Ann McVie
Scottish Executive

Although you did not consult Glasgow Caledonian University on the proposed medical tuition fees (your letter of 1 September), you might like to consider other views. Given timescales this is a personal view, not one based on a resolution of our Court or Senate.

To set this in a more general context, I am enormously impressed by how the Scottish Executive has managed to avoid differential top-up fees for Scottish students studying in Scotland. The recent CSR settlement was very encouraging for Universities and the graduate endowment is very good for students, especially those from low income families.

Since the graduate endowment repayment finances the maintenance grants not University fee income, I think the Executive can currently correctly claim that tuition is and remains free for undergraduate courses for Scottish students in Scotland. The current arrangements also, therefore, meet the principle that access to university education should be free at the point of delivery and independent of family means.

If I have understood these new proposals correctly, they breach the principle that full-time undergraduate University education should be free for Scottish students studying in England, because the fees will be covered by a repayable loan (as your letter clearly states).

Turning to UK and EU based students wishing to study in Scotland, again as a matter of principle I feel uncomfortable about discriminating by nationality. The current arrangements already discriminate between overseas who pay full cost and EU students who do not and for English students there is the current means tested flat rate fee. However, keeping in mind both the Fresh Talent initiative and implementation of future Scottish legislation on nationality discrimination, I remain uneasy about apparent discrimination against students domiciled in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Turning to the proposals for medical students, all the reservations above are multiplied by the scale of what is proposed, and by the introduction of a variable fee by subject.

If the problem is one of labour supply into the Scottish NHS, surely that is best resolved by making it attractive for medical graduates of all nationalities to stay in Scotland?

If the Executive is worried about better qualified English candidates displacing well-qualified Scottish candidates, there is an irony that gradually the Scottish NHS will be deprived of the best qualified candidates.

If the arguments presented by the Executive are accepted, why limit the response to medicine? What about dentistry, veterinary science, or nursing and allied health professions or law? Many of these face big excesses of demand over supply of undergraduate places. The only reason I have heard is because the current demand for medicine in Scotland from English students is running high.

I wrote because I wanted you to know that the HE sector is not entirely unanimous or comfortable with what I recognise as the not unreasonable pragmatic approach proposed.

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