

By Email

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26 October 2022

Sue Webber MSP
Convener, Education, Children and Young People Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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Dear Ms Webber,

I was very pleased to have the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee on 28 September. Many thanks for the invitation.

During the session, there was a question from Ruth Maguire MSP which I was not able to answer at the time and I committed to following-up. The specifics of her question related to a constituent who was a student of educational psychology at the University of Dundee and the interplay between their placements and their entitlements as a student (to loans and/or benefits/tax exemptions etc). Universities Scotland has been able to provide the following detail.

Educational psychology is a two-year taught postgraduate (TPG) degree programme at the University, with a third year of supervised practice in the community (year three) in order to achieve the Qualification in Educational Psychology (Scotland) Stage 2 and the necessary registration with the Health and Care Professions Council. All three years involve a Scottish Government grant paid to the student, as specific to the programme, which exceeds £24,000 in years one and two. Students on this programme, undertake two short placements during years one and two of this TPG and during this period the individual is classified as a student and would be eligible for council tax exemption, as available to postgraduate students.

In year three, the year-long supervised practice gives the trainees a type of employee status and the role is a paid position, administered by the accredited psychology service in a local authority. As such, there are some deductions from the grant and the employee status would most likely mean the end of some other benefits of student status, including council tax exemption. There are also conditions attached to Scottish Government-funded grant for educational psychology, which prevents students on this programme applying for any other form of bursary or loan (disabled students allowance being the only exception). This limits their University's ability to support them financially with discretionary funds or other means, as the institution would ordinarily seek to do if and where a student approached student services with financial hardship.

We are aware that staff at the University of Dundee are in touch with a number of trainees about financial pressures and are exploring options to assist, including raising student finance issues with the Scottish Government.

The second part of Ms Maguire's question related to the expenses and associated learning costs that students incur as part of their course in addition to living costs. This is relevant to her constituent (as the location of the practical placements during the postgraduate degree programme can only be guaranteed within a 90 minute travel distance of the student). It will also be a challenge facing very many students in the current context. Universities aim to be transparent about the costs involved in completing a degree and will aim to set this out according to one-off costs, ongoing costs and incidental costs. However, we absolutely recognise the impact of the rapid pace of rising inflation and the cost of living crisis on students' budgets.

With the exception of students on the TPG educational psychology programme (where the terms of the Scottish Government grant preclude most other forms of financial support) we would encourage any student in financial difficulty or concerned about meeting the costs associated with their degree to meet with their university's student services team. Discretionary funding is available to students and institutions would strongly encourage students to make use of this option where hardship is a factor and particularly where this is a necessity for progression with learning goals.

This is an important opportunity to highlight the fact that discretionary funding for the current academic year (2022/23), as provided to institutions via SAAS, has returned to pre-pandemic levels, meaning there is a significantly reduced funding available with which to support students. I acknowledge that SAAS discretionary funding was effectively doubled in 2020/21 to address the specific challenges facing students during the pandemic. However, this was very much a one-off. SAAS discretionary funding for students in 2022/23 is now down by 58% relative to 2020/21 and there is considerable variation between HEIs in this year's allocations. Several institutions have seen further drops in their discretionary funding since just last year and the fall in funding has been more than 5% in five institutions. We would argue that the current cost of living crisis, referred to by the First Minister as a "humanitarian emergency" presents the same, if not greater, level of need.

I will continue to follow the Committee's inquiry on universities with interest and look forward to the session with Minister Hepburn in November. Very many thanks to the Committee for your support for higher education.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'G. Boyne', written in a cursive style.

Professor George Boyne
Principal and Vice-Chancellor
University of Aberdeen