

Letter from Scotland

Scotland's universities and colleges are beginning to creak in the winds of government austerity.

There is a 6 per cent cut this year to university funding and a 4.7 per cent cut to college funding. And this at a time when record numbers of young people are trying to enrol.

The stresses at Scotland's 19 universities and 24 further education colleges have exposed a number of underlying issues we have not yet resolved. How much public resource should be put into higher education? Does it benefit the rich at the expense of the poor? Should the emphasis shift from the academic to the practical ? Should Scottish universities be for Scottish students only? Are enough students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds? How much do we personally value science and the arts and "a good education"?



A good education..but who pays?

Such airy debates reveal themselves in very practical disputes. College lecturers have been holding day-strikes and over-time bans for months over pay and conditions. They feel they are being undervalued by society. Another series of rolling strikes is due to begin next week. Junior university staff have been on the picket line too, complaining of pay cuts and short-term contracts and lack of research funds.

The universities have been increasingly relying on foreign students' fees to fill the funding gap – charging between £11,000 and £32,000 a year, depending on the course. Scottish students pay no tuition fees under the SNP government's "free university education" policy...in contrast to student fees in England which average £9,000 year.

The cost of this policy is £900m a year and it comes with a cap on the number of Scottish students a university can accept. It's led to a large number of foreign students at the

older Scottish universities – 40 per cent at St Andrews, 30 percent at Edinburgh, 22 per cent at Aberdeen and 20 per cent at Glasgow. The principal of Edinburgh University Sir Peter Mathieson has said he could take more Scottish students if the government would properly fund them or if the “free university education” policy was abandoned.

But the universities are also worried about a recent decline in the number of foreign students coming to Scotland – and the loss of their fees – due to tighter immigration controls being introduced by the Westminster government. They have issued a manifesto for the up-coming election urging the next government to introduce a regional immigration policy for Scotland, including a work visa for foreign students who want to remain here for a period after their studies. They point to the need for new talent and younger people for a population which is declining and ageing.

I’m now in my 70s. I was one of the lucky few who went to university when tuition was free, government grants were generous, most of us lived at home and went to our local university, which was geared to providing the region’s teachers, doctors, accountants, lawyers, farmers, foresters, and generally well-rounded citizens.

Now universities seem to be money-driven institutions. Grants have gone, to be replaced with loans. The average Scottish student leaves university with £15,000 of debt – in England it is £45,000. And they emerge into a world where careers are hard to enter, starting wages are low, homes are expensive and the future is short-term and uncertain.

It seems to me it’s time to rebalance our economy, stop pampering the older, well-off generation with triple-locked pensions, expensive NHS treatments, free bus passes and devote more resources to the young – their education, their welfare and their future.

In all this ranting, I almost forgot to tell you what happened in Scotland this week. It rained, and Dens Park was flooded which meant the Dundee v Rangers game had to be postponed for a second time. The Glen Rosa ferry was launched on the Clyde, only six years late and only four times over budget. And the government sneaked out a ban on wood-burning stoves in all new houses, forgetting that in parts of the Highlands they are a vital back-up when storms bring down the electricity lines.

Perhaps if we had a better education system we would be better able to cope with our weekly disappointments.