

Cross Border Student Flows: Higher Education Tuition Fees

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is pleased to respond to the Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department's consultation on cross border student flows and the implications for higher education tuition fees. This response has been compiled by the General Secretary, Professor Andrew Miller and the Policy Officer, Dr Marc Rands, with the assistance of a number of Fellows with considerable experience in this area.

While there is a need to ensure that the changes made to tuition fee arrangements in England and Wales do not adversely affect Scottish domiciled students, any changes to the fees in Scotland should not unintentionally harm the positive vision of Scotland as a major player in the global knowledge-based economy.

General tuition fees

Do you agree with the principles on which the general fee level should be based, namely: by having regard to fee levels in England; being sufficiently high to influence demand while not making 4-year courses more expensive than 3-year courses; by covering the costs of supporting Scottish students going to English HIEs; and avoiding a rise that would significantly reduce students coming to Scotland. If not, please suggest alternatives.

Fundamental to the document is the assumption that with the exception of Medicine, all other subjects in Scottish universities are equally popular with Scottish students and a single fee approach is a sensible way forward. This is not necessarily the case.

While there has been an increase in the number of cross border students applying to Scottish universities overall, there are institutions in Scotland that have seen declines in applications from students domiciled elsewhere in the UK over a number of years. There are also a number of subject areas where Scottish universities have encountered falls in demand from Scottish domiciled students and where they have only been able to maintain enrolments through appealing to a UK-wide student market. For example, many universities in Scotland have difficulty filling all their science and engineering programmes with well qualified students in spite of the fact that training such students is seen as a major national objective, and in spite of the fact that many of those that do qualify in these subjects end up working in Scotland. It will be important, therefore, to ensure that any disincentives aimed at stabilising cross border student flows, do not actually result in the numbers of students from the rest of the UK wishing to study in Scotland going into decline and/or make it harder for Scottish institutions to attract sufficient students in key subject areas.

Demographic data also show a declining trend in the numbers of potential Scottish domiciled students in the medium-term. This will impact directly on the ability of the Scottish university sector to maintain its current student numbers into the future. The general trend of population decline north of the border has similarly been a key factor in the Scottish Executive's drive to attract people to study in Scotland's universities, and to provide incentives for them to remain here after graduation and contribute to the wellbeing of Scotland's economy and society. This calls into question the fundamental premise of the consultation that the Executive needs to '...take action to ensure that there is no significant variation from the current pattern of cross-border student flows..'

Indeed, this should be an opportunity to encourage very able students from the UK as a whole to study, for example, science and engineering subjects in Scotland. Such a vision of Scotland as one of the major centres for science and engineering in the UK would add immeasurably to our attractiveness as a place to live in and invest in, and would give us a very distinctive position both in the UK and in Europe. Therefore, those subjects that struggle to recruit substantial numbers of well-qualified students from within Scotland, and also have substantial strategic importance, should be treated differently from those such as medicine where maintaining a level playing field is more important. In these cases, the fee levels should be set as a series of bands where magnitude reflects a balance of demand and strategic objectives.

At what level should general tuition fees be set for 2006-07?

Given the final level of fees to be set in England, and in the rest of the UK, is not yet clear, it may be prudent to keep the general tuition fees for 2006-07 unchanged, as the paper proposes for HNCs and HNDs, until it was possible to assess the impact on general cross border flows, in light of the new fee regime south of the border.

Medical tuition fees

Do you agree with the principle of using tuition fee levels to protect the interests of Scottish domiciled students by setting fee levels for medicine that are broadly comparable with those being set elsewhere in the UK? If so at what level should tuition fees for medical courses be set? If not, what alternative measures could be taken to protect the interests of Scottish domiciled students?

There needs to be a separate, higher, and as long as medical courses in Scotland remain roughly comparable in length and cost, flat medical fee across the UK. This should of course not discourage innovation and flexibility in individual university medical curricula, as long as the overall commitment by students and universities does not start to diverge widely from one institution to another. In this connection, the paper assumes that the net tuition fee in England will be subsidized down by bursary awards to £2200-£2500. However, students at Russell Group institutions may very well be full fee. The proposed increase in fees in Scotland would therefore still act as an incentive for well-qualified English students to seek to attend Scottish universities more than they do now. A wide range of Scottish higher education institutions also allow good A-level candidates to complete in three years, not four, which would also have implications for the costings eventually arrived at.

It is also clear that medicine currently attracts the most significant numbers of students to Scotland from south of the border, and cross border flows in this area represent a genuine issue. But there is a danger that the need to address this specific issue has prompted proposals to raise fees across the board, when this would work against efforts to attract students in other disciplines.

Additional Information

In responding to this consultation the Society would like to draw attention to the following Royal Society of Edinburgh responses which are of relevance to this subject: *The Independent Committee of Inquiry into Student Finance* (September 1999); *A Framework for Economic Development* (March 2000); *A Science Strategy for Scotland* (July 2000); *The Are We Realising Our Potential Inquiry* (July 2000; January 2001); *Review of the supply of scientists and engineers* (August 2001); *Scottish Higher Education Review* (January 2002); *The Role of the Universities in the Europe of knowledge* (May 2003); *The Future of Higher Education* (May 2003); and *Inquiry into the Promotion of Scotland Worldwide* (December 2003).

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