

# **Increase to the Higher Education student support package**

## **Equality Impact Assessment – Results**

**March 2023**

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### **Title of Policy**

Increase to the Higher Education student support package

### **Summary of aims and desired outcomes of Policy**

Relevant National Outcomes:

- We respect, protect and fulfil human rights and live free from discrimination
- We are well educated, skilled and able to contribute to society

The current support package offers a maximum of £8,100 to Care Experienced students, Estranged students and students from the lowest household income brackets. This policy change will see the maximum support available to students increased to £9,000.

### **Directorate: Division: team**

Lifelong Learning and Skills: Student Financial Support Team

### **Executive summary**

This EQIA considered the impact of the increase to the Higher Education package of support from £8,100 to £9,000.

The EQIA identified that in general the increase to the student support package is seen as a positive change as it encourages students in Scotland to enter and remain in higher education.

### **Background**

The Programme for Government committed to improving the package of support for full-time undergraduate students to the equivalent of the Living Wage.

The first step to achieving this commitment was a £350 loan increase to the Higher Education package from Academic Year (AY) 2022/23. This step allowed students from the lowest household income bracket and eligible estranged students to receive support equivalent to £8,100. This uplift did not apply to Care Experienced students, who already received full bursary support equivalent to £8,100 at this point.

The second step will apply a £900 increase to the Higher Education package from AY 2023/24. This step will ensure students from the lowest household income bracket, estranged students and Care Experienced students will receive support equivalent to £9,000. The £900 will be applied as a loan uplift, with the exception of Care Experienced students, who will receive a £900 bursary uplift. This is due to the Care Experienced package of support being a non-repayable bursary, with no loan element.

## **The Scope of the EQIA**

As the change to increase the package of support for full-time Higher Education students in Scotland is intended as a positive one, it is considered a concise and focussed EQIA is proportionate in these circumstances.

Information from the Scottish Government's Advanced Learning and Skills Analysis team confirmed that in the Academic Year 2020/21, there were a total of 110,945 Scottish domiciled undergraduate enrolments at Scottish Universities.

There were a total 32,074 Scottish domiciled full-time higher education enrolments at Scottish Colleges.

## **Key Findings**

The impact analysis identified that there are gaps in the information available relating to pregnancy and maternity within full-time higher education students studying in Scotland. As a result, we cannot determine if the increase to the student support package will have a positive impact on this characteristics and instead have to assume a neutral impact. However, in general the increase to the student support package is seen as a positive change as it encourages students in Scotland to enter and remain in higher education.

Whilst the EQIA identified positive impacts with regards to equality groups, it did not consider the policy position of Care Experienced students receiving an increase via bursary, with the remaining student cohort receiving loan.

This was justified on the basis that the Commission on Widening Access (COWA) report 'A Blueprint for Fairness' recommended that living cost loans be replaced with a non-repayable bursary for learners with care experience from Academic Year 2017/18. The COWA observed that challenges faced by those with care experience, both in nature and magnitude, set this group of learners apart from others. In addition, under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, Corporate Parents have duties to deliver on to Care Experienced people. Overall, they have a responsibility to promote the wellbeing of Care Experienced people. To do so they must understand the lives of Scotland's looked after young people and care leavers and respond to their needs as any parent should. In terms of the legislation, Scottish Ministers are named as a Corporate Parent. This policy position is therefore consistent with this approach.

In any case, we have not identified any disproportionate impact on equality groups as a consequence of giving care experienced students the particular advantage of receiving a bursary uplift instead of a loan uplift. The data does not suggest a higher proportion of any particular equality group in the general student cohort compared to the care experienced cohort, indeed there are circumstances in which Care Experienced students have a higher representation amongst equality groups, which can be seen for disability and ethnic minorities.

We are aware that other subsets of the general student population also share some common characteristics with care experienced students. For instance, we are aware of the recent research on estranged students. However, we consider the relevant comparator for the current policy to be all students with protected characteristics in the general student cohort who will not benefit from the bursary uplift, rather than a further subset of that cohort.

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

In conclusion, positive impacts were identified for all equality groups with the exception of pregnancy and maternity - where a neutral impact was identified.

SAAS will gather statistical data on student support applications and we will be able to monitor the impact of the increase to the support package on relevant groups going forward. The Higher Education student support package will also be subject to ongoing monitoring by the Higher Education Division.



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