

Postgraduate Review - Postgraduate Certificates

Equality Impact Assessment – Results

August 2023

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Title of Policy

Postgraduate Review - Postgraduate Certificates

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

At present, SAAS do not fund Postgraduate Certificate courses. The desired outcome is to maintain this position.

Directorate: Lifelong Learning & Skills **Division:** Learner Experience Division

Executive summary

The current Postgraduate support package for Scottish domiciled students was reviewed and as part of this, it was considered if Postgraduate Certificates (PG Certs) could become eligible for support. An outcome from the review recommended that funding is not extended to students studying PG Certs.

The EQIA identified that in general, there was little impact on protected characteristics. Lack of demand for PG Certs to be funded and the fact that students are still able to undertake SAAS funded Postgraduate Study by choosing to study a Postgraduate Diploma or Masters course, both of which attract funding contributed to this.

Background

As part of the 2021/22 Programme for Government, the Scottish Government committed to undertake a review of the funding provision for postgraduate students. This review is being conducted jointly by the Scottish Government and Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS).

The review focused on three research areas; the student support package, course eligibility and widening access.

As part of the course eligibility research, it was considered if Postgraduate Certificates should be eligible for funding.

Under the current regulations, full-time postgraduate students are able to access a loan of up to £10,000 (comprising of £5,500 for fees and £4,500 for living costs) for

any taught or research postgraduate course at any Scottish HEI provided it is a Postgraduate Diploma or Masters course. Part-time postgraduate students are also able to access the tuition fee loan element only, which is split across the duration of their course (should it be no longer than twice the length of the full-time equivalent). However, this support is not currently available to students who choose to study PG Certs.

It should be noted that for 2023/24 AY, the total postgraduate package will increase to £11,500 (£7,000 tuition fee loan and £4,500 living cost loan).

Exploratory research conducted by SAAS found that PG Certs usually had a flexible learning option. In total, there are approximately 110 courses on offer across 17 Scottish HEIs. However, approximately 66% of these courses are delivered solely online whilst the remaining 34% tend to be blended learning. There are 520 Scottish domiciled students enrolled on PG Certs at Scottish providers, so this is a small number of students.

SAAS do not typically receive any complaints or appeals in regards to funding for PG Certs and stakeholders had no particular view on extending support. In general, there is no evidence to suggest there is a demand for support to be offered to PG Certs.

Introducing funding for free-standing PG Certs would have a negative effect on future entitlement for students at postgraduate level. SAAS previous study rules are clear that support is available for one PG level course only, so students wishing to progress to a Masters or PG Diploma would not be eligible to receive full support.

Due to the short course length (15 weeks), a separate funding package would be required as it would not be justifiable to extend the £11,500 package to a course of this length. It is anticipated employers will often support students through PG Certs.

Therefore, it was recommended that the postgraduate support package was not extended to PG Certs at this time on the basis that the majority of these courses are delivered online only and are studied over one academic term.

The Scope of the EQIA

As there is no policy change recommended to provide students studying a PG Cert access to financial support and that the status quo will be maintained, it is considered a concise and focused EQIA is proportionate in these circumstances.

In total, there are approximately 110 courses on offer across 17 Scottish HEIs. However, approximately 66% of these courses are delivered solely online whilst the remaining 34% tend to be blended learning. There are 520 Scottish domiciled students enrolled on PG Certs at Scottish providers, so this is a small number of students.

Not offering funding for PG Certs will apply to all students regardless of their protected characteristics.

Key Findings

The EQIA identified that maintaining this policy is indirectly discriminatory towards mature students over the age of 30, and women, as these groups are more likely to study PG Certs. There is an assumption these categories of people are more likely to study PG Certs due to their flexible nature as this can be more easily managed alongside caring or parenting responsibilities, or reskilling at work.

PG Certs are very short courses (often 15 weeks) and so it would be unjustifiable to provide the full £11,500 funding package. This means that a bespoke package would have to be created to support these students. Due to the small number of students studying these courses, a bespoke package of support could not be justified for affordability reasons.

It is anticipated employers may often support students through PG Certs, and as the courses are mainly delivered online or through blended learning, students may be entitled to other support such as benefits. Students in a higher age bracket are also more likely to have a higher earning potential in order to support themselves through a PG Cert.

Students are only funded by SAAS for one PG qualification – the PG Cert is the lowest level of qualification and if they were to progress to a Diploma or Masters it would prevent them from being funded due to the previous study rule that SAAS can only offer funding for one Postgraduate course.

There is an onus on the Scottish Government to ensure that the limited resources available for higher education student support funding are used effectively and the cost to the public purse is controlled, while also allowing those who wish to enter higher education to do so. Therefore, not funding PG Certs is considered justifiable in order to balance the need to allow equality of access to higher education and the overall affordability of the student support system.

Recommendations and Conclusion

In conclusion, the EQIA identified that there are a few gaps in the information available relating to the characteristics of gender reassignment and pregnancy and maternity in postgraduate students and therefore the impact that the introduction of a financial support package for this group of students will have on these protected characteristics. However, the remaining data is available and maintaining the status-quo of continuing not to fund PG Certs is in line with the outcomes of the Postgraduate Review.

There was no demand from stakeholders for students to be funded on PG Certs and students are still able to undertake SAAS funded Postgraduate Study by choosing to study a Postgraduate Diploma or Masters course. Both of these courses attract funding.

HESA gather statistical data on student numbers and we will therefore be able to monitor the impact of this policy on relevant groups going forward.



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