

## EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT - RESULTS

<b>Title of Policy</b>	Review of funding for postgraduate Distance Learning students.
<b>Summary of aims and desired outcomes of Policy</b>	<p>Relevant National Outcomes: "We are better educated, more skilled and more successful, renowned for our research and innovation." "Our young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens."</p> <p>This policy will review the current provision of support for students undertaking postgraduate studies via distance learning in order to consider whether support should be extended to students on a wider range of courses.</p>
<b>Directorate: Division: team</b>	<p>Advanced Learning and Science Directorate. Higher Education and Science: Student Support and Participation Team.</p>

### Executive summary

A review of the current provision of support for students undertaking postgraduate studies via distance learning has been carried out, of which this EQIA forms a part. This is in the context of the changing nature of the provision of higher education in Scotland.

The EQIA identified that extending the current loan system to 'taught' postgraduate diploma and masters level courses delivered by distance learning, would advance opportunities for all students but would have a particularly positive impact on students with the protected characteristics of disability and gender.

The EQIA demonstrated that the existing policy, which offers tuition fee loans to students studying a selected number of distance learning courses at specific institutions only, is potentially indirectly discriminatory towards students with protected characteristics who may be unable to attend campus based courses, such as disabled students and students who are carers, lone parents and those with childcare responsibilities. For many of these students distance learning is the best mechanism for them to further their education.

This review is considering an extension of the current policy and if implemented, this will afford students the chance to select their course of choice without any restrictions.

### **Background**

The nature of the provision of higher education in Scotland is changing with a wide range of opportunities to take up distance learning studies available across a number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

This policy will consider how students who wish to do distance learning studies at any Scottish publically funded HEI can be supported to do so.

From academic year 2017/2018, eligible Scottish domiciled students are able to access a loan of up to £10,000 (comprising £5,500 for fees and £4,500 for living costs) for any taught postgraduate diploma or masters level course at any publically funded Scottish HEI. They can also access funding to study in England, Wales or Northern Ireland if there is no equivalent course available in Scotland.

However this review recognises that for some students, attending a campus based course is not feasible due to a number of factors.

This policy will consider the proposed change, to take effect from the academic year 2018/2019, that support will be extended to students undertaking taught postgraduate diploma or masters level courses delivered by distance learning on the same basis as current postgraduate campus based courses.

This contributes to the following national outcomes:

- "We are better educated, more skilled and more successful, renowned for our research and innovation."

- "Our young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens."

### **The Scope of the EQIA**

This policy has relevance to the protected characteristics of age, disability and gender. It also has relevance to a wider number of characteristics as follows:

- People living in rural locations with limited transport availability
- People with caring responsibilities
- Parent and carers of children
- People already in employment who want to further their education around their work commitments

Given that an extension to the current provision of support would open up opportunities for study, could benefit those in both the protected characteristics and wider categories outlined above and also that any change in policy would have a positive impact on prospective students, a concise and focused EQIA was carried out.

The EQIA considered key evidence regarding age, disability, race and gender from the Higher Education and Statistics Agency (HESA). The Scottish Health Survey (SHeS) (2012/2013) and the Scottish Household Survey (2016) provided statistics on carers and single parents.

The EQIA consulted relevant stakeholders such as The National Union of Students (NUS), Universities Scotland, The Open University in Scotland (OUiS) and The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). However, none of the stakeholders held information, statistics or had undertaken research relevant to the criteria outlined above.

### **Key Findings**

It has highlighted a need to ensure equitable access for all students to access the course of their choice through the most appropriate form of learning for them. However, the EQIA highlighted the lack of evidence available about demand for student loan support from prospective students who want to take up postgraduate study via distance learning, but who are unable to do so as a result of the limited support available.

The EQIA has informed a proposed option to extend the offer of tuition-fee loan support to students studying all eligible postgraduate distance

learning courses run by Scottish HEIs. This would increase opportunities for those who are currently ineligible for support and enable graduates to further their education by undertaking postgraduate study to increase their career prospects; contributing to Scotland's communities by increasing the supply of workers with high level skills, benefiting its long term economic success by meeting the demand from employers and ultimately making our workforce one which is recognised internationally as a highly skilled qualified nation.

Specifically this would positively impact disabled students whose disability prevents them from physically attending a campus based course and female students, who are more likely to face barriers to taking up campus based postgraduate study due to caring responsibilities. It would also benefit the majority of the students where financial barriers are preventing them undertaking campus based study.

However unlike full-time students, loans for living-costs can impact on students who are in receipt of some benefits as they would be required to have their benefits reassessed in light of any new loan eligibility. For some students, this could reduce their benefit income and therefore could deter them from taking up a course of study via distance learning.

The Review of Student Support which published in autumn 2017 recognised that no student should lose their benefit entitlements because they are in receipt of student funding. As a result, it makes a recommendation for a new Special Support Payment for these students, similar to that already adopted in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Further consideration will be given to this recommendation and the support available to students in receipt of benefits in due course.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

The postgraduate distance learning policy is being reviewed following the Taught Postgraduate Review undertaken in 2015. That review did not specifically consider support for distance learning students and therefore in light of the changing nature of provision of higher education, we are now reviewing the policy to ensure it is fair and equitable to all, regardless of the method of study which students wish to pursue – campus based or distance learning.

The proposed change taking effect from the academic year 2018-2019 is that support will be extended to students undertaking taught postgraduate

diploma or masters level courses delivered by distance learning on the same basis as current postgraduate campus based courses. In addition, support will be available for students studying via distance learning at Scottish HEIs or UK HEIs where there is no equivalent course in Scotland. This will afford students the chance to select their course of choice without any restrictions.

The policy and the impact it has on students, will be subject to on-going monitoring by the Student Support and Participation Team in the Higher Education and Science Division.