

PE1993/I: Reform the financial support for social work students on work placements

Petitioner written submission, 15 October 2024

Further to the Minister's written submission on 1 August 2023 and the Committee's proposed date to consider the petition, we wanted to express our strong opinion that the petition should remain open as our concerns have yet to be fully addressed.

In the Minister's correspondence, the Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP) report is referenced, which was commissioned as a result of our campaign. It was published at the end of July 2024. However, the Minister's response indicates that it was ready for discussion with stakeholders in December 2023.

We are concerned by the delay in publishing the report and the lack of engagement with student representatives in any discussions during the period between December 2023 and July 2024 when we had only been told the report was "delayed". We are also concerned that the Government published the report without informing people who had contributed to it that it would be published.

While the report does acknowledge our concerns, it fails to adequately address them. We would request that meetings be held to discuss the report and the concrete steps that are being taken to implement its findings with current and recent students to seek their views.

The report states "undergraduate students in Scotland are disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in Wales, England and NI who all receive some form of financial grant incentive towards their studies." Ministers and regulators know that the system is unfair, yet they still won't bring in the full set of reforms needed. We believe that this in itself should be the basis for the petitions Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee to continue its work on this issue.

We welcome the Minister's commitment in his letter that "from the 2024/25 academic year, postgraduate students not eligible to receive bursary support from the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) will be able to apply for the postgraduate funding package administered by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)."

However, this does not equate to the parity with nursing students or with our counterparts in other parts of the UK, which we have sought. We would request that Ministers set out a clear pathway to achieving this equality as soon as possible.

Finally, we also welcome the Government's plan to develop a higher level apprenticeship in social work which will enable students to "earn as they learn" to a degree-level qualification in social work. We urge Ministers to prioritise this work but also to ensure that bursaries are offered to those who wish to complete a route to a social work degree through a university-based approach.