

Response to Scottish Executive consultation on medical tuition fees

1. Introduction

Universities Scotland welcomes the invitation from the Scottish Executive to comment on the principle and practicalities of introducing a separate flat-rate fee for Scottish medical schools. We take this opportunity to comment on tuition fees in the wider context, to which the Executive's letter of 1 September 2004 also refers.

2. Tuition fee policy from 2006: general comments

Before commenting on the specific question of the fee for medical courses, we wish to make some observations which have a wider application.

We agree that it is necessary to consider the implications for Scotland of the introduction of variable tuition fees in England from 2006. We believe that the possibility that Scotland might be flooded with fee refugees from England, and that as a result opportunities for Scottish students to enter higher education would be reduced, has been greatly exaggerated. Moreover, the ability of Scottish higher education institutions to attract significant numbers of students from other parts of the UK is a positive and not a negative feature, and one which is of increased value at a time when Scotland faces the problem of a declining population, and is attempting to address this problem by attracting fresh talent into Scotland.

Nonetheless we believe that it is fair and reasonable that a balance should be maintained between attracting students from other parts of the UK and ensuring that opportunities for Scottish-domiciled students are not curtailed. At present the price of a degree course is not the main factor in decisions made by students from other parts of the UK about where they should study: those who choose to study in Scotland do so for other reasons, and it is preferable that price does not become a more significant factor after 2006.

Therefore, Universities Scotland broadly supports the Scottish Executive's review of its policy on the level of tuition fees, with a view to maintaining cross-border student flows at approximately their present level. However, we believe that it is important not to raise the fee level any higher than is necessary to achieve this, and we reiterate our view that concerns about a large increase in the number of students coming from England are misplaced. In any event, it would be preferable to allow a small increase in these numbers after 2006, rather than risk deterring students who would have come had current circumstances still prevailed. Fees ought not be raised to a level where the fee burden which would have to be met over the full duration of a course by an English-domiciled student studying in Scotland would be higher than the same student would normally expect to have to meet for the same course in England.

3. Fees in medical schools /

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Most of our observations on the wider issues apply also to the specific case of fees in Scottish medical schools. However, we recognise that there are some special additional factors which are relevant in this instance. One is the relatively high cost of medical courses compared with other subjects. A second is the tendency for a significant proportion of students from other parts of the UK who choose to study in Scottish medical schools to leave Scotland after graduation. Universities Scotland considers that it is fair and reasonable that the Scottish Executive should seek to optimise the benefit to Scotland of its investment in medical education, and accordingly supports the principle that a higher flat-rate fee might be set for medical courses from 2006.

As regards the practical issues, the most important point is that any action taken should be proportionate. It should be borne in mind that some of the students from other parts of the UK who qualify from Scottish medical schools do remain in Scotland, and that an increase in the tuition fee is not the only, or probably even the most effective, way of addressing the perceived problem: it is making a medical career in Scotland appear attractive that is the surest way of retaining doctors, whatever their domicile prior to their medical studies.

Therefore, while supporting the principle, we advocate caution in determining the level of a higher flat-rate fee for medical courses. As for other courses, it should not be set at a level which would result in the fee burden on an English-domiciled student attending a Scottish medical school being greater than would have applied had the same student attended a medical school in England.

4. Practical issues relating to Scottish-domiciled students

Both in the general case, and in the specific case of medicine, it should be treated as a high priority that, if the fee level is increased by more than inflation from 2006:

- personal fee liability for Scottish-domiciled students is not be extended beyond those to whom this liability already applies; and
- a suitable mechanism is found to ensure that the fee burden on the minority of Scottish-domiciled students who are personally liable for payment of their fees does not increase in real terms.

With regard to the latter point, we welcome the fact that the Scottish Executive is minded to avoid a real terms increase applying to Scottish-domiciled students, and that it is exploring options for achieving this. We urge very strongly that this be managed by means of part-support provided by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) meeting the difference between the current fee level, adjusted for inflation as appropriate, and the increased fee level. For the reasons given below, we believe that this is the most satisfactory, most practicable, and most efficient way of dealing with the matter:

- the judgement to be made, that of whether a student satisfies the criteria for domicile in Scotland, is one which SAAS already makes in relation to the other much more numerous applications it already handles;
- in principle /

- in principle it is no more difficult for SAAS to distinguish between those Scottish-domiciled applicants who are entitled to full fee support and those who are entitled to part fee support than it is at present to distinguish between those entitled to full fee support and those entitled to no fee support;
- the main alternative being considered, namely a system involving a fee lower than the standard level being applied at institutional level to those Scottish domiciled students liable for payment of their own fees, would require each institution to make judgements about whether students were domiciled in Scotland or some other part of the UK, resulting in arrangements which would be more administratively complex, less efficient, and potentially less consistent. The most serious issue of consistency would be that in certain cases the judgement made by the institution might differ from that which would have been made by SAAS, causing problems when, as not infrequently happens, a student at a later stage in his/her course becomes eligible for support. While the seriousness of such problems would be reduced if SAAS agreed to accept the judgements made by institutions in these cases, the most satisfactory and robust solution is for the judgement to be made by SAAS in the first instance.

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