

Graduate tax favoured by two-thirds of Scots according to new poll

A poll in today's Scotsman has shown that two-thirds of Scots back a graduate contribution of up to £4,000 to the cost of their university education.

✘ David McLetchie, Scottish Conservative Campaign Manager for the Scottish Parliament election, and former MSP, said:

“This is more evidence, after last year's Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, that Scots are fair minded and accept that it is fair for graduates to make a contribution towards the cost of their University education. It is clear that, regardless of which party they support, people are in favour of this.

“In a perfect world everything would be free. But in the real world, voters accept that the costs have to be spread.

“Recent figures from the Office of National Statistics showed that, on average, a University graduate will earn £12,000 a year more than those who have not gone to university. Over a working life, that is a pay boost of half a million pounds.

“Despite all the evidence, Labour, Lib Dems and the SNP refuse to find the money needed to bridge the real funding gap. Scottish Conservative proposals for a graduate contribution, paid from future earning, at an affordable rate will mean that Scotland's universities can retain their excellence, retain their student numbers and we can also boost bursary support for students from poorer backgrounds by £55 million a year.

“By contrast, the deficit deniers in the other parties threaten our Universities' standing, threaten up to 13,000

student places and are out of tune with public opinion.”

Meanwhile the NUS have been looking at the Tory figures on university education.

They say that analysis of the Scottish Conservatives' manifesto costings has unearthed a black hole of between £500m and £1.5billion in their university spending plans. It also shows that the Scottish Conservatives are costing on the basis of at least a £20k to £24k contribution (£6k per year) rather than the £16k contribution (£4k per year) they have publicly claimed. Combined with living cost loans of up to £20k per year, a student could leave university with £40k to £44k of debt per degree, higher than any other part of the UK and even higher than an English student at a university charging full £9000 fees.

The NUS say that Scottish Conservatives assume £391m income per year for their graduate contribution, from 2013/14. However they have taken no account of the fact that any charge for people going to university would have to be phased-in (it could only be charged for new entrants). A graduate contribution would therefore not provide any income until 2017/18 (the time it would take for someone starting university in 2013/14 to graduate). This would leave a black hole of over £1.5billion (see note 1). Even upfront tuition fees, something the Scottish Conservatives rule out in their manifesto, wouldn't provide full income until 2016/17 (again much later than Scottish Conservatives assume) as it could only apply to new entrants. This would leave a £500m black hole.

Furthermore, to provide the £391m income per year the Scottish Conservatives assume, the NUS contest that a graduate contribution would have to be much larger than the Tories have stated. The joint university/Scottish Government Technical Working Group showed that to provide £391m per year a graduate contribution would need to be between £20k and £24k per degree

– far higher than the £16k contribution to Scottish Conservatives have publicly claimed.

The Scottish Conservatives have claimed to be the only party being honest with the electorate on university funding. However, NUS Scotland is calling on the Scottish Conservatives to be honest on whether they are proposing a graduate contribution as they have stated – and if so how they would fill the black hole of £1.5billion – or if they are actually proposing a system of upfront tuition fees (with loans to defer) despite their own manifesto claiming the opposite – and if so how they would fill the black hole of £500m. Furthermore they are calling on the Scottish Conservatives to be honest that their figures don't add up unless they are proposing a graduate contribution of £20k to £24k per degree rather than the £16k level they have claimed.

NUS Scotland is also calling on university principals to withdraw support for these proposals given they will leave a huge black hole in university finances.

Liam Burns, President of NUS Scotland said:

“The Scottish Conservatives have claimed they are the only party being honest with the electorate but their own figures show they are misleading the electorate, students and universities on a breathtaking scale.

“The graduate contribution proposed by the Scottish Conservatives wouldn't provide full income from fees or loans until at least 2017, four years later than they assume. This leaves a huge black hole in the Scottish Conservatives' costings.

“Principals shouldn't be parading themselves as the voice of reason on the issue of education funding, like we've seen over the last few weeks, when they clearly haven't done the maths. University principals are meant to be the experts as to how to protect the sector but in actual fact some are signing up to

by far the worst deal from any of the political parties. They should now urgently withdraw their support for these proposals and join those principals that have backed keeping Scotland free of tuition fees.

“Every other party is pledging to meet the funding gap through public spending, if necessary. Iain Gray and Alex Salmond are on record as saying they will fill any resulting gap in funding between Scottish and English universities through public funding.

“I think it would be better if some principals left the politics to the politicians from now on. Nobody wants fees in Scotland, not the public and not the vast majority of the political parties. Let’s move on from the sideshow of fees and actually address the real issues facing students today.”