# Lead Scotland Response to the Equality Impact Assessment for the Care Experienced Bursary

In general, we think any increase to student support funds can only be a positive move for disabled people. However, disabled people who rely on social security benefits could experience unintended negative impacts with this increase. In order to continue to receive full Housing Benefit (HB) as a student, there are a number of criteria that DWP apply. For disabled people in receipt of Employment Support Allowance (ESA), they can continue to claim full HB, as long as they get at least £1 per week of income-related ESA. The amount of ESA disabled students are entitled to, is reduced by the amount of student funding they get, potentially cancelling it out altogether. Therefore, the increase from £7,625 to £8,100 for the Care Experienced Bursary could potentially push a student over the maximum income they are allowed to have, thus cancelling their ESA and subsequently affecting their HB. This has already been well documented in the Student Support Review. I think it’s therefore important to check students’ benefit statuses before making an award decision, and either provide a lower amount to ensure benefits are not affected, or even better, provide the funds as a special support payment type grant that will not affect social security benefits, as put forward in the Student Support Review.

Many of the disabled people we support on our Disabled Students’ helpline are extremely anxious about how their benefits might be affected, especially when they don’t know how well they will manage a long term condition while taking on a full time course of study. This anxiety can lead to people taking the decision that it is too risky to take up a course of education if they feel the security blanket of their benefits could be permanently affected. This is even more a concern now with the introduction of Universal Credit. Any change in circumstances could lead to people’s existing claims for legacy benefits being stopped, with them having to claim UC instead. The issues with UC have been widely documented and disabled people in particular have been found to be more adversely affected by welfare reform than any other group.

There therefore needs to be an alternative option if necessary for students entitled to benefits, should it seem like getting the full CE Bursary would negatively impact their entitlement. SAAS and colleges need to ensure their staff are well trained on how welfare benefits are affected by student funding, and there should be clear messaging in any marketing, publications and websites referencing the bursary, so that disabled people don’t fall at the first hurdle and decide not to progress with applying if they fear their benefits will be cut. The information SAAS provide on their website is not always clear or easy to understand, and that can be true of some college websites too. It’s therefore really important that information about the CE Bursary and its interaction with benefits is made available in accessible formats using plain English, BSL, videos with captioning and Easy Read. This should also apply to information about the bursary in general and how to apply, with clearer links to the eligibility criteria. Consideration should also be given to disabled people who are not IT literate and may need support with applying, as most students get support from their parents/carers to do this.

We have heard from college sector colleagues that budgeting such large amounts of money for the first time can be a challenge for some students receiving the CE Bursary. This could be even more of a factor for any disabled students who have issues with numeracy, reading/writing, memory and organisation. It could therefore be worth exploring providing more regular payments rather than lump sum payments, along with budgeting information, advice and support, especially for younger students. Any students identified as experiencing these issues should be assigned a specific key worker to support them with the whole process of applying and managing the money, in the absence of parents/carers who would normally take on this role.

While we appreciate the age criteria has been set and aligns with other legislation for people with care experience, disabled people could be disadvantaged by the policy to make 26 the cut off age. The disabled people we support on our helpline may have experienced multiple interruptions to their education journey due to significant and long term health conditions that may have resulted in extended hospital stays, exclusions and home schooling. This can result in people missing out on sitting school qualifications and requiring far longer to enter back into any form of formal education due to the impact of their impairment or health condition. It can often not be until someone is in their late 20’s or older that they are able to consider returning to education. Skills Development Scotland increased the age criteria for Modern Apprenticeships from 26 to 30 for disabled people in recognition of this, so it would be good to see this extend and align with the Care Experienced Bursary, allowing disabled people to apply beyond the age of 26.