OU Students ASSOCIATION

OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

Central Executive Committee (CEC)
22 – 24 January 2021

OU STUDENTS ASSOCIATION SCOTLAND MANIFESTO
POLICY POSITIONS

The CEC is asked to:-

i)   **approve** the policy positions that will be included in an OU Students Association Scottish election manifesto

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1.   Introduction

1.1   This paper is put to the CEC jointly by the Association Area Rep for Scotland and the Association's Policy and Public Affairs Manager.

1.2   The intention of this paper is to obtain agreement over the policies that will be included in an OU Students Association Scottish Election manifesto for the devolved elections currently scheduled for May 2021.

1.3   This paper is split into three sections: the first section will provide some useful context around Scottish higher education policy and politics as well as the thought processes, discussions and key considerations regarding policy development for the manifesto. The second section will provide an overview of the suggested policies to be included in the Scottish manifesto. Finally, the paper will set out an overview of what will happen next, for your information.

2.   Context

2.1   *Why have a manifesto:* The main reason to have a manifesto is that OU students in Scotland are directly impacted by the actions and decisions of the Scottish government and have a lot to gain or lose from these elections. It is therefore in the Students Association's interest to attempt to influence the parties and politicians taking part in the elections. Additionally, the OU in Scotland will have a manifesto setting out the University's policy asks and organisations such as NUS-Scotland will have a student-focused manifesto, and it is therefore important that part-time distance-learning student voices are well represented.

2.2   *HE policy and politics in Scotland:* Part-time HE students in Scotland benefit from the availability of part-time Tuition Fee Grants meaning that

undergraduate OU students who qualify can complete their studies without accumulating tuition-based debt. However, The SAAS (Student Awards Agency Scotland) currently offers no form of maintenance support or childcare support to part-time students.

Based on the current political picture and polling trends, it seems unlikely that the Scottish National Party will lose their grip on power in the May elections, and therefore, attempts to influence their position on issues pertaining to part-time and distance-learning students should be seen as part of a long-term strategy. However, due to the nature of the proportional representation system that Scotland uses to elect its government, it is possible that the SNP could fall short of parliamentary majority. If this occurs, then the influence of individual opposition MSPs becomes much greater. This is why getting our messages to all candidates in this election is important.

2.3   *Policy development process:* The policy asks set out below have been developed through conversation between the AAR for Scotland and the Students Association's Policy and Public Affairs Manager, as well as in consultation with the Senior Manager, External Engagement for the OU in Scotland.

Like the manifesto for Wales, we decided that we wanted the Students Association to be an impactful document focusing on a smaller number of priority policies rather than an extensive list that would dilute the importance of our major asks. This led to a decision to maintain the theme from the Wales manifesto and highlight key issues around part-time student finance and removing barriers to access and participation, with a maximum of five policy positions to be included.

3.   Suggested Policies

Below are the five suggested policy positions that the OU Students Association Scottish Election Manifesto will contain:

3.1   *Reform disabled student finance application process*: Disabled students in Scotland often have a difficult and long-winded experience in applying for and receiving Disabled Student Allowance (DSA). They are forced to provide evidence on an annual basis, even for conditions and disabilities that are diagnosed as permanent or long-term. Additionally, the slow application process often results in financial support being provided after courses have already started. The AAR for Scotland has received a number of reports from individuals in relation to this issue, highlighting its prevalence. We will therefore ask the next Scottish government to reform the DSA application process in order to improve this experience for disabled students.

3.2   *Extend maintenance loan availability to part-time students:* Although OU students in Scotland benefit from the Part-Time Fee Grant (PTFG), maintenance loans are currently not available to part-time students in Scotland. Their introduction in Wales has had a huge impact on both encouraging new students to join the OU and also supporting existing students to continue their studies. As a key priority of the Students Association's public affairs agenda to improve the financial support available

to OU students, we will be asking the next Scottish government to extend the availability of maintenance loans to part-time students.

3.3 *Extend the availability of support for parents from the Childcare Fund to part-time students:* Part-time students are unfairly excluded from being able to access the Childcare Fund in Scotland. This can provide a significant disincentive for parents in Scotland - many of whom would need to study on a part-time basis - from either entering higher education, or from being able to continue their studies during periods of hardship. We will therefore ask the next Scottish government to extend the availability of the Childcare Fund to part-time students.

3.4 *Make addressing digital exclusion in rural and socially deprived areas a priority:* The lack of decent broadband is a major barrier to accessing part-time and distance-learning education in Scotland, especially in rural and lower-income areas, where this barrier is most prevalent. We will therefore be making an argument that the Scottish education sector as well as the Scottish economy overall would benefit from an investment in ensuring that everyone in Scotland has access to broadband internet that will enable better connectivity and opportunities, while also reducing social isolation as a side-benefit.

3.5 *Carry out a wide-ranging review into the barriers to higher education experienced by individuals with protected characteristics:* Further to the recent commitments the OU Students Association made in its statement regarding Black Lives Matter to embed equality considerations into all of our processes, this policy seeks to provide a national understanding of systemic barriers to access and participation, and begin a conversation about how those barriers can be broken down.

4. Next steps

4.1 Once the policy positions are ratified by the CEC, the language to be included in the manifesto document will be drafted and finalised, including an introduction to the Students Association and some impactful statistics to boost its influence.

4.2 We will work with a graphic design company to produce a final document with a professional finish.

4.3 We will liaise with the OU in Scotland around creating a plan to send the manifesto out to parties and candidates in order to maximise the impact and enhance the likelihood of engagement with the policy-asks.

4.4 We will work to engage OU students in Scotland with the manifesto in the lead up to the elections to maximise reach.

5 Recommendations to CEC

5.1 This paper recommends that the CEC approves the suggested policy positions put forward in this paper.

5.2   If the CEC is not minded to approve the suggested policy positions, the CEC should highlight which policies it would like to remove.

6   Questions regarding policy and public affairs work

6.1   If you have any questions or want to arrange to meet to discuss any of the points above, or ideas that you have around policy and public affairs, please do not hesitate to email Dan at dan.moloney@open.ac.uk

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