

Roadmap to a new education system

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Introduction

In 25 years of devolution, the ambition and determination of Scotland's student movement, working together with other progressive forces, means we have made significant progress. Scotland is now one of the best parts of the UK to be a student.

Not only are our educational institutions some of the most highly rated in the world, but most students here have lower levels of debt than their peers in England, Wales or Northern Ireland, thanks to the policy of free tuition for Scottish-domiciled undergraduates. Students under the age of 22 get free bus travel across the country, and recent uplifts in student maintenance means that Scotland's most vulnerable higher education students now receive an income equivalent to the Real Living Wage. We recently won £3.21 million from the government towards a Student Mental Health Transition Fund and the Scottish Government's new Care-Experienced Student Bursary will offer vital support for thousands.

These achievements, against the backdrop of a U.K. government hellbent on turning education into a profit driven free market, are testament to what we can do when student leaders, institutions and government work together.

However, too many students in Scotland are still being failed by an education system that fundamentally puts revenue over student wellbeing, eroding the concept of education as a public good.

The most recent Scottish budget has set out around £100 million cash terms cuts to colleges and universities, despite the government claiming that investing in education is one of its top priorities. 37% of Scottish students and apprentices worry about money all the time (NUS Scotland, 2023). Over a quarter of students now work over 20 hours a week, double the recommended level, in an effort to make ends meet (NUS Scotland, 2023).

12% of Scottish students have experienced homelessness during their time in education, and 21% have missed lectures or classes due to not being able to afford their travel fares (NUS Scotland, 2023). And most shockingly, the state of student mental health is in crisis, with 74% of students reporting poor wellbeing, and almost a fifth stating that they had either suicidal thoughts or attempted to kill themselves in the last six months (Mental Health Foundation, 2022).

The day to day reality for many of Scotland's students is bleak. We outlined this in great detail in our [Broke Students, Broken System](#) (2024) report. But it doesn't have to be this way.

Aiming to simply be 'the best in the U.K.' is letting Scotland's potential go to waste. The UK's education system is a European outlier, based on debt, underfunding, and flawed free market principles. All around the world there are examples of countries creating new models of education where students are supported not just to survive, but to thrive. Our International report (2024) laid these out in detail, offering alternatives and creative ideas that could transform our education system.

25 years on from devolution we should, rightly, reflect on the progress we've made, but also set out bold, radical and pragmatic solutions to do better.

This roadmap sets out a challenge to decision makers to join us, Scotland's students, in building the most ambitious vision for education that we can imagine. While devolution creates some limitations, we do not need to wait until we are given "permission" by Westminster to start working towards the lifelong education system that we know is possible. We can start walking the path even before all the steps have revealed themselves to us.

That's why this document sets out the first three steps that we can take for each of the five pillars of education. We imagine a Scotland with a fully funded education system, where education is recognised as a public good and there is complete parity between higher and further education. We imagine a Scotland where every student gets a minimum income guarantee, and student housing co-operatives have created a new, affordable, democratic model of student living. We imagine a Scotland where all students have access to free public transport, and where a stable mental health ecosystem is in place across the life cycle of all students.

And we're inviting you to consider how you can join us in making this vision come to life. We'll need legislators willing to create legislation which transforms how we view education in this country; politicians willing to push for new structures and policies to create the framework for a new system; and student leaders willing to hold the vision for those who will enter education many years after we have left.

Undoubtedly there is work needed to help current students to survive in this broken system. But the longer we pour our energy into tinkering around the edges of an education system which is already failing, the longer we lose our chance to start building something new, which actually works for students, educators and Scotland.

What will the students in 25 years look back and think of the choices we make today? Will they still be facing the same challenges as today's students in a broken system that's forever being stretched thin, and patched up? Or will they thank us for having the courage to be bold, and pursuing the ambitious vision of a completely transformed education system?

The choice is ours. Let's take the first three steps together.

How will we fund it?

In a devolved nation, funding questions are always top of the agenda when it comes to major changes to our public services.

We do not have the luxury of making full use of all revenue raising powers, or making large-scale choices about borrowing and investment.

While Scotland has had devolved power over education since 1999, arguably our autonomy only reaches as far as Westminster is willing to fund it - which means we are still bound by the vision of the world held by the Westminster government at the time.

Some have used this as an excuse to give up, and to blame all of the struggles faced by Scotland's students on issues outside of our control. All this approach does is keep us stuck, repeating the same cycles over and over again, completely convinced by the story of our own helplessness. This is what keeps us locked in a broken system, forever trying to fix our failing infrastructure.

We have a choice.

We can decide to give up.

Or we can decide that we are going to create a completely transformed Scottish education system, regardless of our current circumstances. And that we will use all methods currently available to us to get there.

The Scottish Trade Union Congress released a groundbreaking report last year outlining progressive and costed tax increases the Scottish Government could make to increase investment in public services.

The following measures could be introduced quickly and raise just over £1.1 billion additional revenue per year:

- £779 million from a series of income tax reforms
- £240 million from increases to Land and Buildings Transactions Tax
- £56 million from increasing the Additional Dwellings Supplement
- £30 million from increasing Scottish landfill tax.

