

Scottish Higher Education – Addressing the Gaps

The SNP's proposed Scottish Life Sciences Institute is at once welcome and indicative of how Scottish HEIs address perceived gaps in the sector. Scottish universities have always been good at pooling resources for teaching and research. The co-operation between neighbours Glasgow and Strathclyde, even to the extent of joint departments, is outstanding. Joint research in fields like chemistry and others cuts across the entire range of Scottish universities, from the Ancients to the Post-92 institutions. A Scottish Life Sciences Institute, with input from all HEIs active in the field, would allow individual institutions to contribute to their varying potentials while collectively providing the maximum benefit to students and researchers and allow the HEIs to build individually and collectively on their strengths as research centres. Together, they can achieve more than they can individually.

This same approach could and should be applied to gaps elsewhere in Scottish higher and postgraduate education. This is particularly

true of our collective knowledge (or lack of it) of certain parts of the world.

Thousands of second- and even third-generation Scots have an Asian language as their mother tongue. This is knowledge and knowledge is power. But this knowledge will not last forever without a solid academic base to support and nurture it. It is only because of the strong culture and family ties of South Asia that immigrant communities have kept their languages to the third generation but this cannot be relied upon for the future.

We have yet to discover the Scottish university where one can graduate in Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi or any other South Asian language. A Scottish Institute for South Asian Studies, with input from departments of history, politics, economics, geography, sociology and theology & religious studies, would provide a focal point for research into this part of the world which is growing economically (and thereby in power) and with which we have

strong family ties, through immigration and older Commonwealth associations. It would also provide an impetus for the study of the languages of the area, an important asset in dealing with countries with which we have such strong social and, potentially, economic links.

The same can be said of other parts of the world. We are told, anecdotally, that, of the newer EU members, the one with which Scotland has the greatest volume of trade is Estonia. Everything we have said of the study of South Asia in Scotland is also true of the Baltic states (and, as regards languages at least, largely of the Nordic states also). And then, of course, there's China. A concerted effort to facilitate study and research into these world regions would not only provide the individual with the opportunity to acquire academic training in chosen fields of interest but also facilitate Scotland's social, cultural, economic and political ties with these regions, for potentially considerable mutual benefit.

What's the General Secretary been doing?

Much of the work of the General Secretary is invisible to students and student officers, meeting universities and organisations and attending meetings to ensure students views are represented. Recently the NPC's work has been very visible in a number of areas.

The NPC has continued to gain press coverage with an article in the Sunday Telegraph on Postgraduate Funding and articles in the THES about postgraduate issues. The NPC has also been a witness for a supervisor in an industrial tribunal. This was a very demanding position but one where the NPC's breadth of experience and advice could be harnessed to defend the rights of a supervisor accused of improper relations with their students. The case threatens to challenge the close working relationship between supervisor and student and I was extremely pleased to be a witness to highlight existing and good practice in regard to supervision. The tribunal is ongoing but I hope to report a good outcome soon.

The NPC has also been working with the National Union of Students and Association of Managers in Student Unions (AMSU) to highlight the way the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) can work with the student movement and integrate and embed themes of quality and student learning in institutions and student bodies. Wes Streeting, VP Education and myself alongside other NUS staff attended the QAA Board Meeting in February to present these ideas and to discuss the QAA taking on a greater student led engagement. The presentation was received well and the QAA will be expanding its engagement, firstly with the creation of a Development Officer position for liaison with students.

The final very publicly visible activity of the NPC was hosting the Eurodoc (a federation of associations of doctoral candidates and young researchers) Annual Conference in London in March. This attracted delegates from over 25 European countries and presentations from UK bodies and European organisations concerned with the development of the student experience. What was particularly exciting for students was a view shared by Mr Cornelis-Mario Vis from the European Commission DG Research on the European Charter and Code being more legally regarded and not voluntary. This is exciting for students as the Charter and Code offers guides to institutions on what they should be doing to support research.

Armineh Soorenian on her Research into Disability and International Students' Experiences

This article aims to briefly outline the general background to my research into disabled international students' different experiences in British Higher Education (HE). An assumption of the "normal" appears to underpin the construction and the provision of education within the traditional pedagogical system. Underlying selective structures, based on ability and class membership (Ball et al:2002), often created and perpetuated inequalities (Archer:2003). Entering any educational system has been traditionally based on the selection of the intellectually able/gifted or "elite", and the exclusion of those who were deemed to be educationally incompetent (Tomlinson:1982). Therefore, conventional systems were geared towards serving the needs of those students perceived to be "normal", with the assumption that such educational institutions as universities were not the place for disabled students (Riddell et al:2005).

However, data provided by the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) and Skill: the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities shows that there has been a considerable increase in the number of disabled domestic students entering British HE between academic years 2001/02 and 2004/05. This increase can be partly attributed to the development of policies and provision for disabled students brought about by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 1995, and its addition of Part 4 – the 'Special Educational Needs and Disability Act' (SENDA) in 2001.

