



Improvement by Degrees

Universities need time to address the complex issue of attracting poorer students

The pressure on universities to increase the number of students from deprived areas in Scotland has become intense. The SNP government insists that the institutions themselves are not doing enough; universities protest that they simply do not have enough well-qualified applicants. Threatened, however, with fines if they do not reach a target of 10 per cent of new undergraduates from areas classed as "disadvantaged" by 2021, some universities find themselves in what has been described as an "arms race" for poor students.

Desperate times call for desperate measures and the University of Aberdeen has decided to of-

fer applicants a free year in halls of residence if they come from disadvantaged areas. The offer might be worth close on £6,000 a year if taken up. It's an imaginative idea. Despite free tuition in Scotland, many prospective students view with alarm the cost of higher education and paying for accommodation ranks high on the list.

As with all such schemes, however, there are risks. Aberdeen says it will make its offer based on postcodes. That is, prospective students, even if well-off, who live in an area defined as deprived because of its postal location will be accepted; just outside and they will lose out. It is, says one critic,

a "crude" way of enticing prospective students. But the fault lies with a government that puts undue pressure on universities to achieve an outcome within an unrealistic timescale. The reason that more pupils are not applying from deprived areas is because the schools themselves are not preparing them sufficiently for higher education.

A better approach is that adopted by St Andrews, which works with local schools to prepare pupils for the transition to university. Inevitably this kind of approach needs time, and time, it appears, is not on offer. If the Aberdeen scheme falters, it may not be entirely the university's fault.