In the longer run, the report recommends raising almost an extra £2.6 billion per year from a series of more complex reforms to the tax system including:

- £1,416 million from a wealth tax
- £783 million by replacing Council Tax with a Proportional Property Tax
- £200 million from scrapping the Small Business Bonus Scheme for Non-Domestic Rates and replacing it with a better targeted scheme of relief for Fair Work employers
- £100 million from the introduction of a Land Value Tax for commercial land
- £50 million from a frequent flyer levy
- £25 million from a super tax on private jets
- £13 million from a carbon emissions land tax
- £18 million from increasing the Scottish Aggregates Levy.

By taking these steps the Scottish government could make a significant difference to public finances, and start to redistribute wealth across the country.

Some of the steps we've outlined in this roadmap will require a significant investment for years to come, while others advocate for structural change, requiring extra resources initially but leading to potential savings in the long run.

It's important for decision makers to remember that every £1 of public investment in higher and further education leads to around £7 in benefits for society and the economy. (Universities Scotland, 2023; Colleges Scotland, 2023).

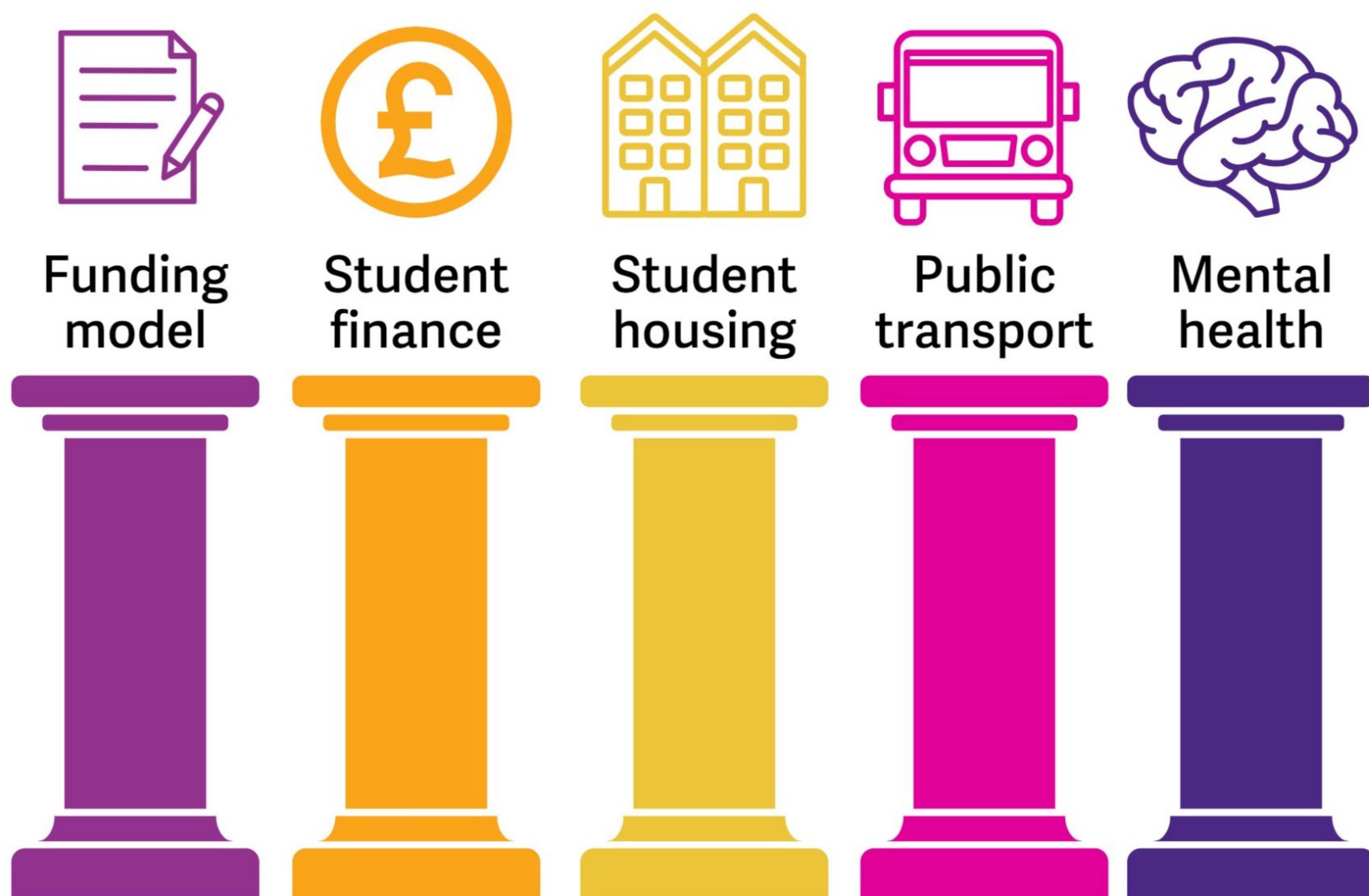
Our vision for education involves creating the conditions for a Scottish student population that is healthier, more secure and able to make the most of their education.

