

Dear Editor,

I spent an enjoyable couple of hours on Friday 11/03/11 talking with year 10 students from Bradley Stoke Community School regarding a variety of issues which they raised as part of their Citizenship classes. One of the main topics discussed was that of student tuition fees.

I am someone who left school aged 15 with no qualifications and then had to get my professional qualifications after, which I juggled with making a living, having a young family and of course pursuing my Parliamentary ambitions.

I am passionate social mobility, and believe we should do all we can to ensure that those from the humblest of backgrounds can fulfil their potential. It is therefore fantastic that so many young people today go into higher education compared to when I was at school.

However, this increase in student numbers has meant that the cost of funding universities has also risen steeply. The country is facing the largest deficit in its history, and at a time when savings are having to be made across all areas of government, and people everywhere are feeling the effects of a difficult economic climate, we just cannot afford to keep funding students to the same level that we were previously.

Currently, higher education costs, on average, £400 per year for every taxpayer in the UK, and universities are still low on funding. As student numbers increase, universities require more and more money to meet the demands whilst maintaining a high standard of teaching. At a time when many people are struggling to make ends meet, it is unfair to tax them more or cut vital services in order for more of their money to go into funding universities, especially when many of these taxpayers have not benefitted from higher education themselves. Even under the new system, 40% of a university student's degree will still be paid for by the taxpayer.

On average, a graduate can expect to earn £100,000 more than someone without a degree over the course of their working lives. When you consider this figure, degrees will still be exceptionally good value under the new proposals, especially as graduates will not be expected to pay anything until they earn £21,000 or more, and their loans will be written off if not paid after 30 years. Early estimates indicate that around half of graduates will not pay off their loans in full. In addition to this, £150 million will be put into a national scholarship programme to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds into university.

It should not be forgotten that the Labour Party first brought in tuition fees, and they set up the Browne review as they could see that, despite the fees, universities are still low on funding. All this government has done is to introduce the recommendations from the review set up by Labour. For Labour to oppose the measures now they are in opposition is nothing more than political opportunism.

These changes have not been introduced lightly by the government; however I believe they are the only way to ensure that higher education remains available to all. Nobody will ever be expected to pay off their student loans if they cannot afford to do so, and the majority of graduates will pay back less per month than they would under the current system. The changes shouldn't put anyone off of higher education, but they are a necessity to ensure that

universities remain well funded, and continue to contribute to the great tradition of social mobility that our country can be proud of.

Best wishes,

Jack Lopresti MP