



national union of students scotland

**NUS Scotland response to the
Scottish Executive Consultation on
Cross Border Flows: Higher Education
Tuition Fee Levels**

May 2005

NUS Scotland

NUS Scotland is a federation of local student organisations in Scotland, comprising over 60 local campus student organisations that are affiliated to the National Union of Students of the United Kingdom (NUS). NUS Scotland is an autonomous, but integral, part of the National Union of Students. The students' associations in membership of NUS Scotland account for 85% of students in higher education in Scotland and over 90% of students in further education in Scotland.

Students' associations affiliated to NUS retain autonomy over all policy areas, and may choose to make individual students' association submissions based on local policy. NUS Scotland operates a democratic forum for policy and debate on national issues affecting students and NUS Scotland's role is to reflect the collective position.

Introduction

NUS Scotland welcomes the opportunity to participate in this consultation as well as more generally in the process determining the Scottish Executive's response to top-up fees in England. In the recent past, English-domiciled students studying in Scotland have been charged a fixed fee comparable to the up-front fee they would have to pay if attending a Higher Education Institution elsewhere in the UK. We are entering uncharted territory in 2006, because we have never needed to compensate for the effects of a full market system in England. In such an environment, it is important for students to know that their personal interests are given just as much importance in these matters as the importance given to balancing 'the system'. Personal interest must be balanced in this context between the Scottish-domiciled student who must be protected from any potential influx across the border (and the consequential effect on places at HEIs), and the student from elsewhere in the UK who may be attracted to Scotland for myriad reasons, and should not be dissuaded from coming here by cost. It is therefore very important that NUS Scotland is able to participate, both by responding to consultation and by participating in the Implementation Advisory Group; we continue to value this participation very highly. We hope that, by working together with the Scottish Executive, we can get the balance right in this complex matter. We would also wish to stress that our policy is to oppose tuition and top-up fees, and the comments we make in this submission are intended to be read in that context.

General tuition fees

NUS Scotland is in agreement with the Scottish Executive that most of the principles upon which fee setting is based must, by necessity, respond to the market system that will exist in England from 2006-07 onwards. It is therefore important to consider the likely increase in demand from student domiciled in the rest of the UK (hereafter: RUK-domiciled), in the event that a given degree from a Scottish HEI becomes substantially less expensive, and make adjustments based on that assessment. However, it is also important in our view to ensure that Scotland remains an attractive destination for talented students from elsewhere in the UK.

We would advocate a fee level that offers a moderate incentive for RUK-domiciled students to study in Scotland in terms of reduced debt after graduation. We would argue that Scotland has an opportunity to place itself in the market at a price lower than the most expensive English HEIs, thus attracting the most talented students, and at the same time taking action to reduce student debt for graduates of Scottish HEIs. It is, of course, crucially important that such fees remain at a flat rate to avoid the introduction of any kind of market system to Scotland, even in relation to students (and prospective students) domiciled in England, where there will be a market system.

We reject the principle that the cost-saving from charging tuition fees to RUK-domiciled students should be linked to the cost of providing support for Scottish-domiciled students who wish to study in the rest of the UK. This in our view has little to do with controlling cross-border flows and should therefore not be a consideration in determining cross-border fee levels.

On this basis, NUS Scotland believes that the 2006-07 fee level should be as low as possible. The new fee level should therefore be at the bottom of the range proposed by the Executive.

Self-funded Scottish domiciled students

NUS Scotland believes it is absolutely essential that Scottish students who are not eligible for support are insulated from the results of the introduction of top-up fees in England. It would be grossly unfair for self-funding Scottish students to pay more simply because of a new and more costly fees system south of the border, and we are surprised that Ministers have not been clearer about this issue of principle thus far. We therefore support any measure to offer fee remission equivalent to the difference between the current level and the revised level. We would advocate that this remission should be extended to all those categories of student identified by the Implementation Advisory Group to be affected by a tuition fee increase.

Medical tuition fees

NUS Scotland's position on differential fees is already very well known, and indeed we are pleased that our view forms an integral part of this consultation. We do not agree that a differential fee should be introduced for medicine or any other subject.

Stopping rises in the number of English students attending Scottish medical schools will not help Scottish students from poorer backgrounds. They will face exactly the same barriers as at present, including cost, inadequate financial support, burden of student debt, length of the course, and so on. The Higher Education Review (Phase 3) concluded that students from private schools are much more likely to study medicine than those from state schools, largely due to these factors.

During the Higher Education Review (Phase 3) process, it was argued that it is mostly wealthy students that study cross-border. Wealthy Scottish students can go to England, and will not be much put off by the fees; wealthy English students can study in Scotland because the extra year adds to the costs. This was, of course, mainly anecdotal, and does not appear in the report. If, however, it is true, it means that increasing fees for medical courses in Scotland will not make any difference to the students coming to Scotland, because they are already well off and will not be put off by increases in fees. Wealthier students are more likely to

see the chance of taking medicine, whether in Scotland or the rest of the UK, as more important than the cost of the course.