Building a strong, stable, supportive lifelong education system is an integral component of creating a wellbeing economy in Scotland.

We cannot allow the funding restrictions of our current system to limit our ambitions for a transformed education system. So we invite all readers to approach our proposals with the same kind of solution-based thinking the STUC has demonstrated.

We don't have to solve everything at once. We just have to take the first steps.

Five Pillars of Education



We're focusing on five pillars of education:

- **The Funding Model**
- **Student Finance**
- **Housing**
- **Transport**
- **Mental Health**

These five pillars don't encompass every issue that affects students in Scotland. But they represent the foundational building blocks that directly impact students' ability to learn and progress through the education system. These pillars are fundamentally interdependent, and the work we carry out on each will have a ripple effect through the rest.

By working towards an ambitious vision around each of these five pillars, together we can completely transform the student experience in Scotland.

Funding model

The foundations upon which Scotland's post-16 education system is built on are no longer fit for purpose in today's society.

The Withers report outlined clearly that outdated assumptions about further education, complex funding pathways and a lack of understanding of newer forms of education and training are getting in the way of Scotland's post-16 education landscape reaching its full potential. Scotland is right to be proud of its university sector, and the global impact it has through the students we attract and the research we produce. But too frequently university education is treated as the gold standard, whilst other forms of education and training are seen as second class. All of this leads to fragmentation, confusion and a lack of clear information for Scottish citizens as they try to navigate the education system.

On top of this, over the last 15 years the education system has been stretched to breaking point, starting with the introduction of austerity and a major push towards a marketised education system from Westminster. The UK government's obsession with creating a free market in education has driven a profit-first agenda in which education institutions are expected to behave entirely like private businesses, prioritising money making activities over the public service they were originally designed to provide.

Teaching grants have been slashed, and while the Scottish government has fought to keep tuition free for Scottish students, universities and colleges have experienced an annual drop in their budgets as funds haven't kept up with the rate of inflation. In the year ahead, the sector is looking at a £100 million real terms cut, which will have a knock on effect on course provision, staffing and student care.

The marketisation of education has resulted in an increasingly unstable sector as precarious short-term solutions have been developed to plug holes in funding. Staff on zero hours contracts are working up to 2 unpaid days per week to deliver the work their students need (UCU, 2022), while Vice Chancellor pay increased by 75% from 2008 to 2018 (The Herald, 2018). Salaries for college staff across the UK have fallen by 35% in real terms over the past 12 years (UCU, 2023). Those at the top are reaping rewards, while the poorest paid are holding the system together, doing more work for less.

These shaky foundations are also being held together through the exploitation of students. Scotland's appeal as a popular destination for international students means that universities are able to top-up their funding grants by charging them sky-high tuition. And at the other end of the education system, Scotland's under-funded apprenticeship programmes are carrying on as employers are able to pay apprentices just £6.40 per hour - over £5 less than the National Minimum Wage.

The system is held together through the wellbeing sacrifice made by students and apprentices. 21% of international students in Scotland have experienced homelessness during their time in education, while 29% have considered leaving their course (NUS Scotland, 2023).

The current funding model doesn't make the most of the wide variety of educational pathways that can provide a lifelong service as Scottish people grow and evolve, moving in and out of education. Over a decade of austerity and inflation driven education cuts have pushed the system to breaking point, and it currently rests on shaky foundations, desperately plugging gaps in funding by exploiting the labour of staff and students.

It's not enough for us to keep patching holes which get bigger year on year. We need a complete overhaul of how we view education in Scotland, and what we value as a country. We need our funding decisions to be driven by a deep understanding of education as a public good, and a commitment to building a lifelong, globally respected, national infrastructure.

Our vision: A Scotland where all levels of education are free at the point of access and all forms of education are given parity of esteem. This is a Scotland where education is truly understood to be a public good.

There are fundamental moments in a country's history where it makes a decision to commit to building a public service. Even if at the point of creation they are seen as ambitious dreams, criticised for being unrealistic or unaffordable, over time, these public services come to be seen as a standard part of the country's infrastructure, with their existence rarely questioned by the general population.

One of these fundamental moments was in the late 19th century, when the decision was made to provide universal primary level education. Another was in the 20th century when secondary level education began to expand and new legislation provided free secondary education for all.

The time has arrived for the same ambition to be applied to tertiary education. And with Scotland's history as a leader in the education sector, NUS Scotland is calling on political leaders to recognise that education at all levels is a public good, and assert the right of the population to free tertiary education at the point of access.

Together we will put an end to the inequality that has existed between higher and further education for far too long, and instead recognise the benefit that a diverse educational ecosystem has to offer. We'll build a Scotland where everyone is supported to take the education path which allows them to reach their highest potential, rather than pushing young people towards the university route simply because it's "the done thing". And we'll make sure that money is never a barrier to anyone who's ready to progress through education.

Here are the first three steps to make this a reality:

1. Enshrine education as a public good in law.

NUS Scotland calls on the Scottish government to introduce legislation recognising education at all levels as a public good.

