

Scots 'face university fees' under separation

By **Simon Johnson**
Scottish Political Editor

THE SNP's flagship promise of free university tuition for Scottish students may be unaffordable after independence as it would have to be extended to English applicants, a survey of academic experts warned yesterday.

Research published by the University of Edinburgh found that higher education leaders think it unlikely that Scottish ministers would be permitted to continue charging fees to students from the remainder of the UK.

European law states that it is illegal to discriminate on fees between students from different EU member states but the Scottish Government's White Paper on independence promises that ministers would get an exemption.

But the researchers heard evidence that this "flies in the face of what we're required to do as good Europeans" and questioned whether free tuition would be affordable for Scottish students without the fees income from their English peers.

The study predicted that any extra influx from England by youngsters wanting a "free" university degree would be "relatively small" in the short term.

However, it warned that only a small increase in the proportion of English students coming north of the Border would be required for them to match the number of Scots studying here.

If one in 10 English students decided to study in Scotland, then the researchers found that the majority of Scottish youngsters would have to go elsewhere for a degree as there would not be enough university places to accommodate them.

The study also found that the disparity in the tuition fee regimes north and south of the Border had reduced "cross-border flows" of students, with one expert warning that the system had become "insular" for young people.

Mary Scanlon, the Scottish Tory education spokesman, said: "This is yet another example of experts lining up to dismiss more claims from the SNP's White Paper.

"We've always known that European law could not be clearer on this issue. An independent Scotland would not be able

to discriminate between different national groups, and that has been confirmed in this in-depth study."

Under the SNP's fees regime, Scottish and EU students get a taxpayer-funded higher education while youngsters from England, Wales and Northern Ireland must pay fees of up to £9,000 per year.

This is permitted under European law as discrimination is allowed within the same EU member state. However, it would become illegal if Scotland separated from the UK unless SNP ministers managed to get a special derogation from Europe.

Edinburgh University interviewed 50 higher and further education experts, including senior academics, college principals and civil servants. It also spoke to 148 youngsters aged between 14 and 19. The study noted that Scottish universities have a "growing reliance" on income generated from the fees of students from the remainder of the UK and outside the EU.

For example, it said each cohort of students from south of the Border who sit a four-year degree in Scotland contributes more than £170 million in fees.

Without this income, the study warned that many commentators thought independence would make free tuition for Scots "unsustainable".

The researchers said that the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees for all youngsters at English universities had contributed to a "small decline" in the number of Scots studying south of the Border.

They argued that this suggested the increase from England would be small if Scottish independence meant that all students north of the Border paid no tuition fees.

A spokesman for Universities Scotland, which represents the higher education sector, said it is neutral but "we want to continue to see the cross-Border flow of students in manageable numbers and in a financially sustainable way".

The Scottish Government said it was "firmly committed to free tuition" and insisted it should be given a derogation from EU law because even a small increase in the number of English youngsters "could have a significant impact on access to places for Scottish-domiciled students".



SNP's tuition fees policy 'could not continue after yes vote'

Lindsay McIntosh

Scottish Political Correspondent

Academics do not believe SNP ministers' claims that they could charge students from the rest of the UK tuition fees after independence, according to a new report. The findings, from the University of Edinburgh, are damaging for the Scottish government, as they suggest a breakdown in trust between the administration and the higher education sector.

The government says that, if there is a "yes" vote, it would let universities continue to price degrees at up to £36,000 for English, Northern Irish and Welsh applicants, while Scots would study free of charge. The policy appears to contradict EU law, which states that citizens of all member states should be treated the same way. It is only those from the rest of the UK that the SNP wants to charge, a policy it can enforce under devolution because of a quirk in the law. It says that it would have to continue after a "yes" vote to prevent a rush of students from south of the border.

