

DEPUTATION TWO  
LEEDS UNIVERSITY UNION

THE LORD MAYOR: Good afternoon and welcome to today's Council meeting. Could you make your speech to Council, please? It should not be longer than five minutes and can you please begin by introducing yourself and your colleague.

MR M SEWARDS: My Lord Mayor, fellow Councillor. My name is Mark Swards and I am currently the elected leader of Leeds University Union. This is my associate, Lydia Blundell, who is also a member of Leeds University Union. I am also speaking to you as a long term resident of Leeds, having lived in Morley for most of my life, so it is a privilege to speak to my Councillors today.

University is and will continue to be the biggest vehicle for social mobility in this country today. It is not the only one but so far it is by far the most effective and time has shown that.

With the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees there is little doubt that individuals and students from Leeds-based schools will be put off education by the price tag, regardless of how progressive the current Government claims it is. People will base their decision on whether or not they go to Universities on their ability to pay rather than their academic ability.

Now, under the last Government, plans were drawn up both at a national level and at a local level to make sure that the negative effect of introducing £3,000 a year fees was battled quite nicely by Widening Participation methods in schools and in universities who went out to make sure that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds could still go to university. It was not always effective but as a widening participation student myself, as someone who could only go to Leeds University because of Widening Participation, it was effective in some areas. However, student were still put off when it was at £3,000. I can say that some of it has worked. Now these activities are being stripped back.

In Leeds schools, and in other schools from around the country, the situation has been made worse with the abolition of "Aim-Higher", which focused on making sure that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds could go to university and could carve out their own career paths. Now that has gone, the task of making sure these students can still go to university, can still get where they want in life, falls to us and it falls to everybody who is in the Government at the moment.

Firstly, I think we should start at the local schools, and this is why I am speaking to you today. I think it will be down to local schools to make sure that teachers and tutors are well equipped to make sure that their students know the benefits of going into higher education no matter what the burden of debt is that they have to take on.

I also think that it will be down to parents as well, and guardians. Somebody who is capable of going to university will still be put off if their parents are telling them, "No, it is just not worth it." My own mother told me that if it had been £9,000 when I was 18 she would have been telling me to stay at home, no matter how progressive the Government claims the system is. We have got to make sure that teachers and parents across Leeds and across all cities - but Leeds specifically - make sure that they are well equipped to make sure

that their kids know that they can still go to university, they can still get a degree regardless of how much they have to pay per year, regardless of the negative consequences that the system is having.

Widening Participation, which is what this is, does not just stop at 18-21 level either. It affects everyone. There are lots of older people - and by "older" I mean any age, any age above 21 - who do not go to university who are still academically capable, and that is wrong. With £9,000 per year fees, they are going to be put off again purely because they have other commitments, such family commitments, employment commitments, travel commitments. I think it should be down to Leeds City Council and other bodies to investigate ways in which we can make sure that these people are not put off from going to into higher education just because they have got these commitments that they did not have when they were 18 years old. I think it is right that they should be equipped to make sure that they know that if they are academically capable they can go to university just like anyone else, and we can tell them the benefits and the negatives of the current system and explain how it would not affect them and how they would be better off if they did still go to university.

Now I do not want to run out of time but I think it is worth remembering that the activities I am asking you to consider here are all about mitigating and tackling the effect of £9,000 per year fees.

The reality is we should still oppose this system and we should still advocate a new system that does not ask students to pay up front. I know there are differing views on what that system could be, whether it is a graduate tax without the price tag whatsoever or even free education, should we be able to afford it, but whatever we choose we must argue and continue to oppose this system and I ask all Leeds City Councillors, whatever party you are from, whether you are Independent, Labour, Tory or Lib Dem, please oppose this system and continue to campaign with us to make sure that we oppose the damaging effects that tuition fees will have on us and our city. Thanks so much. (*Applause*)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor James Lewis, please.

COUNCILLOR J LEWIS: Thank you, Lord Mayor, I move that the matter be referred to Executive Board for consideration.

COUNCILLOR LOBLEY: I second, my Lord Mayor.

THE LORD MAYOR: All those in favour? (*A vote was taken*) CARRIED.

Mark, thank you for attending and for what you have had to say and speaking so eloquently. You will be kept informed of the considerations which your comments will receive. Good afternoon. (*Applause*)