The Scottish Government already speaks highly of education and its commitment to seeing education as a public good. But it can strengthen this commitment and raise its ambition by enshrining its view of education as a public good in law, giving all Scottish citizens the right to lifelong education, ensuring that the system is properly funded and supported through adequate structures, and recognising the public service of workers in education.

Taking a lifelong view of a person's educational experience, and embedding education as a foundational part of Scotland's existence would change how we approach decision making. It would operate as a 'check and balance' against the temptation to make convenient short-term decisions which could have harmful consequences in the long run. We could take inspiration from the Future Generations Act in Wales, which has created a regulatory framework to respect and consider the needs of Welsh citizens in the future.

Recognising all levels of education as a public good will change how we invest in education, and the priorities that educational institutions base their work on. It will change how we evaluate success and ensure that we recognise all the ways in which education benefits our society, not just the monetary gain. And it will create a population that knows they belong in education of all kinds, no matter their background.

2. Commit to a gradual rebalancing towards public funding to reflect the public value of education

The way we invest our money reflects what we value.

In England, after the shift to a heavily marketised education system in 2010, the amount of money that universities invested in marketing and Vice Chancellor pay increased significantly, while staff pay remained stagnant. When the existence of a market was the top priority, money went towards creating a marketplace.

Our International Best Practice Report (2024) demonstrated that countries that value education highly as a public good have institutions which receive a high proportion of their funding from public spending rather than private investment. In the United Kingdom as a whole 71.9% of higher education funding comes from private investment, with only 24.7% being publicly funded.

Meanwhile in Finland and Norway private investment makes up only 4.3% and 6.7% respectively of total tertiary spending. Finland's tertiary education system relies heavily on public funding, with 90.4% of expenditure coming from government sources, while Norway's public funding accounts for 91.7% of total spending

NUS Scotland calls on the Scottish Government to commit to a gradual rebalancing of the public / private funding ratio received by higher education institutions.

NUS Scotland also calls on the Scottish Government to review the funding currently invested in different parts of post-secondary education and commit to ensuring that further education students and apprentices receive equitable provision during their time in education. We frequently hear from our members that further education colleges and student associations aren't able to provide the same kind of student services that those in universities receive. By recognising the public good of education and committing to a rebalancing of funds, we want leaders to recognise the totality of a student's experience while in education and set up funding streams and structures which allows the whole education sector to work together to deliver equitable experiences for everyone in education.

3. Develop an "FE first" approach.

The university sector in Scotland is already extremely well established, with a long and distinguished history, while the FE sector has been historically under funded and less well understood. Across Europe many countries invest much more heavily in their vocational and apprenticeship training, and much higher numbers of the population pursue this route

We want the Scottish Government to commit to a culture shift in Scotland, and rebalance our education system by shifting to an "FE first" approach.

An "FE first" approach would include:

- Prioritising information about FE and apprenticeships in national guidelines for careers information.
- Assessing the amount of resources and time devoted to discussing FE and HE matters in government, and shifting this towards FE.
- Setting up structures and funding streams to promote collaborations between schools and colleges, so that young people are supported to learn about the variety of educational routes available to them.
- Developing a public information programme to promote apprenticeships to the public and employers, designed to build a new generation in Scotland where apprenticeships are no longer on the fringes of education.



Student Finance

The goal of the Scottish Government is for education to be a pathway out of poverty. But for many Scottish students, starting education has been a pathway into poverty.

Learning costs money. Even students who aren't paying for their tuition are still paying to receive an education. There are living costs to consider including rent, transport, food and utilities; and then there is the direct cost of being involved in an education course, such as textbooks, equipment, the cost of wifi and childcare. Many Scottish students find that the support offered to them while they study doesn't meet their needs, and this is having a knock on impact on their wellbeing and ability to learn.

A large-scale survey conducted by NUS Scotland found that 37% of students and apprentices worry or stress about their finances all the time – with only 3% responding that they never do. 52% have skipped a meal because of lack of money and 11% have used a foodbank, while 45% have gone without heating (NUS Scotland, 2023).

37% have stated that they considered leaving their course because of money worries – and among those from widening access groups, particularly estranged students, student parents and those with caring responsibilities, it rises to over 50% (NUS Scotland, 2023).

Not only is the current level of student finance making many students question their future in education at all, but the complex funding structures are having an unequal impact on students across the system.

Scotland currently has no national and consistent process for FE students to access funding during their time in education. Students apply for bursaries that are decided by individual colleges, which means that two students at different colleges from the same economic background could receive vastly different financial support. Meanwhile in HE, students from low income backgrounds can receive student support up to the equivalent of the Real Living Wage - however as a large chunk of this is delivered through student loans, these students also leave education with the highest levels of debt.

In 2017, the Scottish Government published the independent report titled the 'New Social Contract for Students', concluding the independent review into student support in Scotland. The report proposed a minimum income guarantee for all students in further and higher education, ensuring that student support is equivalent to the Real Living Wage.

