressed if students are to continue to receive a quality education, if we're to avoid mounting pressure on staff-student ratios and if Scottish HE is to retain its world-class reputation.

2. Commit to growing investment in higher education research and innovation over the next Parliament.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown how vital university research is to society and to our quality of life. University research has played an integral part in the protection of the general public and the race to understand the virus and develop a vaccine. From the Lighthouse Laboratory (University of Glasgow), Scotland's research expertise in genomic sequencing (Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen), nation-wide studies integrated with the NHS to protect cancer patients at risk of coronavirus (Dundee) and the first studies into the effectiveness of the vaccine roll-out (Edinburgh) – universities have had a major contribution to make.

Looking beyond the pandemic, research and innovation will be integral to Scotland's role in addressing global challenges like the climate emergency and sustainable economic growth as part of a recovery.

With greater investment, we can ensure we protect an asset that enables Scotland to be a constructive, positive and green global partner. Being a competitive research strength on the world stage will give Scotland routes to growth through international trade and inward investment that will create high-value jobs and support sustainable economic growth.

A commitment to increase universities' research excellence grant by £50 million in the first year of the next Parliament would restore the 17% real terms funding erosion this grant has faced between 2014/15 and 2020/21. Over the life of the Parliament, the next Government should go further to prioritise investment in research at a level that allows Scotland's universities to be competitive nationally and internationally.

Context:

- The UK Government has committed to investing 2.4% of UK GDP in research by 2024. Scotland currently lacks goals of equivalent ambition.
- In 2018/19 research in Scotland's universities was funded at 80% of cost, a deficit of £340 million. This is a combination of underfunding of research by all funders including the Scottish and UK Governments, industry and charities.
- Scotland used to lever in 15.6% of the UK Research Council's funding in 2013/14. As Scottish Government investment in core university research grants has fallen since then, so too has Scotland's competitiveness. In 2018/19 Scotland levers in only 13.6%. Every percentage point share of the UKRI's research funding is worth £40 million.

3. Invest in flexible, fast skills development to get working-age people back into high-value, secure jobs. This is a key part of an education-led recovery.

There are two parts to this:

- i) **Double universities' capacity to deliver short upskilling and reskilling courses and support working-age people into high value, secure jobs.**
 - Universities have seen demand for short upskilling and reskilling courses soar since the start of the pandemic and the first national lockdown. Demand for courses at SCQF level 8 and above has been led by individuals and employers.
 - Universities can expand their existing delivery of short courses to meet demand and ensure that working-age people, who have been negatively impacted by the pandemic, who face redundancy after furlough, or have found themselves stuck in sectors of the economy now facing unavoidable decline, can re-purpose their skills and knowledge base.
 - Doubling the existing fund for universities' short reskilling courses to £13.2 million in 2021/22 – and sustained on an annual basis would ensure this is accessible to everyone who can benefit, cover the cost to institutions and give Scotland's workforce a constructive roadmap to recovery and help employers and key sectors of our economy.
 - Universities deliver short courses or micro-credentials across a broad range of specialisms that are highly relevant to the economy and employers including data management, advanced digital skills, and advanced practice in health and social care.
- ii) **Commit to review the grant model for part-time study early in the life of the next Parliament.** Part-time study should be accessible to everyone who can benefit from it, regardless of income. Support for part-time students should be reviewed. For instance, currently, you have to have earned less than £25,000 in the past year to qualify for grant support to study part time on a short course or microcredential. Many people will be facing financial hardship in 2021 and beyond, as a result of the devastating impacts of the pandemic on our workforce, but they would fall through the grant support system because their earnings last year, pre-pandemic, would disqualify them. This needs to change.

4. Widen access to postgraduate level skills and enable Scotland to perform on par with the rest of the UK.

Masters and postgraduate research students are an important pipeline of top-level talent for industry, universities and the wider economy. Scotland currently compares unfavourably on the level of support available to people who want to commit themselves to higher level study. Currently, £10,000 is the maximum loan available in Scotland to postgraduate taught and research masters students (with a maximum £5,500 for fees and a maximum of £4,500 for living costs). In England, the maximum loan available is £11,222 and in Wales, the maximum loan available is £17,489 (on a means-tested basis considering household income). We'd like to see the loan available to Scottish-domiciled students increase to a competitive level within the UK. £14,000 (to cover fees and living expenses) would go further to lower barriers to postgraduate level study for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and offer Scotland's economy more highly qualified talent. PhD students in Scotland also have less access to support than elsewhere in the UK, since a doctoral loan was introduced in England in 2018/19. Scotland should take the opportunity to review this.

Context:

- Back in 2017/18, SAAS funding for postgraduate taught courses (including one-year Masters) was improved and expanded in Scotland and the first year alone saw a 7% increase in Scottish-domiciled postgraduate taught students.
- Universities are reporting a further surge in demand now. Sandy Begbie's advisory group on economic recovery after the pandemic recommended supporting more postgraduate level study as part of the Young Person's Guarantee.
- It would cost circa £40 million to raise the current level of support offered to postgraduates to £14,000 making it a more competitive offer relative to that available in the rest of the UK.
- In England and Wales, doctoral research students can now receive a loan of up to £26,445 for the duration of their PhD. This was introduced from 2018/19 and offers some financial support for those who are self-funded.

5. Commit to fund a new set of international scholarships to keep Scotland open and accessible in a post-Brexit world.

- The post-Brexit environment and a change in the fee model for EU nationals studying in Scotland requires us to make changes to ensure that we remain open and accessible as a country and benefit from the best talent around the world as part of inward mobility.
- We'd like to see a commitment, over the lifetime of the next Parliament, to fund a new scholarship programme in the order of at least £7 million annually to attract inward mobility. This should be developed with a particular focus on supporting access and niche skill sets.
- The Scottish Government's budget for 2021/22 makes some provision for expanded scholarships amongst other commitments in an uplift of £6.7 million to the HE International budget. However, this is only a one-year commitment and we don't yet have details from the Scottish Government on the nature of this scholarship scheme.

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