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The SNP has failed Scotland's children

Nine years of SNP rule have not led to any great improvements in Scottish education.

The SNP has been in power in Holyrood for the last nine years, and had a majority for the last five. When not pushing for greater powers, Nicola Sturgeon's party have emphasised their commitment to education at every turn.

Yet, across primary, secondary and higher education, the party's record is poor. Nine years of SNP rule have not led to any great improvements in Scottish education; indeed, in many ways it has become worse.

Standards of literacy and numeracy have declined north of the River Tweed. Since 2011, the proportion of pupils performing well or very well in reading has fallen in all three of the age groups measured by the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy - Primary 4 (age 8-9), Primary 7 (age 11-12) and Secondary 2 (age 13-14). Writing standards for older students have slipped too, while maths attainment has decreased for all three age groups measured.

For all the SNP's rhetoric about opening up opportunity, the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged Scottish children is huge, and actually increasing by many measures. By the age of five, the vocabulary of the poorest quintile of students is 13 months behind the richest quintile. Aged five, the poorest children in Scotland perform worse than the poorest in England, and the gap in cognitive development between children from less well-off backgrounds and others is bigger in Scotland than in England. Disadvantaged children are suffering most from the SNP's failure to make good on its pledge, in 2007, to reduce average class sizes in primary schools to 18; they are now 23.

The gap between the richest and poorest Scottish students only widens after primary school. Since 2011, the biggest decrease in both writing and numeracy performance among 13 and 14-year-olds has been for the most disadvantaged students. In 2014, the most deprived tenth of children were seven times more likely than the least deprived to leave school without achieving one or more Standard Grades at Credit level, which are analagous to GCSEs.

Little wonder that Scotland's international standing in education, long a source of pride, has fallen away. A special OECD report on Scottish education last year observed the "declining relative and absolute achievement levels in mathematics". The most recent PISA figures, based on data from 2012, continued the trend of stagnation. Scotland's performance across each of reading, science and maths, the three areas measured by PISA, has worsened since 2003; the drop has been particularly great in maths, where Scotland has fallen from being a world leader to average for the OECD. Across maths, science and reading, educational attainment in Scotland is worse than Ireland. While the roots of the educational decline predate the SNP coming into power, Scotland's performance, as measured by Scottish and international data, has not been improved in nine years of SNP rule.

If the SNP's record in primary and secondary education is undistinguished, it is even worse in higher education. The richest Scottish students are 3.53 times more likely to enter university at age 18 via UCAS than the poorest ones, compared with 2.58 in Northern Ireland, 2.56 in Wales and 2.52 in England. Fewer than one in ten young people from the most disadvantaged areas begin to study towards a degree by the age of 20.

It is five years since Alex Salmond declared: "The rocks will melt with the sun before I allow tuition fees to be imposed on Scotland's students." He was so enamoured with these words that he unveiled them on a commemorative stone at Heriot-Watt University on his last day as First Minister in 2014.

Since devolution, there is no policy that the SNP trumpet more proudly than resisting the move to tuition fees south of the border, and keeping university education completely free of charge. This is flaunted as a triumph of progressive politics: Sturgeon likes to say that fees would have prevented her from going to university.

Yet protecting Scottish students from university tuition fees has led to cuts to student grants, and a £20 million transfer from disadvantaged students to middle-class ones, according to the policy analyst Lucy Hunter Blackburn. The poorer you are in Scotland, the greatest the debt when you graduate: students from households that earn less than £34,000 will typically graduate with between £4,000 to £5,000 more debt than those from families earning more, research from Hunter Blackburn shows.

The tuition fee policy has also hurt disadvantaged students in another way. Success rates for Scots applying to university have fallen sharply in recent years, and are now well below those for applicants in England or Wales, due to the relatively tight cap on the number of students that Scottish universities can take. This hurts all students but disproportionately affects the most disadvantaged. Meanwhile in England the cap on the number of students universities can take has been removed, benefiting all students but especially the most disadvantaged.

The deleterious consequences of free university tuition extend to school education. "Higher education spending has been maintained whilst spending on schools and colleges has been cut. This is a conscious political decision," says Sheila Riddell from the University of Edinburgh. The effects can be seen in the investment in schools. Between 2010 and 2013, school spending in Scotland fell by five per cent in real terms from 2010 to 2013 while, in England, it rose by

three per cent in real terms between 2010 and 2015.

If the extra cuts forced by the maintenance of free tuition fees are one common theme of Scotland's educational problems, there is another striking one: a lack of accountability. The culture of ubiquitous school league tables is lacking north of Berwick-upon-Tweed.

Scottish education needs "a more robust evidence base," the OECD report noted, while the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission have said the lack of data impedes analysis of "the effectiveness of different policy interventions at improving social mobility". It is not merely a bureaucratic issue. "A lack of data means a lack of accountability," Riddell says. The reluctance to use data to highlight failings in schools partly explains why Scotland has also shied away from the educational reforms that have been pioneered in London and then rolled out in the rest of England, including the Teach First programme and academies.

This inertia is also detectable in higher education. Since 2004, England has had the Office for Fair Access, an independent public body designed to ensure universities do enough to encourage disadvantaged students. But disadvantaged students in Scotland endured a decade with no high profile national leadership until the Commission on Widening Access in Scotland was formed last year. It remains unclear whether the planned new Commissioner for Fair Access would have the same powers enjoyed by the Director of OFFA.

These failings do not merely add up to huge problems in Scottish education. They are also emblematic of something wider: how the SNP has been able to float above all criticism of its record while focusing on the independence debate. Scottish children, particularly those most in need of help, have been the losers.

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