Seven years later the only students receiving this level of support are those from low income backgrounds in full-time HE courses. FE students, part-time and apprentices are still waiting for the government to commit to a fair system for everyone.

We need to end the romanticisation of "impoverished students" as a given and stop pretending that the promise of future financial rewards justifies asking students to live and learn in poverty. It's time to transform how we view student financial support, and create the conditions where students are thriving, not just surviving. It's time to invest in students and apprentices.

Our vision: A minimum income guarantee for all students, equivalent to the Real Living Wage.

In 2017 the government's own independent report into student finance recommended a minimum income guarantee for all students, equivalent to the Real Living Wage. It recommended making sure that this support was available to students in both higher and further education, and laid out a clear set of principles on which to base the development of a new student finance system.

We don't need to reinvent the wheel. The government already has a plan laid out for it by the independent chair, with a set of measures that it can take today. A minimum income guarantee would allow everyone to take the step to enter education with a promise that it won't be a step into poverty.

In the years that the government has procrastinated over actioning this plan, thousands of students have relied on foodbanks to survive, slept on friends' sofas without a home to call their own, and made the difficult decision to drop out of education as they can no longer cope within the system.

Enough is enough.

Here are the first three steps to make this a reality:

1. Implement the Student Social Contract through legislation, giving all students the right to a Minimum Income connected to the Living Wage

Earlier this year, the government brought student incomes for higher education systems from low income backgrounds up to the level of the Real Living Wage. But students in further education, part-time students and apprentices are still waiting for real support.

Without legal backing, a student social contract is nothing more than a nice idea that the government can play along with when it is socially popular to do so. It guarantees that the government can be seen to be 'doing something good for students' yet offers no avenues of protection for students as they move through their course.

Currently when someone chooses to start a four year education course, they have zero guarantees that the income they will receive to help them live their life while they develop valuable skills will keep up with the real cost of living in the country.

Legal protection would fulfil Scotland's promise to ensure that education is accessible to all, regardless of a student's parental income. By treating students as independent adults it will provide them with the security that they will be supported correctly throughout their time in education.

This legislative basis could be combined with law to recognise education as a public good.

2. Develop a single funding body to manage all post-16 student finance

The further education finance system is inconsistent and leads to wide variations in support for students across the country. While it is right that colleges should have the ability to respond to the unique needs of their students, this should be underpinned by national infrastructure, which offers clear information to applicants about what they can expect to receive.

Bringing student finance for further and higher education under one body was a recommendation of the 2017 report, as it would also provide an opportunity to embed parity between the sectors.

You don't get a discount on your rent, your electric bill or your grocery bill for studying a further education course. So there's no reason that further education students should receive any less to live their lives than higher education students.

Everyone deserves a liveable income. A single funding body is a sensible structure to make this possible.

3. Commit to all students being debt free by 2049 - funding the entire education system and wiping debt for current students

There is no need for us to run an education system which is based on debt.

Debt creates stress for students, unnecessary pressure for education providers, and a complicated relationship with education in our country as a whole. We get into complex arguments about the individual gain that third level education brings, while underestimating the vast collective benefit of a well educated population. Our country wouldn't survive without well educated doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, architects, scientists, builders, electricians, plumbers, musicians, and the other vast array of careers that our education system serves. When we take a broader view of the true value of education, it just doesn't measure up to the unnecessary difficulties of a debt based system.

Fees may be free but education isn't. Scottish students still leave with thousands of pounds in debt, because all but those from wealthy backgrounds have to rack up debt just to live. Transforming this system will take time and commitment. That's why we've given this ambitious goal a long time frame.

We want the Scottish government to commit to a debt free education system by 2049. On the 50th anniversary of Scottish devolution we want to be celebrating an education system where all student incomes are based on grants and bursaries, and where all existing education debt has been wiped.

Let's take debt out of education, once and for all.



Housing

Securing affordable, decent quality accommodation is one of the biggest challenges for students in Scotland, and the problem has been getting worse in recent years. For most students rent takes the vast majority of their income, and research by NUS found that after rent even students on the highest levels of support are left with just £31 a week from their student support package (NUS Scotland, 2023).

In 2023, rents in Edinburgh and Glasgow rose at a rate of 15.5% and 13.7% per year – the highest of any UK city (The Guardian, 2023). In Glasgow, average student rent eats up 84% of the maximum grant and loan support (as of October 2023), and 125% of the minimum grant and loan support (NUS Scotland, 2023).

Students are typically left to choose between slightly cheaper rents in the private rented sector and somewhat higher quality but extremely expensive Purpose-Built Student Accommodations (PBSAs). Private sector accommodation is often poor quality, and landlords have little incentive to maintain their properties when they are guaranteed a steady stream of students each year. Meanwhile PBSAs have become a lucrative business market, attracting international investors who build luxury accommodations, charging upwards of £290 per week - far outside the budget of the average student.

Recent renter protections brought in by the Scottish Government don't cover students in PBSAs leaving these students completely unprotected by the rent cap, and unable to leave their contracts should they experience a change in circumstances.

Due to housing shortages and soaring rents, it's increasingly common for students to not be able to live in the city or town they study in – instead having to commute large distances.