Furthermore, the numbers of Scottish students will not increase. Fees for English students will not mean that there will be more Scottish students studying medicine, and will not address the underlying problem of retention of medical practitioners in Scotland. The measure will not have the desired effect of preventing outflow of graduates from the rest of the UK after concluding medical training in Scotland.

It is surely short sighted to revert to modification of the student funding system, where what is really needed is a root and branch review of the delivery of medical training in Scotland and the access routes to that training, especially regarding Scottish-domiciled applicants. Such reform was proposed in the Calman report, and is supported by the British Medical Association, but appears to have largely fallen by the wayside. Much has been said about “defending the interests of Scottish students” in connection with a differential fee. We contend that it would be in Scottish students’ interests to establish a system for medical training where the requisite places exist to fulfil demand, and where access is fair and equitable for all school leavers.

In short, we believe that the differential fee power has been devised as a ‘quick fix’ measure, that is unlikely to repair the underlying problems of access, equality, and fear of debt that plagues medical training both north and south of the border. We believe that Scotland should be a pioneer in opening up access to medical schools, and we would therefore advise the Executive to consider a number of alternatives to the introduction of a differential fee before resorting to the use of this new power. We invite the Executive to note that in its Stage 1 report, the Enterprise and Culture Committee stated:

“We think it would be helpful if the Minister could publish, prior to Stage 2, an analysis of the alternative options presented by NUS Scotland in comparison with the route chosen in the Bill as introduced.”

We have seen no evidence that the Executive has given any detailed consideration to the suggestions we made at that time, and we therefore call on the Executive to do so now, and prior to introducing a proposal for a differential fee for medicine. In particular, we would advocate detailed investigation of the following possibilities:

- Offering financial incentives to students domiciled in Scotland, in order to maximise recruitment of medical students from within Scotland relative to applicants from the rest of the UK. Such financial incentives offered on a long-term basis would also have the effect of improving retention of medics.
- Encouraging institutions to relax the overly stringent academic entry requirements for medical courses, and consider alternative entry criteria, in

order to maximise applications from Scottish students. Alternatively, an “access to medicine” foundation course could be provided for those students who obtained excellent Highers, but not entirely at S5. This reform has been strongly advocated by the BMA.

- Paying special attention to potential medical students as part of existing schemes for widening participation, especially active mentoring of talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The Scottish Executive taking steps to provide incentives for medical practitioners to remain in practice within NHS Scotland.
- At the very least, we would argue for a system where the difference in fees between the general fee level and the higher fee level could be remitted over a period, if a graduate stays in Scotland to practice medicine. Under such a system the student loan that each graduate takes out to pay the fee would have a flat rate repayment made by the Scottish Executive for each year that each graduate practiced medicine in Scotland. If that repayment was of the order of £600 per annum, up to a maximum of £6000, then a graduate would have a substantial incentive to stay in Scotland for 10 years after graduation. Such systems should be examined as positive alternatives to higher fees, as they directly target the problem in retention of doctors.

Implications for further education

NUS Scotland agrees with the Executive that fee levels for HNC/HND programmes should not be changed, since we do not anticipate any significant cross-border flows to occur in relation to further education programmes.

Transitional arrangements

NUS Scotland believes that any student who secured a place at an HEI in 2005-06 should be treated as a 2005-06 entrant. It is at the discretion of the student and the HEI, in consultation with each other, to determine whether a deferral is appropriate, and such deliberation should never involve a financial worry in connection with fees. If students who secure places in 2005-6 are treated as 2006-07 entrants if they defer, then this would be a strong disincentive for students to take gap years in that period, denying them the opportunity for personal development. It would also significantly add pressure to an already crowded market of students wanting to enter higher education before the fee-level rises, which will likely result in fewer students being offered places on their preferred course, or at their preferred institution.

Conclusion

NUS Scotland will take this opportunity to reinforce the point that no fees would be required at all if the UK Government had not chosen to legislate first for tuition fees, and then for a full market system in higher education. There is a clear need to relieve student debt, which is placing a burden on graduates, causing serious hardship for students, and discouraging many more potential students from entering higher education. We would strongly urge the Executive to consider the problem of student debt alongside its other principles for determining general tuition fee levels.

Regarding medical fees, we call on the Executive to pause, reflect, and wait for the reality of the situation to emerge rather than relying on assumptions. The power to bring in such a fee now exists under the recently passed Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Bill, albeit with a requirement for full consultation and Parliamentary approval. This does not mean, however, that it should be used immediately. We urge consideration of the alternatives we have put forward, and would advocate all of those proposals in preference to setting a precedent for a creeping system of differential top-up fees in Scotland.

Submitted for and on behalf of the Scottish Executive Committee
May 2005