However, the University of Edinburgh report has found that higher education experts do not believe the policy could continue, and that it would not be necessary to prevent a cross-Border influx. Professor Sheila Riddell, an author of the report, said: "Experts in EU law have been very, very clear that EU institutions are very unlikely to allow Scotland to behave in a completely different way from any other member state and when there have been test cases the arguments have never, ever been accepted."

Her team interviewed 50 higher education policy makers and other stakeholders across the UK, and 148 people aged 14 to 19 in schools in Scotland and the north of England.

One of the respondents, an anonymous civil servant, said: "It just flies in the face of what we're required to do as

good Europeans, that we would have a particular set of requirements for one particular member state and not the others. So the big question is whether free tuition would be sustainable in those circumstances."

The SNP's white paper on independence claims there is an "objective justification" for deviating from EU law to charge students from the rest of the UK — that it is necessary to prevent applicants edging out Scots applicants.

However, the Edinburgh study found that university choice was determined by a range of factors, such as the length of the degree, travel and accommodation costs, the chances of employment and the course content.

A Scottish government spokeswoman said the administration was "fully committed" to free tuition for Scots.

She added: "The ability to benefit from free tuition would provide a very strong incentive for students being asked to pay up to £27,000 over three years to come to Scotland in increased numbers. That is why our policy is in place."



Tuition fee threat

A SEPARATE Scotland would be unable to carry on charging tuition fees to students from England if it stays in the EU, experts claim.

Edinburgh University researchers made the prediction after interviewing higher education policymakers and young people across the UK.



No fees for UK students if there's Yes vote, says study

by **JANE CASSIDY**

UNIVERSITY experts believe students from the rest of the UK could not be charged tuition fees in an independent Scotland that remained part of the EU.

A study has found they think it unlikely students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland could still be charged, contradicting the Scottish government's claims in their independence White Paper.

EU students – like those who live in Scotland – are currently exempt from fees.

Researchers from Edinburgh University interviewed 50 higher education policymakers and other stakeholders in Scotland and the rest of the UK as well as 148 teenagers in Scotland and the north of England.

The Scottish government insists it will find a loophole in EU regulations to charge the fees.

It claims the fees would be justified because an independent Scotland would be overwhelmed by students from the rest of the UK trying to avoid paying for tuition in their own countries. However, the research found concern about this influx was unfounded.

Prof Sheila Riddell, of Edinburgh University's Moray House School of Education, said: 'The four countries' systems are tightly intermeshed and decisions made in one have major knock-on consequences for the others.'

A Scottish government spokeswoman said: 'The ability to benefit from free tuition would provide a very strong incentive for students to come to Scotland in increased numbers.'

'This could have a significant impact on access to places for Scottish-domiciled students.'

Liam McArthur of the Lib Dems said: 'Even without a significant increase in numbers there would still be a significant funding gap to fill.'



Letters

Universities are right to demand wider access and to move from academic elitism

I READ with interest your front page article ("Universities feel threatened", The Herald, June 24) on the view of senior university managers that they feel threatened by the centralising instincts of the Scottish Government. The autonomy of the higher education sector is a long established and important principle and one which UCU Scotland, the union for academic and related staff, wholly supports.

But the views of senior managers reported focused on their criticism of single outcome agreements designed to widen access to universities and what they regard as interference over governance issues. UCU Scotland will argue as vociferously as anyone for the retention of academic freedom, for staff to speak on contentious matters without fear of reprisal and for universities to retain autonomy.

But universities exist and thrive only as part of the community they are in. Given the substantial public funding they receive, they have a duty to that community and politicians are right to demand more of our universities. They are right to demand wider access and more open and representative university courts and senates. Autonomy means more than the ability to give those at the top pay rises 10 times the rate offered to staff. To defend Scotland's poor records on access and governance on the basis that any attempt to address these issues is an attack on

autonomy is shoddy and does nothing to add to the debate.

**Mary Senior,
Scotland Official, UCU Scotland,
6 Castle Street, Edinburgh**

YOUR report ("Universities feel threatened", The Herald, June 24) prompts me to say that for once I do in

fact agree with a number of the principles enshrined in the Scottish Government's Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013, though sadly I feel it does not go nearly far enough.