Poor quality student housing is such a common part of the student experience that it has become an expected part of student life. But given that poor quality accommodation can have lasting health implications and significantly affect our ability to learn, it's time for the government to put an end to the cliché and sort out student housing once and for all.

Our vision: Widespread student housing co-operatives across Scotland

The model of student housing that we are accustomed to just isn't working.

The idea that a student house is mouldy, cold, dirty, broken down and run by an unhelpful landlord is so embedded in our society that few students question it when the cliché turns into reality. Purpose-built student accommodation was supposed to provide a real alternative, but the sector is dominated by investors who care more about their quarterly returns than the students they are providing homes for.

We want to change the “normal” around student housing. And one of the biggest potentials we see for doing that is introducing widespread student housing co-operatives in Scotland. Housing co-operatives allow students to pool resources to build affordable, shared living environments which are based on democratic principles. They require students to take responsibility for the environment they live in and learn how to work together as a group to manage a large community. Housing co-operatives often embed principles of sustainability into their practices, and focus on creating good quality, secure environments for those living there.

Living in a housing co-op may not work for every student. But by changing “what’s normal” for student housing we can put pressure on both the private rented sector and PBSAs by giving students a real alternative. We’ll show that affordable housing really is possible (the Edinburgh Student Housing Co-op has only increased its rents by £69 in the last 10 years) and prove that when students are given more ownership over where they live, they can create spaces that really meet their needs.

While housing co-operatives are rare in Scotland, other countries around the world are embracing this democratic and community based approach. 20% of housing stock in Norway is cooperatively controlled and in Switzerland around 170,200 apartments are under the ownership of housing co-operatives (reference: international report).

Here’s how we can make it a reality:

1. Carry out a review into the regulatory framework surrounding housing co-operatives and create a supportive legislative landscape.

A highly supportive legislative environment accompanied by government funding is a key factor in the prevalence of housing co-operatives in Switzerland. Cooperatives UK has made a series of recommendations to help improve the regulatory framework in Scotland to facilitate the creation of more housing co-ops, including:

- Examining whether the regulatory framework for social housing responds appropriately to the distinct characteristics of co-ops.
- Helping non-registered housing co-ops to expand, by granting a carefully targeted relief from Land and Buildings Transaction Tax on additional property purchases made by fully mutual housing co-operatives with non-distributable assets.
- Designating appropriately-purposed housing co-ops with non-distributable assets as ‘community transfer bodies’, to allow them to make asset transfer requests under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015.

We want the government to review the overall regulatory framework for housing co-operatives in Scotland and identify opportunities, such as those listed above, for creating a supportive landscape.

2. Set up an intermediary body responsible for expanding student housing co-operatives in Scotland.

If Scotland is serious about expanding student housing co-ops then it will need to address some of the key barriers students currently face such as sourcing land, managing initial set up, and finding new students on an annual basis.

In Switzerland education institutions often have Housing Offices which acts as the 'go-between', helping to connect students to housing co-operatives, and offering structural support such as rent collection and maintenance to co-operatives. The management body of these Housing Offices usually include student representative bodies to ensure that they are in keeping with the democratic ethos of the co-operatives.

We want the Scottish government to take inspiration from this model to create an intermediary body designed to support the growth of student housing co-operatives in Scotland. This body should be student-led, with student representatives playing a key role in its development and direction.

3. Launch a public education programme designed to build skills and knowledge about co-operative living

Expanding housing co-operatives will require a wide scale public education programme, both to increase awareness and understanding about the existence of co-operatives, and to help those who may be interested in joining one to develop the skills needed to be part of one.

Student populations are primed for this type of innovative thinking, as during their time in education students are already learning new skills and new ways of thinking on a daily basis.

The government should launch a public education programme including:

- Providing accredited training to student community-led housing advisors
- Launching an online portal with advice and guidance on how to start a student housing co-operative
- Running a national publicity programme across schools, colleges and universities to promote the concept of co-operative living
- Developing a peer network of student housing co-operative management committees across Scotland and further afield to facilitate information gathering and skills sharing



Transport

Students are three times more likely to use public transport than members of the general population. Affordable, accessible public transport is a vital part of being able to engage with education, but for many students Scotland's transport infrastructure is falling short.

The cost of transport has risen significantly in recent years. Bus travel costs 60% more than it did in 2012 and the UK's train network is one of the most expensive in Europe (NUS Scotland, 2023). Since the deregulation of public transport in the 1980s Scotland's transport system has become a free market, with multiple competing companies all managing their own timetables and fares.

This has led to a complicated system where travellers are unable to purchase integrated tickets. Many timetables are designed with office workers in mind, specifically catering to those working a 9 to 5 schedule. For students who may have more flexible class patterns or need to access library services until late in the evening, there can be a lack of provision, even along popular routes.

Those who live in rural areas face even more disadvantages. A survey of young people aged 16-26 conducted by Scottish Rural Action found that 33% of those in rural areas said the cost of travel had prevented them from accessing education.

