

# Scottish party manifesto analysis: Further and Higher Education

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## SNP

### Key policies:

- Protect free university tuition, keeping higher education free for students who have lived in Scotland for 3 years prior to the course starting
- Reviews on the education sector with the Shape of Future Funding Framework for universities, and the College Sector of the Future Programme.
- Expand apprenticeships to 150,000, including over 8,000 graduate apprenticeships and a new Apprenticeship Accelerator Grant for employers
- Increase college investment, supporting skills, regional economies and the national skills strategy.
- Reform the planning and regulatory system, speeding up decisions that support campus, skills and research infrastructure.
- Strengthen links between colleges, universities and industry, including Techscaler expansion and new Scotland House consulates for investment.

### Summary and analysis:

The SNP's commitments on Further Education and skills focus on expanding training opportunities, strengthening pathways into work, and aligning provision with Scotland's economic priorities. The manifesto pledges to increase the number of apprenticeships to 150,000 over the Parliament, including more than 8,000 graduate apprenticeships and a new Apprenticeship Accelerator Grant for employers. It also commits to supporting strong regional economic partnerships and expanding the Techscaler programme into new sectors, positioning colleges as part of a wider skills and innovation ecosystem. The SNP frames skills policy as central to economic growth, linking FE provision to start ups, high growth firms and local wealth building. There is a strong emphasis on protecting free university tuition, but little discussion of universities outside of this, with a focus on colleges and apprenticeships. While the manifesto emphasises expansion and alignment with economic strategy, it outwith the commitment of funding reviews, it provides less detail on how colleges and universities will be funded to deliver increased capacity or how the FE and HE sectors will be supported to manage these wider expectations within existing financial pressures.

## Scottish Labour

### Key policies:

- Universities

- Maintain free tuition.
- Develop sustainable funding and governance model.
- Apprenticeships
  - Ringfence Apprenticeship Levy for skills.
  - Regional employability hubs in colleges.
  - Guaranteed apprenticeship places for qualified applicants (creation of 9,000 additional apprenticeships in key growth sectors).
  - Apprenticeship Centres for Excellence.
  - Digital Skills Passport.
- Colleges
  - Defence technical colleges.
  - Regional skills accelerators.
  - Simplify vocational qualifications.
  - Multi-year funding linked to employment outcomes.

#### Summary and analysis:

Scottish Labour sets out a programme to stabilise and expand further education funding, positioning colleges as central to skills development, regional growth and social mobility. The manifesto commits to reforming college funding so that it becomes multi-year, stable and linked to employment outcomes and apprenticeships, enabling colleges to plan and invest for expansion. It also proposes ringfencing Scotland's share of the Apprenticeship Levy for skills development, directing resources into apprenticeships, upskilling and reskilling programmes. Colleges are further resourced through new roles in regional employability hubs, delivery of short reskilling courses and the Parent Works Scheme, which funds colleges to provide training for parents in low paid work or unemployment. The manifesto also commits to creating Apprenticeship Centres of Excellence and regional Skills Accelerators led by colleges, requiring additional investment in facilities and staffing. Overall, the manifesto outlines a significant expansion of the FE sector's role, backed by targeted funding reforms, while leaving detailed costings and implementation mechanisms to later planning.

## Reform UK (Scotland)

#### Key policies:

- Shift a significant share of school-leavers from university routes into technical colleges and trades.
- Provide multi-year funding settlements for technical colleges to support stable vocational pathways.
- Align further education training with Scotland's ten priority economic sectors.
- Expand apprenticeships and adult retraining programmes linked to these sectors.
- Build vocational pathways that are more resilient to automation and AI.
- Strengthen transitions from school into trades and technical careers through clearer early guidance.

- Reinvigorate state funded education to ensure young people are prepared for productive jobs in the new economy.

#### Summary and analysis:

Reform UK's approach to further education is centred on repositioning colleges as the primary route into Scotland's re-engineered economy, with a strong emphasis on technical training aligned to their ten priority business sectors. The manifesto frames the current system as failing to guide young people into secure, productive careers and proposes a significant shift away from the existing model in which large numbers progress to university. Their agenda prioritises multi-year funding for technical colleges, expanded apprenticeship pathways and a clearer vocational pipeline designed to equip learners with skills that are resilient to automation and directly linked to labour market demand. This is coupled with a wider critique of governance and system performance, including concerns about attendance, discipline and the perceived ineffectiveness of existing national bodies (e.g. Education Scotland). While the direction of travel is clear, strengthening vocational routes, tightening alignment with economic strategy and restoring institutional authority, the manifesto provides less detail on how colleges will be supported to expand capacity, how transitions between school, college and employment will be coordinated, and how the system will manage the operational implications of a large-scale redirection of learners into technical pathways.