The inclusive widening participation policies adopted by the Labour government to accommodate diversity within the student population, including non-traditional and under-represented groups, may also have contributed to the increased numbers of disabled domestic students at university (Brown & Simpson:2004;

Tinklin et al:2002). It can also be argued that access to funds such as Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), Access Funds, Discretionary Awards and Social Security Benefits to help with impairment-related costs has made the transition of disabled domestic students from Further Education (FE) to mainstream HE somewhat smoother (Hurst:1999).

These examples suggest a positive move towards more inclusive educational practices, signifying progressive steps toward adopting the social interpretation of disability in education. The social model is a concerted shift away from an emphasis on an individual's impairment/s as the cause of disability, to the way in which physical, cultural and social environments exclude or disadvantage disabled people (Barnes:2001). The social model advocates the removal of barriers in society. In an educational context, this view recognises various social, environmental and teaching barriers as obstructing disabled students' progress rather than seeing individual students' impairments as obstacles (Riddell et al:2005). Therefore, this model aims to accommodate all students rather than hold individual disabled students responsible for their failure to access education.

Despite this recent progress in disabled students' access to education, ample research has criticised HE institutions and related organisations for the limited access, support and funding options they offer to disabled students (Cottrell:1996; Parker:1999). Disabled domestic students who enter HE, despite its selective nature and inflexible culture (Burke:2005), often face various discriminatory social and environmental practices (Fuller et al:2004). This may be particularly the case for disabled international students, who may contend with possible additional cultural and linguistic barriers in British HE. Yet, very little is

being written about this group.

However, the figures provided by HESA indicate that the percentage in increase of disabled international students entering British HE (38.24%) exceeds both disabled domestic students (37.02% increase) and non-disabled international students (31.38% increase). Despite the considerable increase in disabled international students accessing HE, there is no designated organisation responsible for their affairs. This means that there are no official services for representation, advice, policymaking and campaigning purposes. In the literature studied thus far, disabled international students' needs are often referred to Skill and the Council for International Education (UKCOSA); neither of which appear to be specifically concerned with provision for this group.

Consequently, disabled international students may feel invisible, and that their difficulties are either 'irrelevant' or 'added on as an optional extra' (Vernon 1999:391). They may feel discriminated against and rejected from such disabled domestic students' groups as Students with Disabilities (SWD) within the National Union of Students (NUS) and also from non-disabled international students' groups such as the Council of International students (CIS). This possible marginalisation could contradict Skill's statement, which claims that SENDA covers part-time, overseas, evening class, postgraduate, undergraduate, distance learning disabled students (DEMOS:2003).

Hence by employing a particular methodology and established data collection strategies, the study will identify and examine any difficulties and concerns that this group faces in academic and social life whilst in HE. Additionally, ways that these barriers can be removed will be suggested.

Holyrood 2007 – Where is Higher Education?

With the Holyrood election looming, we wrote backing February to all parties represented at Holyrood and all independent members still to declare whether they would be seeking re-election, to address them on the following points:-

Funding

Many current academics are approaching retirement while graduate debt deters the brightest from postgraduate education. What changes in current funding policy do you propose to encourage more Scottish-based graduates to continue to postgraduate and postdoctoral education, to maintain and expand the current level of higher education provision in Scotland and allow more Scots graduates to achieve their full academic potential, to the benefit of our culture, society and economy?

Admission and residence of non-EU students/researchers

Under the Academic Technology Approval Scheme, the Foreign Office will carry out background checks on all non-EU citizens applying to study or research in areas such as physics, metallurgy, microbiology, biophysics and all branches of engineering, supposedly to vet potential terrorists. Fears have been expressed that delays will cause bona fide applicants to turn elsewhere instead.

Scottish-based, UK-wide operating charities after independence

This final point is primarily for those who endorse Scottish Independence.

The NPC is a charity, SC033368, registered in Scotland, with a UK-wide remit. We note that the Scottish electorate reserves the right to opt for independence; therefore, we ask what procedure you propose to introduce in such event a propos the activities of charities like ourselves which would find ourselves based outwith the greater part of our current area of operation.

We received precisely five replies, only two of which outlined policy. They were:-

Labour

- No change from status quo
- Fully supportive of ATAS
- No comment (N/A)

Scottish Socialist Party

- Funding through grants, thus avoiding the accumulation of debts

- ATAS “an unnecessary over-reaction”
- “Foresee no real difficulties”

Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party

- Letter forwarded to the Deputy First Minister on our behalf! (He replied!!)

Dr Jean Turner

- Communication acknowledged

Margo MacDonald

- Communication acknowledged



From the rest, zilch, nada, zero. We hope their silence is not indicative of how seriously they really take postgraduate education and the future of the higher education sector.