Scotland is falling far behind many European countries, where public transport has become a central component of the work to reach net zero, and where free or very cheap tickets across a range of modes of transport have been implemented.

The introduction of free bus travel for under 22s was a welcome relief to many. But 55% of students and apprentices in Scotland are over 22, meaning that the majority aren't able to benefit from this support.

Transforming Scotland's transport infrastructure would benefit the whole population. The transition to public transport is a vital part of plans to tackle climate change and instilling the habit of public transport use in Scotland's young people is a crucial behavioural shift. As one of the most frequent users of public transport, Scotland's student population is an ideal place for the government to focus its attention in changing the foundations of our transport system, and making it an affordable, available and easy-to-use service for everyone.

Our vision: Free public transport for all students across all modes, integrated into your student card.

Public transport is a central component of Scotland's plans to reach net zero.

We know that the public transport system is too complicated. We know that a profit driven system has led to a bloated market that doesn't meet the needs of the population. We know that the extortionate cost of transport in the UK is a reflection of the need to constantly satisfy shareholders, and we know that another way is possible when we look to other European countries and see much more affordable, publicly owned forms of transport.

The Scottish Government already knows that we need to change the way we do public transport, so that it can really meet the needs of our population and our climate.

Students make the ideal test group to start focusing efforts to make public transport more simple, affordable and accessible.

Here's how to make it a reality:

1. Use students as a blueprint for creating an integrated Scottish travel card.

Complications in the Scottish travel system are one of the biggest barriers to building a truly integrated system. Big, nationwide changes will be required if the Scottish Government is to fulfil its climate obligations.

Current travel cards largely only apply to bus services. But with many people transferring between bus and train services on an average journey, it doesn't make sense to keep these services separate any longer.

NUS Scotland calls on the government to take on the travel companies and create a fully integrated travel card, allowing students to access student tickets via their student card. A student should be able to purchase a single ticket and move between multiple modes of transport seamlessly as they travel between home and class.

This is the way that our Scottish travel system needs to move as we work together to tackle climate change. So let's use the student card as the blueprint for Scotland.

2. Create regional working groups between transport bodies and education institutions to build timetables that work for students.

Affordable travel is only one aspect of providing a high quality public transport system. A system which truly serves the population also has regular journeys which meets the needs of the local population.

NUS Scotland calls on the government to create regional working groups between transport bodies, colleges and universities, and give these groups the responsibility of ensuring that the needs of student populations in all regions are provided for by the public transport provision. Both transport providers and educational institutions will be responsible for ensuring that student timetables work with local bus and train routes, and that as many students as possible are able to bus-bike-walk-and train between class and home.

While it is very welcome that ScotRail has been brought into public ownership, the government should also make plans to bring all public transport back under public ownership. Cities like Manchester and Edinburgh have already started bringing services back into municipal control, and making fare setting, route creation and timetabling part of our public services. If our transport services are going to service the local community, the community should be able to hold the decision makers accountable, and this simply can't happen in a deregulated, privately owned system.

3. Extend free transport to students in all age categories and all modes of transport within 10 years.

Free bus travel for all under 22s was an excellent start. NUS Scotland sees this as the first step in creating a free transport system for all students in Scotland. We now invite the government to introduce free bus and train travel for all students in Scotland within the next 10 years.

In Northern Ireland bus and train travel is free for all citizens over the age of 65. It is not unrealistic for the Scottish government to hold the same ambition for students - a demographic which represents the future of the country, and which will be responsible for adopting an environmentally sustainable lifestyle.

In combination with the steps outlined above, investing in student travel will be a significant investment in Scotland's climate action.



Mental Health

Making student mental health a priority makes sense as part of building a wellbeing economy.

Research has found that 75% of people with both common and serious mental health conditions first experience symptoms before the age of 25 (Kessler, 2007). Early intervention can make a significant impact on long-term outcomes, so focusing time and resources at this stage is an investment into the decades that come after. Given that the majority of students are under the age of 25, it's clear that creating positive mental health support in student populations could be of huge benefit to the whole health system.

The latest [Thriving Learners University survey](#) results revealed that from a sample of 15,000 students across Scotland, 74% reported low wellbeing, and 45% said that they had experienced a serious psychological issue they felt needed professional help (Mental Health Foundation, 2022). Almost a fifth (19.6%) of students reported that they had either suicidal thoughts or attempted to kill themselves in the last six months.

There are two areas to consider when looking at student mental health. The first is the conditions that students are living in and how these impact the day to day wellbeing of individuals. The second is how the needs of those with specific mental health conditions are being met, and how prepared services are to handle more complex cases.

The conditions that students are living in are contributing significantly to poor wellbeing. The transition between new forms of working, living and learning can be a period of natural stress and tension, but if well supported can also help students to develop healthy levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. But in our current society the pressure of handling the transition is greatly exacerbated by extreme financial stress, and global concerns.

14 years of austerity policies have been followed by the Covid-19 pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis. Students are living in financially precarious situations, and many are struggling for their basic survival. [Thriving Learners College research](#) found that over a third of college students experienced food insecurity in the previous 12 months and 17% lived in a household that had run out of food (Mental Health Foundation 2022). Students are handling extremely high levels of stress day-to-day and many are spending years in survival mode trying to make it through their course.

