

Scotland: Growing calls for tuition fees as universities face funding crisis

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The higher education sector in Scotland is facing hundreds of job cuts, as universities declare they are facing a funding crisis. The response of many senior officials, including university vice-chancellors, has been to call for the reintroduction of tuition fees for students. At present, Scottish students who attend a university in Scotland have their tuition fees paid, although they must still take out large loans to fund living costs and other related expenses.

Stirling University announced plans in June to reduce its workforce by 10 percent, a cut of 140 jobs. Presented as “voluntary” redundancies to meet a budget deficit of over £4 million, the plan resulted in 130 applicants by September. University officials have indicated that they may still press ahead with compulsory layoffs, with the University and College Union (UCU) stating that over 170 cuts are being sought.

On October 19, several hundred students and workers gathered at the university to oppose redundancies. This protest, in line with those that have taken place at institutions in England and Wales, was firmly under the control of the UCU, who have cooperated in the implementation of staff cuts. At the Stirling demonstration the UCU merely called for no “compulsory redundancies,” fully accepting the elimination of 130 posts, as this had been done through “voluntary severance.”

At Strathclyde University in Glasgow, 140 job cuts have been announced. In Edinburgh, both Heriot Watt University and Queen Margaret University are cutting staff, to meet budget deficits of £3.5 million and £3 million respectively. These announcements add to the over 6,000 job cuts at higher and further education institutions across Britain.

The staff layoffs take place amidst evidence that student numbers are rising. With unemployment continuing to

increase due to the global economic downturn, some Scottish colleges have reported a rise in applications of 300 percent this year.

At the same time, government funding has been cut. Education is a devolved issue, the budget for which is set by the Scottish National Party (SNP) minority government in Edinburgh. Last month, the education budget saw a reduction of £49 million, part of a package that included cuts in the budgets for housing and local authorities. Although higher education was allocated an additional £20 million, it is widely acknowledged that funding will come under attack in the coming years. According to various projections, Scotland’s budget is set to be cut by £2.5 billion, or 8 percent, by 2013.

The SNP has also been forced to abandon its 2007 election pledge to “ditch student debt.” This step, which would have reportedly cost up to £2 billion, has been quietly dropped in the face of the current economic crisis. All that remains was an announcement in early October of a meagre £30 million in additional funding.

Debates have already begun in ruling circles about where further savings can be made, with education being a key target. A recent report by the Centre for Public Policy for Regions (CPPR), a body set up through the collaboration of Strathclyde University and the University of Glasgow, concluded that the education budget could be cut by over £600 million without adversely affecting service provision.

One of the report’s authors, John McLaren, commented, “Next year the government will start to cut. The first year is easy—you start with low hanging fruit. It is once you get into the third or fourth year of consecutive cuts that you are probably going to have to cut things you don’t want to, unless you have made plans in advance.”

Noting that such plans were not being prepared, McLaren warned that ignoring the problem could lead to “civil strife and strikes.”

Aware that government funding is under threat, universities are seeking to shift the financial burden onto students. Several university principals have made it plain that tuition fees represent the most desirable option. Professor James Mitchell of Glasgow University claimed in the *Scotsman* that scrapping tuition fees for Scottish students in 2000 was “a mistake,” adding, “The Scottish Parliament made an early decision that needs to be looked at again. It was a mistake. It is likely that it will take many years to reverse. But that process needs to begin.”

Lord Sutherland, the former principal of Edinburgh University, stated in September that tuition fees for Scottish students were required.

One of the main forces behind this drive is the likelihood that tuition fees for students attending universities in England and Wales will be raised in a review due next year. While the possibility of an increase from the current £3,000 upper limit to £5,000 has been suggested, institutions such as Imperial College London are pushing for much higher levels of £15,000 per year. This would result in Scottish Universities being underfunded and over-subscribed compared with their competitors in England and in Wales. Professor Anthony Cohen, former principal of Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, commented, “So far, the Scottish Government has just about been able to keep the funding of Scottish universities comparable with English universities.

“But if the cap is raised to £5,000, or in the case of some, significantly higher, there is no way the Scottish Government could keep Scottish universities comparable.”

An illustration of the consensus developing within ruling circles in favour of fees is that even the author of the report recommending their abolition in 2000, Sir Andrew Cubie, has called for a re-think. He told a recent conference, “I do not jump to the conclusion that the only way that contribution can come is from students as fees during the time of study, and I think we need to look very closely at models which can apply after graduation in the current context.”

Such a proposal would only add to the tens of thousands of pounds in debt faced by graduating students. Notwithstanding his denial that he favours the implementation of tuition fees, Cubie has embraced calls made for a comprehensive independent inquiry into the funding of higher education. This demand has been promoted by those most in favour of fees as a means to give a veneer of legitimacy to their proposals. Cohen, for example, in an article in the *Scotsman* entitled “Only

certainty is change for funding universities,” also called for a “comprehensive independent review” of funding.

The introduction of tuition fees would place a further crippling burden on those entering higher education, with a forecast from the National Union of Students (NUS) indicating that charging £7,000 in fees would leave the average student in £32,000 worth of debt at the end of his or her studies.

Students who hope to oppose such an outcome will find little support within the established organisations, in particular the National Union of Students. Having abandoned any campaign for free higher education in Britain on the basis that no major political party is willing to support such a proposal, the Scottish section has lined up behind demands for a full independent inquiry into the funding of universities. Responding to Sir Andrew Cubie’s comments supporting such a move, NUS Scottish President Liam Burns stated, “We welcome his [Cubie’s] intervention as a way to move the debate on from the recent fixation on students as cash cows and the only way to fund higher education.”

Far from “moving the debate on” from the focus on students as a funding source, such an exercise will only prepare the way for the reintroduction of tuition fees.

The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) calls for free, high-quality education as a basic right for all. For this, the entire framework of the current debate must be rejected, including the claim that it is possible to defend the existing limited funding provisions in Scotland on a national programme. What is required is the reconstruction of society along socialist lines, the only basis for high-quality free education for all.



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