Introduction

The STUC is Scotland’s Trade Union Centre. Its purpose is to co-ordinate, develop and articulate the views and policies of the Trade Union Movement in Scotland reflecting the aspirations of trade unionists as workers and citizens.

The STUC represents over 630,000 working people and their families throughout Scotland. It speaks for trade union members in and out of work, in the community and in the workplace. Our affiliated organisations have interests in all sectors of the economy. Through our affiliates in the education sector the STUC represents thousands of workers in Scotland’s higher education institutions, including teaching and support staff. The STUC also represents workers as users of learning services, and with the development of a Scottish Union Academy, has a strong interest in supporting workers to access learning, whether for personal development or vocational reasons, through the trade union movement.

The STUC’s representative structures are constructed to take account of the specific views of women members, young members, black/minority ethnic members, LGBT members, and members with a disability, as well as retired and unemployed workers.

STUC Response

The STUC agrees with the principle of abolishing the Graduate Endowment (GE) Fee for students who graduate in 2007 and thereafter. The STUC believes higher education should be free at the point of access for all of those who can benefit from it, and therefore welcomes steps to remove the GE.

The STUC notes the financial costs of abolishing the GE, and welcomes the statement that its abolition will not affect fees, grants and bursaries currently payable by the Students Awards Agency for Scotland. Given the minimal costs involved, the abolition of GE should also have no impact on the wider funding of the higher education sector.

The STUC would welcome further dialogue on fees charged to students for part time study, with a view to widening access to both further and higher education, and a full debate on the responsibility of the state, individuals and employers in supporting education and lifelong learning.

The STUC is deeply alarmed at the current levels of student debt. The recent figures on Student Loans in Scotland, putting the total amount lent to eligible higher education students in the financial year 2006-07 as £197.6 million, with the total balance outstanding (including loans not yet due for repayment at £1.85 billion, underline the high levels of debt for students. The National Union of Students Scotland reports that these high levels of debt are deterring young people from participating in higher education, and in particular are preventing people from poorer families from going to university. The wealthiest seven percent of the population are five times more likely to go to university that the poorest seven percent. The STUC would encourage the Scottish Executive to elaborate further on its proposals for addressing student debt.