## Scottish Conservatives

#### Key policies:

- Retain free tuition and review admissions fairness.
- Ringfence Apprenticeship Levy.
- Increase college funding & expand borrowing powers.
- Skills Bill for colleges/universities to employer needs.
- Allow 14- and 15-year-olds to disengage from school to attend college.

#### Summary and analysis:

Scottish Conservative proposals for further education focus on aligning colleges and skills provision more closely with economic growth, employment needs and value for money. The manifesto positions colleges as part of a wider system that must deliver stronger labour market outcomes, and it links FE funding to reforms aimed at reducing public sector costs and improving efficiency across education. Their wider skills agenda emphasises expanding access to well paid jobs, improving productivity and ensuring that training routes support economic priorities, but the document does not set out detailed new investment streams or structural reforms specific to colleges. Instead, further education is framed within a broader commitment to fiscal restraint, streamlined public services and a labour market strategy centred on economic growth rather than expanded public spending. Overall, the manifesto presents FE as a component of a more disciplined, employment focused skills system, with an emphasis on outcomes and efficiency rather than new funding commitments.

# Scottish Liberal Democrats

## Key policies:

- Increase funding for colleges.
- Align college courses with the new skills strategy.
- Give colleges further freedom from government to innovate, and to borrow and keep surpluses.
- Secure the future of Scotland's agricultural colleges.
- Encourage Scottish universities to widen access with outreach working in schools in disadvantaged areas.
- Supporting students in Higher Education through bursaries, grants, special support loans and flexibility on student borrowing loan limits.

## Summary and analysis:

Scottish Liberal Democrat policy on further education is centred on repairing a system they describe as financially strained, fragmented and misaligned with labour market needs. Their manifesto positions colleges and universities as central to economic development, expecting them to deliver new skills pipelines, expand provision for adults changing careers, and support national priorities such as offshore wind, care and NetZero technologies. These ambitions depend on stable multi-year funding, yet the manifesto acknowledges that current pressures on college finances are severe, and while it commits to secure funding and reforms to the credit-based funding model, it provides limited detail on how long-term sustainability will be guaranteed within wider fiscal constraints. The same can be said for the approach to universities, with an acknowledgement of the issue of relying in international student fees, and an underfunding of Scottish students. However, this faces the same issues as the college commitment funding considerations with manifesto aim for a cross-party cross-sector consensus, but little on what this would look like in the eyes of the Liberal Democrats. The party also proposes closer alignment between colleges, employers and the new skills strategy, but the governance mechanisms for coordinating this across sectors remain only partially specified. Their plans to widen access, strengthen careers advice, and support specialist institutions such as Corseford College and agricultural colleges rely on strong institutional capacity, yet the manifesto does not fully outline how staffing, estates and digital infrastructure challenges will be addressed. There is also mention of the cost-of-living crisis and its impact on students (for FE and HE students and apprentices), with commitments to bursaries, grants, special support loans and greater flexibility on student borrowing limits. However, this is not costed and sits in conflict with the recognition within the manifesto of the funding crisis facing the sectors. Overall, the FE and HE agendas sets out a clear direction focused on responsiveness, local economic contribution and lifelong learning, but the operational and financial architecture required to deliver this transformation is less fully developed.

# Scottish Greens

## Key policies:

- Protect free tuition.
- Increase student support to real living income.
- Expand college funding and green skills programmes.
- Suspend interest payments on student loans during maternity and parental leave.
- Improve college governance, including an increase in the number of reserved board places for staff and student representatives.
- Support students during the summer through a national hardship fund and the opportunity to rebalance bursaries and extend loan payments to stretch over the summer months.

## Summary and analysis

The Scottish Greens further and higher education proposals set out a broad vision for a sector that is central to Scotland's social and environmental missions. The agenda positions colleges and universities as key contributors to net zero and poverty reduction but highlights that a lack of strategic direction from government and a decade of industrial relations problems have constrained their ability to deliver on these ambitions. Commitments to maintain free tuition, strengthen college governance through enhanced staff, student and community representation, and support colleges to generate additional income indicate an intention to rebalance autonomy and accountability for both colleges, and their students, though the mechanisms for ensuring financial stability remain only partially specified. The proposals to resist market driven funding frameworks and pursue cross party work on a sustainable model signal recognition of systemic funding pressures, yet the material does not fully outline how long-term institutional resilience will be secured. Alongside this, the agenda includes measures to expand adult upskilling, enforce fair work conditions, and reduce financial pressures on students, but the operational capacity required to implement these reforms, particularly in a sector already affected by workforce strain and uneven governance capability, is not comprehensively addressed. Overall, the programme articulates a clear direction centred on equity, fair work and lifelong learning, but the institutional, financial and governance architecture needed to embed these changes across a diverse tertiary landscape is less fully developed.

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