Meanwhile, gaps in the system are making it difficult for those who need access to services to receive the help they need. Waiting lists for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) consistently exceed government standards, and many colleges and universities report difficulties trying to manage the transition for students between institution and NHS based services. On top of this the sector has never received any consistent, long-term funding for student mental health, meaning that institutions are only able to make short term decisions around staffing and service provision.

The work to transform the other pillars listed in this roadmap will make a significant difference to the conditions that students live in, and this will go a long way to creating a student lifestyle that's built to support positive mental health. But if Scotland is committed to creating a wellbeing economy it's time to also look at service provision and make fundamental changes so that students are no longer falling through the gaps.

Our vision: Embed a wellbeing ecosystem across tertiary education

NUS Scotland imagines an education system which places wellbeing at the centre.

We want colleges, universities and apprenticeships that support the wellbeing of students throughout their time in education, and which create the conditions for wellbeing at every stage.

Much of this will be achieved by the other pillars in this report. Addressing financial insecurity and barriers to education will make a significant difference to the living conditions which currently contribute to poor wellbeing for students.

But to truly place wellbeing at the centre of education we need to go beyond this. We need to look at the services students have access to during their time in education. If we want a lifelong education system it needs to be easy for students to move between services as they enter and leave education. And institutions need to be able to plan for the long term.

In other words, instead of throwing things at the wall to see what sticks, we need the stability to create a long-term ecosystem across the sector, which guarantees that no one falls through the cracks.

Here's how to make it a reality:

1. Create long-term, ring fenced funding for colleges and universities mental health support

The lack of secure funding is a significant problem for institutions. Currently many find it difficult to plan staffing provision without clarity about future funding, and they are cautious about developing services which would require long-term investment.

A stable ecosystem is built on secure foundations. We want the Scottish government to introduce ring-fenced mental health funding for colleges and universities to allow them to plan for the future.

We want this funding to come with requirements to ensure the involvement of students' unions / student associations, and for there to be parity between further and higher education provision.

Investing in mental health in institutions will have a significant return in the long-run, and may also help to relieve pressure on local NHS services.

2. Set up a "transitions" review panel, responsible for creating a set of standards for key moments of transition for students in relation to mental health.

Students are a unique group. Some of them are moving geographically on a regular basis. Others may be moving between different institutions every few years.

The transitional nature of student life is where many of the challenges for student mental health provision arises. Some students may need to move between institution based support and NHS services depending on the nature of their needs. Others arrive at their new institution with existing needs which were being met elsewhere and now need to integrate into a new service. When a student leaves education whilst in the middle of a support plan, there can be confusion over where they should go next.

We want the Scottish government to set up a review panel to identify these key movements of transition and create stable pathways to ensure that students are supported at all stages. These pathways may involve key standards for collaboration between the NHS and educational institutions, or the introduction of staff specifically tasked with managing the transition of students with mental health needs.

3. The Scottish Government should commit to long term funding of the Think Positive project.

Think Positive supports 89% of Scotland's colleges, universities and students' associations to work with their students to develop and improve their mental health support offer and works with 100% Scotland's colleges & universities to promote their mental health support offer. Whilst Think Positive are a trusted partner to the Scottish Government on student mental health, and commitments have been made to continue working with Think Positive through Scottish Government delivery plans and strategies, the Think Positive Project is funded on an annual basis. This greatly limits the long-term planning and impact that the project is able to have.

"Working with Think Positive has improved how we engage with our students regarding our mental health agreement. We have used the support the staff have given us to ensure that students are prioritized in the decision-making of our liberation work and in their mental health" (Think Positive Impact Report 2024)

Conclusion

In 25 years from now our education system could be radically different.

We could live in a Scotland where no one has to wonder whether they are able to afford to start a new college course, take on an apprenticeship or pursue a degree, and where moving in and out of education throughout our lives is as normal and accepted as changing jobs.

Our students could live in warm, comfortable, affordable houses, where they learn how to live in community with one another and share their resources. Few students would need cars to travel to class because our thriving transport system will be designed with people in mind, not just shareholders.

And wellbeing will be at the heart of the whole education system. Students will no longer be fighting to survive day to day, but rather a solid foundation of financial security, educational support and healthy living conditions will allow all students to thrive. And those who require mental health services will be able to access what they need, and easily move between the support that's best for them.

All of this is possible. But it's only possible when we decide that this is the future we are going to create, regardless of what stands in our way.

The Scottish Government can decide that it will allow itself to be held back by the Westminster Government or intimidated by the scale of transformation required.

Or it can decide to listen to its students and student leaders, and dare to be as bold as they are.

Time and again students have created the unimaginable. We have put forward ideas that seemed unthinkable at the time, and held the vision until it became a reality.

These are not changes that we can achieve overnight. But they are changes that we can make by deciding on our destination and committing to walk the path until we get there.

We've laid out the first three steps.

Now we just need a government that's ambitious enough to take them.

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