All thanks to Labour and the SSP for their detailed replies (Colin Fox replied personally); Nicol Stephen's official (and obligatory) response to correspondence forwarded from the Tories announced a planned review of support for taught postgraduate courses but gave no indication that the Executive see a looming recruitment crisis and are planning ahead. At least we know that James Douglas-Hamilton opened the letter, even if both he and Stephen failed to read it properly to see what it was asking of the Scots Tories - their own policy, not that of the current administration.

On our third point, we should have perhaps underlined that NPC is essentially a representative body; an independent Scotland would put us in the reverse position to that which Gordon Brown is trying to stare down.

Of the other parties, only the following have anything of note to say in their manifestoes:-

Scottish National Party

- To review situation of part-time and postgraduate students
- Support efforts to attract more international students
- Pledge an additional £10m for cutting edge research
- Propose a Scottish Life Sciences Institute

Scottish Greens

- Cut cost of international student visas, increased support for international students
- Allow earlier application date for Fresh Talent
- Widen access, increase retention and support part-time and informal study

Solidarity

- Higher education to be “free at the point of need”
- Commission appointed to establish best methods of funding free education and financing quality research, examining the following options:-
- Increase in Corporation tax
- Scottish Universities Research and Patent fund, to put profits back into the system
- General power of competence for universities to borrow and invest for research, development and teaching
- Redirecting tax breaks for business back into university education
- General taxation
- Use of Scottish parliamentary under spend

The Greens' pledge to cut visa charges is most welcome but it is Solidarity which, uniquely, sets out plans to address seriously how to raise extra funds for higher education and research. It is disappointing that no other party has put as much thought into this issue which so effects those whose interests we represent. The SNP's Life Sciences Institute proposal is commendable and at least they come up with a concrete figure for extra research funds - even though it works out at less than £1m per university and is about as much as St Andrews is to spend on its new student union! It is disappointing that the call of Universities Scotland to fund an extra 4,000 postgraduate posts by 2010 for £21m p.a. have largely fallen on deaf ears.

The rest have nothing to say on postgraduate education and research in their manifestoes.

As a charity, the NPC cannot be politically active so we do not endorse any particular party; however, in pursuit of our declared aim of advancing, in the public interest, postgraduate education in the United Kingdom, we can draw attention to policies which we believe would further our aim. Accordingly, we leave it to the electorate to weigh one thing against another for now and, once the dust of the election has settled, we will be addressing the new Executive. Hopefully, it will prove big enough to take a leaf out of any other party's book.

Council Tax – Who Pays?

Much has been made in the election campaign about Council Tax—who should pay it, should it be replaced, how much should be charged. One sector which has been conspicuously overlooked is that of the writing-up postgraduate.

Those who find themselves in this particular limbo face a serious financial dilemma: as they are no longer under tuition, they no longer qualify as students. Consequently, they are officially liable to pay Council Tax and, unless their HEI recognize them as students before their local council, they can find themselves facing financial meltdown just at the time when they can least afford to take the time to earn money.

After three years of research, possibly becoming the world's expert on one's chosen topic, the PhD researcher can find their writing-up hampered by liability for extra debt which may require sacrificing valuable time to paid employment in order to make debts meet. Thesis quality may suffer; some candidates have even been known to withdraw due to lack of time for writing up, wasting not only several years of their lives but depriving society at large of the fruits of their labour.

This problem has come to the fore recently. When Paisley asked fellow-affiliates what arrangements they had for writers-up liable to pay Council Tax, the responses indicated a patchy situation. Several HEIs have local arrangements whereby writers-up are recognised as students and thereby not liable for Council Tax, but this does not apply to those who reside outside the Council area. What about one who lives in the next county? It is unrealistic to expect every individual HEI to make arrangements with every relevant local authority. That is why we welcome the NPC's briefing paper on Council Tax, following a meeting with the NUS and Westminster Minister for Higher Education, Bill Rammel MP.

The issue of Council Tax exemption for writers-up is one which requires legislation to enshrine their status as students. It is far too complicated an issue to be left to the hit-and-miss of local negotiations. Exemption will of course add to the pressure to enforce a fixed period for writing up (NPC has argued in the past for six months with funding) but individual circumstances should always be taken into account.

We hope recent discussions have a ripple effect throughout the United Kingdom and will be campaigning towards that end.

npc the national postgraduate committee

The National Postgraduate Committee is an independent charity that represents and promotes the needs of UK postgraduates on a national and international stage voicing your opinions to the funding councils, review boards, academic bodies, the media, the government and other relevant bodies. Comprising postgraduate representatives from over 40 institutions and managed by an elected full time general secretary and a team of elected part time officers the NPC forms a national support network issuing UK universities and colleges with up to date guidelines and advice on current affairs. These range from recommended provisions of facilities to the instigation of learning contracts. Through regular OGMs and mailing lists the NPC fulfils the role of a national postgraduate forum providing formal responses to government and non-government papers and proposals. The needs of students in Scottish and Welsh institutions are also catered for by the NPC's Scottish and Welsh Subcommittees.

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