

## Scottish higher education

# A costly promise

**Scrapping tuition fees has helped rich students at the expense of poor ones**

Oct 3rd 2015 | EDINBURGH | From the print edition

NEXT to a loch, in the leafy Edinburgh campus of Heriot-Watt University, lies a monument to political hubris. Unveiled on Alex Salmond's final day as first minister in 2014, a commemorative block of Elgin sandstone is inscribed with his vow: "The rocks will melt with the sun before I allow tuition fees to be imposed on Scotland's students". Nearly a year on, to little surprise, the rock stands strong.



Newly sprung in June

In 2007 Mr Salmond's Scottish National Party (SNP) came to power on a "dump the debt" platform, and duly scrapped the £2,289 (\$4,582) fee that all students paid after graduation (yearly tuition fees had already been abolished in Scotland by the previous Labour-led coalition). In the years since, defenders of the old system have grown scarce. No major Scottish political party today says it would reintroduce fees. As Rob Henthorn of Scotland's National Union of Students notes with satisfaction, "the argument has been won".

Although the inability to levy fees means they receive less teaching funding per student than universities in England, which can charge fees of up to £9,000 per year, Scottish universities are in rude health. Last year assessments which determine the amount of research funding they receive found that the average Scottish university was as good as, if not better than, the average English one. On September 30th Scotland improved its comparatively strong position in the *Times Higher Education* world rankings.

Yet the abolition of fees has done surprisingly little to widen access to higher education. Indeed, since 2011 the proportion of students from state schools entering Scotland's elite universities has fallen. And while the proportion of university students from non-professional backgrounds has risen by just 0.2 percentage points, to 26.8%, in England it has gone up from 30.9% to 33.1%.

Although the poorest Scottish students are guaranteed an annual income of £7,625—higher than in England—most of this is in the form of loans. The level of non-repayable support has fallen sharply. Grants offered to poor students in Scotland are now worth little more than half those offered to the English. Lucy Hunter Blackburn, a policy analyst, calculates that the net effect of the SNP's no-fee, low-grant policy is a £20m-a-year transfer from poor students to their richer classmates.

According to research by Sarah Minty of the University of Edinburgh, Scottish students are particularly averse to taking on debt. This has unfortunate consequences. One-third of the very poorest students attempt to get by without a government loan, often relying on help from their families (who have little to give) and excessive paid term-time work. The SNP's rhetoric on the evils of student debt is partly to blame, says Ms Hunter Blackburn.

The lack of funds means the government is having to cut back in other areas. Further-education colleges, which account for one-fifth of higher education provision and tend to attract poor students, have seen a real-terms funding cut of one-fifth since 2010. In 2010-13, school spending fell by 5% in real terms.

There are signs that the Scottish government has woken up to these problems. Nicola Sturgeon, Mr Salmond's successor as first minister, has asked to be judged on her education record, pledging to close the attainment gap between rich and poor children. This year the government created a commission to look at ways to widen access (although it has a narrower remit than its English equivalent). And the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), which disburses teaching funds, has been given the power to fine universities whose efforts to attract poor students are judged insufficient.

Other interventions have been less welcome. Scottish universities fret about the SNP's centralising tendency. Academics strongly oppose plans to impose a unified structure on universities' governing bodies and enable future changes to their composition with minimal parliamentary scrutiny. These moves could, they say, see universities lose their status as public institutions—as happened to colleges in 2013—restricting their financial freedom. The independence of the SFC has been reduced. "It is very much a government department now," says Ray Perman, director of the David Hume Institute, a think-tank.

And it seems likely that attempts to widen access will again be constrained by Scottish universities' limited sources of income. Abolishing tuition fees may have been a political achievement, but it is proving to be a pricey policy. Nor is it as popular as it once was. In 2013 two-thirds of Scots said that students with the money to do so should contribute to the cost of their tuition. As the Scottish government is forced into further spending cuts, it is possible that it may introduce fees under a new name, speculates Sheila Riddell of Edinburgh University—in which case Mr Salmond's monument may need amending.

**Correction:** We said that Sarah Minty was at the University of Stirling. She is now at the University of Edinburgh. Sorry.

From the print edition: Britain