

Good evening. My name is Becky Howe, and I am the President of Oxford University Student Union.

On 8<sup>th</sup> July 2015, when the emergency budget was announced, I was at an NUS Conference. I sat with other student leaders as we found out that the government proposed to abolish maintenance grants, and in doing so, destroying vital support to the most disadvantaged students. I'm sure I don't have to describe the mood in the room that day.

Since July, we have been campaigning to stop the abolition of maintenance grants. We met with Andrew Smith and Nicola Blackwood on September 18<sup>th</sup>, the national lobbying day to save maintenance grants. Andrew Smith wrote to Jo Johnson for us, expressing our deep concerns and disagreement, and Nicola Blackwood also agreed to raise our concerns with Jo Johnson. We joined thousands of other students on a national demo in London in early November, protesting to keep maintenance grants.

Yet, despite huge opposition from students across the country, and in the face of overwhelming condemnation of the socially regressive nature of the proposals, the government deemed it acceptable to try and push through the abolition of maintenance grants in a committee of 18 MPs. The only reason this motion was debated in the House of Commons was due to pressure from student unions across the country, with cross-party support from Labour, the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, SDLP, the Green Party, and the DUP.

That the government has gone to such lengths to avoid scrutiny on this decision is incredibly concerning.

Furthermore, we're appalled that, despite making no mention of it in their manifesto, the government has taken away this vital support from the future applicants that need it the most. A larger loan is in no way an adequate replacement for a non-repayable grant. Under the new system, students from less well off backgrounds will owe thousands of pounds more to the government than their richer peers.

I'm sure that you're all aware of the arguments given on the national stage against this measure. I'd like to present the results of research Oxford University Student Union conducted over the summer. We surveyed a sample of 211 students in receipt of the maintenance grant. Their responses form my argument that the impact of the abolition of maintenance grants will be three-fold:

## 1. Debt aversion

- Research from NUS shows that students from the most disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are the most likely to be debt averse. Without maintenance grants, this could have a huge impact on access to higher education amongst these students.
- We asked our students if, when applying to university, the promise of receiving a maintenance grant had influenced their decision. We asked them to think of this in terms of deciding whether or not to go to university, where to study, what to study, and whether to live at home. 61% said it had significantly influenced their decision, with a further 15% saying it partially influenced their decision.
- In our survey, many students expressed how vital the grant had been to them when deciding whether to come to university or not. One said: 'Without the grant, I would have been worried about the extra debt, and may not have decided to go. Receiving the grant also somehow makes you feel like you do have a right to come here, it sends a message that education is for everyone, that you shouldn't have to worry about how to survive at uni.'
- Another replied 'I think this would be the best possible way to dissuade as many low income background students from applying to university as possible. From the perspective of an applicant, it is almost impossible to see how gaining a university education could possibly be worth £53,000 of debt upon graduating. Especially given that, when applying, my mum had been supporting me on less than £15,000 a year, and I had never conceived of earning more than £30,000 a year.'

## 2. Financial impact whilst at university

- To my knowledge, in setting this policy, no research has been done on what the effects of these measures will be on **student retention rates** or indeed the impact they will have on the student experience.
- Two words that came out of the comment sections of our survey a staggering number of times were 'stress' and 'guilt'. Our students wrote that the grant had been a 'lifeline', allowing them to '(almost) pay rent every term'. Many replied that, without the maintenance grant, the stress of trying to live in

Oxford would have been overwhelming for them, and their families.

- In this respect, a loan can in no way replace a grant. A loan is just even more money to pay back in future, and our respondents were acutely aware of that. One respondent noted that he would have been incredibly wary of spending any of the money he would need to spend in order to live in Oxford, for fear that ‘every pound will come back and bite me in the future, with interest.’

### 3. Financial impact after university

- Students from the lowest income households will have to take out higher maintenance loans, so will leave university with thousands of pounds’ more debt than their wealthier peers

The decision reached by the House of Commons – with a margin of only 11 votes – is devastating.

In 2012, when the government trebled tuition fees, they themselves singled out maintenance grants and the lower repayment threshold as the mechanisms by which they would continue to ensure the higher education remains accessible. They have now abolished maintenance grants and retrospectively altered the loan repayment threshold. These actions, along with the proposals in the Green Paper, leave us seriously concerned about the direction on travel in the higher education sector.

Our MPs should stand with the students of Oxford in expressing their disgust at a government that has taken vital support from the students who need it most.

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