The Open University in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee on the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill.

The Open University is Scotland’s largest provider of part-time higher education and we are committed to ensuring that the position of part-time higher education students is represented in all relevant policy developments.

This evidence is prepared in advance of the Scottish Government’s announcement of its spending plans in 2008-09 and subsequent years, and of any associated statement on support for part-time learners.

As we highlighted in our response to the Scottish Government’s consultation on the abolition of the graduate endowment fee in August 2007, a consequence of the abolition will be to widen further the gap which already exists between support for full-time and part-time students in Scotland.

Higher education for full-time students will effectively be free, irrespective of individual students’ ability to pay. The majority of part-time higher education students, however, will continue to pay tuition fees, with only those on the very lowest incomes currently receiving any financial support.

In our view, this differing treatment is difficult to justify on objective grounds, is inequitable to individual students because it is not based on need, and is distorting the market in higher education. This is not only damaging for students and the higher education market, but also for the skill-set of Scotland and its prospects of sustained economic growth.

General principles of the Bill

While The Open University in Scotland has no specific objection to the over-riding principle behind the abolition of the graduate endowment, we believe it is important that it is seen within the context of the wider higher education landscape.

In considering the general principles of the Bill therefore we would like to make four points:

1. The abolition of the graduate endowment will in effect be a relatively small step towards the goal outlined in Section 13 of the policy memorandum accompanying the Bill.

   “It is a step towards ensuring that in a modern Scotland everyone can gain economic, social and personal fulfilment to the fullest possible extent and that everyone who has the ability has the opportunity to be involved in the higher education experience by removing the barriers which may prevent them from doing so.”

   Part-time students make up more than a third (38%) of the student body at Scottish higher education institutions. As the legislative changes will not affect them directly, a significant proportion of the student population will gain no benefit from the abolition.

2. The Scottish Government’s skills strategy, Skills for Scotland, highlights the importance to Scotland’s economic and social development of a system for learning and skills which meets the needs of people of all ages. The policy memorandum focuses on the position of young people which, while of undoubted importance, again only addresses the needs of one part of Scotland’s potential learner base. Reducing the cost barrier for part-time students will also be essential if we are to meet the higher level skills needs of all sections of Scotland’s working age population.

3. Section 14 of the policy memorandum cites evidence from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on debt aversion as a disincentive to full-time education for young people. There is also a significant body of recent research evidence1 which highlights that cost is a considerable barrier to engagement with part-time study for people of all ages, including many of those likely to benefit from it the most.

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1 See for example: Exploring the work/life/study balance: the experience of higher education students in a further education college, Janet Lowe and Vernon Gayle, Journal of Further and Higher Education Vol 31, No3, August 2007; and Looking to Learn: Investigating the Motivations to Learn and the Barriers Faced by Adults Wishing to Undertake Part-Time Study, Ralf St Clair, Scottish Executive social research, No 36/2006
4. Section 16 of the policy memorandum states that “Abolishing the GE is the first step for the Scottish Government towards its aspiration of having a higher education system in Scotland that is free for all”. The Open University in Scotland believes strongly that in order to address the needs of all potential learners, the logical next step must be to improve the position of Scotland’s part-time students.

Policy memorandum and financial memorandum

Other than the comments above, we have no specific points to make on the policy and financial memoranda accompanying the Bill. Both provide a clear and helpful outline of the principles behind the Bill and the financial picture.

Scottish Government's consultation on the abolition of the graduate endowment

We have no specific comments on the handling of the consultation. We were pleased to see however that the report analysing responses acknowledged that a number of respondents had highlighted the part-time student position.