



Response to Scottish Executive Consultation on Cross Border Student Flows: Higher Education Tuition Fee Levels

In responding to this consultation, The Open University supports the pan-sector response submitted by Universities Scotland. This individual submission is intended to focus only on the section in the consultation paper which raises specific issues for The Open University and its students: section 48 on part-time students.

With over 15,000 part-time students, The Open University is the largest provider of part-time higher education in Scotland. Representing the position of part-time students to ensure their needs are fully reflected in Scottish public policy is a key priority for The Open University.

Section 48: Part-time students

We wish to highlight two points in relation to Section 48:

1. The paper states that 'Domestic part-time students currently pay a fee as a proportion of the full-time flat-rate fee.' This is not technically correct. Part-time student fees are set at the institutional level and are not necessarily directly proportionate to the full-time flat rate fee.

Research conducted by The Open University¹ illustrates that that undergraduate students are extremely sensitive to price increases. This is unsurprising given the student profile. Over half are either unemployed or from low or semi-skilled occupational groups. Over half earn less than £19,000 a year and 40% earn less than £15,000, about 15% have household incomes of less than £15,000. Only 11% of undergraduate students get their full tuition fee paid by their employer.

While full-time students in Scotland, and from 2006 those in England, are able to defer payment until after they graduate and then repay according to income, part-time students still pay upfront tuition fees.

While we appreciate the Executive's reassurances that any changes to the full-time flat-rate fee should not disadvantage part-time students, we believe that it is now time to re-examine whether maintaining a distinction between the treatment of part-time and full-time students is still valid, particularly as we move towards credit-based funding.

2. As acknowledged by the Implementation Advisory Group, SHEFC's current funding model for part-time students should be viewed only as a holding position, pending the findings of the research on part-time students currently being commissioned by the Scottish Executive' as part of the Review of Funding for Learners. SHEFC and SAAS have also acknowledged the need to give further consideration to the position of part-time students.

A strong part-time higher education sector is vital to achieving Scotland's widening participation and lifelong learning goals. Equity of treatment for part-time students and for the funding of the universities that teach them is essential if we are to offer fair and increased access to higher education in Scotland.

The Open University in Scotland
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¹ OU student registration data 2003/04; data collected by the Open University for the DfES Part-time Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2004.

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