CHESS recognises that the question of funding Higher Education is difficult and expensive to answer. We do not pretend that we have all of the answers, however CHESS has compiled the following response to removing the Graduate Endowment while bearing in mind the opinions of the students at our institutions, as well remembering there is no easy solution to this issue.

The Graduate Endowment however is only one piece of a bigger puzzle; that of Higher Education funding. Education, like justice, health and the economy to name a few are vital to the goal of making Scotland “the best country in the world”. Higher Education, plays a key role- today’s students are tomorrows economists and teachers, lawyers and doctors.

Barriers to Entry

Universities are attempting to enrol the best and the brightest minds from Scotland, the UK and beyond. However, institutions actively seeking such students are singled out for failing to admit enough students from a particular type of background. CHESS would propose that it is not the Universities that are at fault but a combination of factors – fear of student debt being the most pressing.

“Student debt” or “the rising cost of being a student” are now accepted phrases in the mindset of young people and their parents. The important question to ask is, how does this affect the decision making process of school leavers thinking about the option of Higher Education. For middle class families, attending University can sometimes be a social question; “it’s what is expected of me”, but for a working class family it becomes a question of economics; “can I afford it? Do I want to spend the rest of my working life trying to clear debts incurred because I chose to study?”

With a government serious about a widening access agenda, more needs to be done to ensure this is a reality in Scottish education. Student Support is central to this.

Another concern is one of equity. Scottish and EU students find themselves exempt from tuition fees. This obviously is the ideal scenario for these groups but how do we treat students from the other side of the border. English, Welsh and Northern Irish students are required to pay fees of £1700 (or £2700 for medicine). This is unfair and a solution must be found to tackle this.

The Widening Access Agenda

There are countless mechanisms across the HE sector that institutions are using to encourage local school pupils, who might dismiss HE as an option, to think about it seriously.

Summer Schools, School visits, student shadowing and student tutor programmes to name a few. However, universities are right to accept students on the basis of academic merit. Ensuring that each and every school leaver is given the opportunity to progress and excel within the HE sector is important but under no circumstances would we propose or support social engineering within the university admission processes. The question should not be one of how can we make universities take more pupils from non-traditional backgrounds, but how can society encourage each and every young person to take the opportunities afford to them within their primary and secondary schooling and drive them onto success?
In it for the long haul?

We want our institutions to be world-leading centres of excellence in the fields of teaching and research. This does not come without serious investment—significantly greater than the levels of funding available at present. While we cannot say that Higher Education should be prioritised over other specific areas of spending, if universities are to survive and prosper beyond the next 10 years additional funding needs to be found. We strongly believe that student’s are not the only solution to the funding crisis. The main beneficiaries of degrees are not just the students, society and business gain skills and expertise from our graduates.

The Principal of the University of St Andrews, Dr Brian Lang has spoken out in the media recently and suggested a graduation tax, a means for graduates to repay society for providing the taxes that got them through university. They are the graduates who will work in the skilled professions society needs. They are the next generation of doctors and lawyers, economists and teachers. As graduates gain particular skills through their University education, they are able to partake in the economy at a higher level, therefore it is not only the graduate who gains from a degree, but the society as a whole, building a more successful Scotland. However, we should be careful not to impose over-taxation on graduates in case there is a decrease in new students and those graduates staying on in Scotland.

Dr Lang stated at the Funding for Success – Higher Education and the Economy conference in May 2007, “We compete in an international market for the best staff, the best students, for research grants and for donations towards building projects for those new labs and libraries…Our young people deserve no less than the best and we should not compromise on that. But we need urgently to look for more effective ways of supporting students and research. The present structures and mechanisms carry a substantial risk of higher education in Scotland being left behind.” Sentiments that we completely agree with, however the mechanism of graduate tax that Dr Lang voiced we do not agree with.

The Knowledge Economy

We live in a society where knowledge is the key that opens many doors. The shape of that key, however, is changing. No longer do jobs require Highers or Standard Grades, but “Educated to degree level.” In some cases, jobs are requesting candidates who have gone beyond degree level to masters and Ph.D. programmes. The myth that a degree will get you a high paid job has gone, students need more than just their honours degrees. Scotland should be ensuring that our students, our graduates, have the ability to reach their knowledge potential— not because they can pay for it, but because they have the ability to do it. Students wishing to study higher degrees or second degrees in subjects which will lead to a professional career, e.g. medicine, law should be supported and indeed encouraged by government. The barrier to this at present is funding.

Conclusion

We support the abolition of the Graduate Endowment. However we do see three important goals for government.

1) Working to end student debt and encouraging non-traditional students to move into Higher Education with the result of no longer requiring a Widening Access Agenda
2) A review of University funding is required urgently. If we want our universities to excel and be world leaders they need greater financial resources.
3) Students embarking on professional courses or higher study need to be supported adequately at all times – and procedures should be put in place to make sure this is happening.

These are exciting times in Scotland. The new Scottish executive has a huge opportunity to make a difference.