

The SNP is failing Scotland's poorest students

On tuition fees the government's policy is flashy, boastful—and entirely short-sighted

by Ruth Davidson / June 10, 2016 / [Leave a comment](#)



Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has a cup of tea with former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond ©Andrew Milligan/PA Archive/Press Association Images

Could for-profit “challenger institutions” improve higher education?

Vanity and hubris were never far from Alex Salmond's side in his time as Scotland's First Minister. Indeed, when it came to his own favourite policies, the vanity was cast in stone. Before quitting office, the ex-SNP First Minister ensured that a monument was placed at Heriot-Watt University to commemorate his policy on tuition fees. It declares that, to use the phrase he repeatedly appropriated from Robert Burns, “the rocks will melt with the sun” before fees are introduced in Scotland. This was Salmond-era

politics encapsulated: flashy, boastful, populist and entirely short-signed.

The downsides are now beginning to come home to roost. Earlier this month, a major Sutton Trust report examined the state of University access in Scotland. It eloquently set out the facts that lie behind the SNP's monuments to itself.

It found that if you are poor, Scotland is the worst place in the United Kingdom to live if you want to go to University. The report found that a student from the poorest fifth of Scottish households is four times less likely to go to University than their wealthier counterparts—compared to only 2.4 times in England. And it found that where access has increased for disadvantaged pupils, this has largely been by finding places not at Universities but at Further Education colleges. The report concludes: "Not only is the access gap still wider in Scotland, what progress there has been has largely been through sub-degree places in colleges."

How has Mr Salmond's tuition policy affected this? The report concluded that it was "not evident" that it had given Scotland any advantage in increasing participation among disadvantaged groups. Indeed it may have made things worse. It is worth pointing out that tuition is not free in Scotland: it is just that it is paid for by the state. With heavy constraints on public budgets and the discriminatory nature of the SNP's "no fees" policy, the SNP places a cap on the number of Scottish students who are able to receive tuition funding—one that does not exist in England. University leaders in Scotland have been forced to accept this cap but they also know it has made it much harder for Scottish students to get into Scottish Universities, particularly poorer students.

Indeed, it could be that the cap is now leading to quite remarkable unintended consequences. The latest figures from UCAS show that the percentage of Scottish students who receive an offer from a Scottish University has now fallen well below that given to English (fee-paying) students. In other words, in some cases, English students stand a better chance of getting an offer from Scottish Universities than do Scots. I do not think that English applicants who want to come to Scotland have suddenly become better qualified than their Scottish counterparts. More likely, this is due to the fact that Scottish student entry—to Universities in Scotland—is constrained by the cap, and English student entry isn't. It also points to a growing suspicion that fee-paying students from elsewhere in the UK are being prioritised ahead of less lucrative Scottish students. With bursaries in Scotland slashed to help pay for the policy, time spent at uni is harder now than in years past—evident by the much higher drop out rate for poorer students.

The SNP's answer to this in recent weeks has been to pledge to enforce greater access to Scottish students through legislation. While every political party rightly supports the concept of widening access, the SNP is facing serious questions to which it hasn't yet found any reassuring answers. If it forces all Scottish universities to accept 20 per cent of their intake from the 20 per cent most deprived communities by 2030, it will have to fund additional university places, unless, of course, it wishes to squeeze out middle class students. These additional places will cost more money—lots of it.

How best to find it? There is the option of raising taxes in Scotland; something which both Labour and the Lib Dems proposed during the election campaign, and which I and my party opposed, or there

is the historic SNP solution—which has been to slash college budgets in order to fund university provision. Thirdly, there is the proposal which we put forward in the same campaign, to introduce a total graduate contribution of £6000 (£1,500 per year for the average Scottish four year course), payable after students are earning £20,000 a year. This is, as English families know full well, much lower than the £9,000 per year fees currently in place south of the border. However, our plan would at least ensure that, by the end of this parliament, an extra £100m would be available for post-16 education in Scotland, to supplement public funding. We have proposed that some of this extra cash could be used to increase bursary funding which has been cut under the SNP from £100m to just £60m.

It does not make for easy politics to propose this: I know, having just come through an election campaign when it was a key topic of debate. But that we require a debate in Scotland about how best to fund our Universities is clear. The consequences of inaction are now obvious: unless public spending on tuition increases rapidly, more and more Scottish students will be squeezed out of our Scottish universities, with the poorest placed at the back of the queue. It is a complex situation—far too complex to etch onto the side of a monument. But a responsible post-Salmond Scottish Government would attempt it nonetheless.

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