

New issues for academic staff morale in Scotland

An independent think piece for ECC

This is a volatile time in Scottish higher education, even though Universities often seem to enjoy protected political status by the Scottish Government. The SNP will lead the Scottish Government for the foreseeable future, which means a restated commitment to zero tuition fees for Scotland-resident University students and an emphasis on a more restricted number of more vocational college places. Proposed governance reforms, which relate to University decision-making autonomy, may grab some [headlines](http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/oct/21/is-scotlands-university-shake-up-meddling-or-modernising?CMP=new_1194&CMP) http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/oct/21/is-scotlands-university-shake-up-meddling-or-modernising?CMP=new_1194&CMP , but the economic situation – and its effect on morale - will likely grab the more regular attention of academic staff.

When we compare the direction of travel in Universities in Scotland, and the rest of the UK, our focus is generally on the effect on students: students in Scotland leave University with lower debt because they do not pay £27000 in fees. However, there are two issues with the potential to affect the day to day business of academic staff.

First, the Scottish Government is pursuing a broad *inequalities* agenda. It knows that its current system reinforces educational inequalities in [two main ways](http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/centres-groups/creid/projects/he-in-scotland/publications-and-research-resources/he-in-scotland-briefings) <http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/centres-groups/creid/projects/he-in-scotland/publications-and-research-resources/he-in-scotland-briefings>. Put simply, if you are middle class, your children are more likely to go to University and they are more likely to leave with minimal debt. It also accepts, broadly, the idea associated with the '[Heckman curve](http://heckmanequation.org/content/resource/heckman-curve)' <http://heckmanequation.org/content/resource/heckman-curve> that it is better to invest public money in under-5 education than in University students. It has a great incentive to maintain high political commitment to Universities with regard to tuition fees, but to seek ways to shift – albeit slowly, and quietly - some funding to pre-school education.

Second, one way to limit University funding is to set a low rate of per-student funding to Universities. Or, when Universities receive 'tight' funding settlements overall, their internal accounting systems accentuate a low per-student fee calculation. The effect on academic staff morale and behaviour can be profound. The fees generated by Scotland-resident undergraduate students are often taken for granted by Universities, to be supplemented by higher priority 'rest of UK' and international student income, and postgraduate income. Consequently, departments/ degrees are not credited for maintaining large numbers of taken-for-granted students. Instead, they seek new ways to manage large intakes with relatively few staff, putting pressure on departments to:

1. rely on relatively low paid temporary teaching staff
2. increase their class sizes, or find other ways to teach large numbers of students rather than focusing on one-to-one or small group learning.

This combination of decisions may not always overlap with the Scottish Government's agenda on a more sustainable 'living wage', but one can often detect the sense that a new group of relatively low-paid staff, with no long term employment guarantees, is developing (far beyond the idea that PhD students accept low wages before they move on to a better position).

A tendency to increase class sizes also has an impact on permanent staff, who often feel under pressure and underappreciated when they manage large cohorts of undergraduate students, and may envy their colleagues if they are lauded for other activities, such as publishing research and receiving grant income. Younger or newer staff may take this imbalance of status for granted, but more established staff will see the changes and wonder if the profession gives them the same satisfaction, and incentives to excel, that they remember from their early careers.

The overall result represents a challenge for human resources: HR staff may generate the perception of diminishing academic staff morale, without always knowing why it has changed.

Written for ECC by a Scottish HR commentator

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