Deep cuts and fee rises threaten future of Scottish education system

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Scotland is to raise fees for university students who come from England from the present £1,800 a year to up to £6,500 a year, the Scottish government said yesterday.

The rise is in line with the maximum possible £9,000 course charges in England under new proposals, because Scottish degrees require four years of courses rather than three. Students from the European Union will be exempt from fees and Welsh students will be subsidised by the Welsh regional government.

The discriminatory move is being justified with the argument that it an extension of the decision at Westminster to raise fees in England, made necessary in order to prevent an exodus across the border to Scottish universities. But the decision is part and parcel of a package of cuts by the devolved Holyrood administration that will have a devastating impact at all levels of the education system.

The £1.3 billion in spending cuts for 2011-12 outlined by the Scottish National Party (SNP) includes a £200 million reduction in the £1.8 billion budget for further and higher education. Primary, secondary and further education will also be impacted by the 2.4 percent to be slashed from local government's £11.6 billion budget, of which education accounts for £5 billion.

Funding for Scottish universities will be reduced by 6.4 percent, or £63 million of the current £926.2 million budget. A further £26 million has been gleaned by changing the grant for student travel into a repayable loan.

The number of fully funded undergraduate positions, which are currently free for students from Scotland and within the European Union, is to be scaled back. The size of the cut will be revealed by the Scottish Funding Council before the end of the year. For additional intake, the Scottish government will pay only £1,820 per year per student, well below the costs of tuition, which currently range from £4,190 for the social sciences to £16,330 for medical and veterinary courses.

The SNP government is withholding information on the full impact of the education cuts, as well as broader austerity measures to be carried out in the next parliament. Seeking to avoid exposure in the run up to the May election, they have presented only a one-year budgetary projection.

But at least a further 16.7 percent or £150 million will be cut from the further and higher education budgets in 2012-13, as the UK coalition government's 80 percent cuts in university funding are passed on to Scotland and the other devolved regions. The University and Colleges Union warned that more than 4,000 jobs will go in Scotland over the next two years.

The convener of Scotland's Colleges Principal's Convention, Linda McTavish commented, "There's going to be colleges across Scotland that will fail. It's just too big a cut."

University principals have voiced their concerns that universities, worth £6.2 billion in the gross value added to the Scottish economy, will no longer remain internationally competitive.

The SNP committed itself to not imposing fees on Scottish students, but this could change. The plan to increase fees for English universities, from the current level of £3,000 to £9,000, has encouraged university principals to push for some form of student contribution in Scotland. They have claimed that failure to raise further funds for Scottish institutions will lead to them losing out on revenue from private investment for research and development, and students from outside of the EU, who pay market rates of up to £12,000 per year.

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This wealthy layer of university heads, many of whom receive combined salary packages in the range of £250,000 or more, are primarily concerned with preserving their privileged social position, while ensuring that Scottish universities do their utmost to service the interests of Scottish capital.

A recent report by Universities Scotland, a body representing university principals, advises that any cuts be compensated for by a funding solution that includes the re-introduction of some form of graduate contribution. Entitled "Towards a Scottish Solution", the report advocates an "aggressive pursuit of efficiency savings," totaling £40 million for 2010-11, including "pay restraint," "the adoption of Pensions Plus Salary sacrifice scheme…" and the fast-tracking of more students to the second year of Scotland's current four-year degree path.

Scottish universities are already taking steps to vastly expand the number of students from outside the EU to increase revenue. Professor Anton Muscatelli, principal of the University of Glasgow, has indicated that he is looking to expand non-EU enrolment from 2,500 to 3,500 over the next few years. He warns that unless revenue is increased and £20 million in savings are found, the University will run out of money by 2013.

Given that the SNP's one-year budget has put off the majority of the most politically damaging cuts until after the election, there is no reason to believe that if elected, an SNP government would honour its fees pledge for very long.

The National Union of Students (NUS) has not opposed the discriminatory leveling of fees on English students, warning instead that regional disparities in the cost of higher education mean that either a quota system or higher charges for students from the rest of the UK are necessary. This is an entirely nationalistic agenda which fits in with that of the SNP.

Primary, secondary and further education will also be hit by the funding deal reached between the SNP and local authorities, outlined within the draft budget. Under the deal, local authorities will receive a lower than projected 2.6 percent cut in funding next year in return for protecting key SNP pledges in the run up to the May election, including the preservation of the current pupil-teacher ratio.

As part of the deal, COSLA, the organization that represents local authorities, has demanded flexibility on the terms and conditions of teacher contracts. These powers include flexibility on the wages of supply teachers and an end to provisions such as the chartered teacher programme, which pays teachers for completing additional training.

This is the approach that the SNP is employing across the public sector. While supporting no compulsory redundancies, the SNP is to rely on the trade union bureaucracy to enforce "flexible working practices". What this entails is the driving down the wages and conditions of public sector workers with the threat of mass unemployment.

The SNP has promised to secure the employment of all newly qualified teachers. However, the Education Institute of Scotland and the Secondary School teachers' Association have both warned that this will lead to teachers being axed who are on short-term, fixed term or supply contracts, in order to make room for the newly qualified, creating a system of job-rotation.

COSLA has warned that around 900 positions will go next year, which comes after a reduction of 800 teachers in the past year, and a total reduction of 3,000 since the SNP came to power in 2007.

Local authorities are planning a consolidation of the delivery of education and other services. Stirling and Clackmannanshire local authorities are proposing to jointly deliver education and social care. The 60 primary and 10 secondary schools within these constituencies will be managed jointly, and savings will be made by a reduction in posts and the joint procurement of services. Many other local authorities are considering similar plans.

A third of the schools in the rural constituency of Argyll and Bute, West Scotland, are to be closed, as the council looks to cut £15 million from its budget by 2014. Due to the geographical nature of the constituency, which covers numerous islands, the 515 children to be affected will face journeys of more than 45 minutes to alternative locations.

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