



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

News Release

Issued: 24 June 2014

Influx of students from rest of UK to Scotland unlikely, study says

An independent Scotland within the EU could no longer charge English, Welsh and Northern Irish students tuition fees, according to experts questioned in a survey.

However, concern about an influx of students from England choosing free education in Scotland to avoid paying fees at home is unfounded, the study suggests.

Researchers investigating attitudes to tuition fee policies in Scotland and England say that the impact on cross-border student flows is likely to be relatively small in the short term.

They interviewed 50 higher education policy makers and other stakeholders in Scotland and the rest of the UK and 148 young people aged 14 to 19 in schools in Scotland and the north of England. Experts also analysed data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

The report by the University of Edinburgh states that the higher education sector in Scotland faced a challenge to maintain both its size and commitment to free education.

Population trends suggest that there will be a decline in the number of young people in Scotland until 2023. To sustain the size of Scotland's universities, it will be necessary to attract growing numbers of young people from elsewhere.

Policy makers in England and Scotland were sceptical about the sustainability of the Westminster government's approach to student funding. They suggested that the very high levels of student debt and uncertainty over repayment rates would eventually derail the system.

Scottish policy makers questioned the sustainability of free higher education in the light of ongoing austerity in the public sector. They believed the issue was 'dormant' rather than settled.

Young people in the north of England believed that the current policy of Scottish universities charging fees to students from the rest of the UK is unfair since, as UK citizens, they should enjoy equivalent social entitlements.

In Scotland, young people supported the principle of free tuition. However, other issues such as the economy were more important in influencing their decision on how to vote in the referendum.

Ranked among the top universities in the world

In both Scotland and England, there was a consensus among stakeholders that higher education policy would be subject to further seismic shifts, which might harm the long-term well-being of universities.

The briefing paper was produced by *Higher Education in Scotland, the Devolution Settlement and the Referendum on Independence*, which is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council's Future of the UK and Scotland project.

An event reporting on the findings of the paper will be held at 2pm today, Tuesday 24 June, 2014 at Godfrey Thomson Hall, Thomson's Land, Moray House School of Education.

Professor Sheila Riddell, of the University of Edinburgh's Moray House School of Education, said: "It is quite clear that whatever the outcome of the referendum in September, policy on higher education tuition fees in Scotland and England will continue to be very high on the political agenda.

"Whilst UK higher education is very successful, all countries face major challenges in relation to the funding and stability of the sector. The HE systems in the four countries of the UK are tightly inter-meshed, and decisions made in one country have major knock-on consequences for the others."

For further information please contact:

Edd McCracken, Press and PR Office, tel 0131 651 4400; email edd.mccracken@ed.ac.uk

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