

Petitioner submission of 19 April 2023

PE2009/B: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

“Tuition at Scotland’s Universities is free for the Scottish” is a Scottish boast. What comes as a shock to many is that this is not universal, that the likelihood of obtaining a place may depend more on your demographic than your ability, that because of chronic underfunding and poor government policy many capable young Scots are shut out, the only route left to obtain a degree at institutions outside Scotland where they will have to pay.

Freedom of Information requests show that since 2006 there has been an 84% increase in the number of Scottish-domiciled applicants refused entry to a Scottish university.

When Michael Marra MSP asked a question about this at FMQs in January 2023, the First Minister’s response framed this issue as a matter of “deprived” young people versus their “privileged” counterparts. My question is, why does it have to be either/or? Our government tells us that attending university is a desirable outcome, so why isn’t it accessible to all?

The Scottish Government (SG) has complete control of funding for Scottish students. It concedes that its controls on higher education spending produce a cap on the number of places available to Scottish students. The remaining spaces are offered to fee-paying students from the rest of the UK and overseas. Why are these remaining spaces not open to Scottish students? Is clinging to an empty boast about free tuition more important than opening up opportunities for young Scots?

The annual tuition fee per student is also troubling:

Scottish	Rest of UK	Overseas
£1820	£9250	£23,100
		Science £30,400
		Medicine £53,460

The Scottish amount set by the Scottish Government has not increased for more than 10 years notwithstanding the emergence of challenging

economic conditions. There is a significant disparity between Scottish revenue and the other categories. From a business perspective, it is not difficult to identify who the most attractive students are to universities, and it is an unpalatable realisation that underfunding has led to a situation where Scottish students have become financially unattractive to their own universities. The question arises, has chronic underfunding made Scottish universities financially dependent on fee paying students from elsewhere?

The Scottish Government's submission refers to Widening Access. I welcome Widening Access initiatives across the education spectrum. The petition and this submission are not intended to advocate for the scaling back of efforts to get more students from our most deprived communities into university. What I would highlight is that as Scottish Widening Access policy has developed, SG has failed to have regard to how their targets interact with their cap and underfunding.

Consequently, all places available to Scottish students on some courses go to students who fall within Widening Access criteria. The response to an FOI request to Edinburgh University shows that in the 2022 Scottish intake to Scot's Law, out of a pool of 387 Widening Access flagged candidates 168 were successful. 0 places went to the 555 remaining unflagged Scottish applicants. A swathe of hardworking young people shut out altogether because they were not classified as deprived. There are 9 more courses at Edinburgh alone where this was the case. With Widening Access targets set to increase in 2026 and 2030, this is not a trend likely to reverse. My questions here are, are we really content with the rejection of these capable young Scots? Are we happy that put off, many might leave, never to return to contribute to Scottish life and our economy?

Moreover, not being classed as deprived covers a lot of ground and does not necessarily mean you are wealthy. Being rejected from university in Scotland might end the university dream for some because they do not have the economic or social support to travel elsewhere.

The assumption is that I started this petition because my children missed out, that is not correct. Others might label me "middle class" or "privileged", but that was not how it started out for me. I was the first in my family to attend university where I studied law. That education and experience were transformational for me. I am stunned that this might force my kids out of Scotland, but what actually motivated me to stick my head above the parapet here was that the same opportunity was now

blocked for others, and this was largely being hidden from view by the advertisement of “free tuition”.

A society that genuinely values and promotes diversity, fairness and inclusion would seek to maximise opportunities for ALL its young people.

The Scottish Government state in their submission, “We believe firmly that every child, no matter their background, should have an equal chance of accessing university”. I agree, and I invite them to live up to this statement by conducting a review of their funding arrangements for Scottish universities and ridding us of the cap on places.