Your Leader Comment on the issue within the report was titled "Universities and their autonomy" which seems to sum up in a nutshell what some see as an inherited problem. I feel there is often a fine line

between autonomy and a monopoly, which I rarely find a helpful concept least of all in Scottish education.

Surely the terms higher education and further education are purely a contrived human construct with no real meaning in the 21st century. I suggest the distinction remains an anachronism due to the historical development of post-school education. Study at an FE college or at university requires exercising the same mental processes including the development of problem solving skills, eLearning, perception, cognition and personal development planning to name just a few.

A National Certificate or Diploma from a Scottish FE college meets validated national standards and

therefore gaining such a qualification tells an employer key facts which are not specifically associated with the particular college attended.

But our university structure has, largely due to their autonomy, produced "A" listed establishments. This means that we also have Scottish universities which are then wrongly perceived as "B" or even "C" listed. While our universities are overseen by the UK Quality Assurance Agency, perceptions persist due to their love of academic elitism. In a post-industrial society is it not time to radically renovate our educational provision after secondary school?

Bill Brown,

**46 Breadie Drive,
Milngavie.**



Scotland 'will have to stop charging UK students fees'

SCOTT MACNAB
POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

AN INDEPENDENT Scotland could no longer charge English, Welsh and Northern Irish students university tuition fees if it stays in the European Union, education experts have warned.

The country could also struggle to maintain its system of free education for home students, according to the report by Edinburgh University.

There are currently more than 4,800 undergraduate students from the rest of the UK paying fees of up to £9,000 a year to study in Scotland.

The study interviewed 50 higher education policy-makers and others in Scotland and the rest of the UK, as well as 148 young people aged 14 to 19 in schools in Scotland and the north of England.

Professor Sheila Riddell, of the University of Edinburgh's Moray House School of Education, said: "The higher education systems in the four countries of the UK are tightly inter-meshed, and decisions made in one country have major knock-on consequences for the others."

Scottish policy-makers questioned the sustainability of free higher education in the light of ongoing austerity in the public sector. They believe the issue was "dormant" rather than settled.

Young people in the north of England believed that the current policy of Scottish universities charging fees to students from the rest of the UK was unfair, the report found. As UK citizens, they believe they should enjoy equivalent entitlements.

In Scotland, young people supported the principle of free tuition. However, other issues such as the economy were more important in influencing their decision on how to vote in the referendum.

Scottish Conservative education spokeswoman Mary Scanlon said: "An independent Scotland would not be able to discriminate between different national groups, and that has been confirmed in this study."

Lib Dem education spokesman Liam McArthur said a fall in the number of students coming to Scotland from abroad paying fees would leave a "significant funding gap" for universities.

More than one in ten students at Scottish Universities is English-domiciled. The fear is that even a slight increase in this number could make it harder for Scottish youngsters to get a place.

The Scottish Government has argued that it will be able to continue to charge fees on the basis of "objective justification" after a Yes vote. They claim Scotland's

relative size, shared land border and language, would allow it to continue with fees.

A spokeswoman said last night: "The Scottish Government is firmly committed to free tuition and we need to ensure that there are enough funded places for Scottish-domiciled students. This is important for them, their families and the economy."

She added: "The ability to benefit from free tuition would provide a very strong incentive for students being asked to pay up to £27,000 over three years to come to Scotland in increased numbers. That is why our policy on this matter is in place."

"The education systems are tightly intermeshed"

Prof Sheila Riddell



Warning over tuition fees

SCOTLAND could not charge students from the remainder of the UK tuition fees if it becomes independent and stays in the European Union, according to university experts.

Scotland currently gives fee-free education to Scots but charges students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

However, Edinburgh University researchers said this arrangement was “unlikely to continue” if Scotland became an EU member state following a vote for independence”.

