



Scottish Funding Council  
Promoting further and higher education

# Total Equality For Students

**TEFS**

One  
casualty is  
one too  
many

## **RESPONSE: A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education**

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Total Equality For Students  
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**T**otal  
**E**quality  
**F**or  
**S**tudents

**RESPONSE to: A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education: Priorities for a fairer system**

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**T**otal **E**quality **F**or **S**tudents is about promoting equality of opportunity and equal access to time and resources for all students regardless of disability, gender, ethnicity or a low income background. This should be the overarching aim of all education that unlocks the full potential in our citizens. The plea is that, in striving for a better post-18 education, no student is left behind or struggling because of lack of time and resources.

The overriding principle is simple: *“one casualty is one too many”*

**Overview.**

This short response aims to address the following guiding principles under two main headings: 1. Fairness and equality of provision for all students and 2. Research linked to teaching.

A system-wide view of further and higher education  
Lifelong learning  
Autonomy and governance  
Economic recovery.  
International reputation.

Planning through uncertainty.

It also addresses the stated 'Government policy assumptions' that:  
'Full-time Scottish students will continue to have free tuition at SFC-funded colleges'  
and  
Universities and  
'Widening access and participation in further and higher education for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and promoting equality and inclusion'

### **A perspective based upon experience as a teacher and researcher in Higher Education.**

Total Equality For Students was founded by Professor Mike Larkin in October 2017 as an initiative to promote the case for equal access to resources and equality of opportunities for students in Higher Education.

This perspective comes from extensive experience in supporting students whilst lecturing at a leading Russell Group University, Queen's University Belfast, over 36 years. Also from leading a substantial research group and coordinating academics and projects across the EU in the [award-winning](#) Queen's University Environmental Science and Technology (QUESTOR) Centre.

#### **1. Fairness and equality of provision for all students**

The overriding aim should be to put access and provision on an equal footing for all students. This means that the time available for study is equal for all students. This, in turn, means that there is a minimum financial provision based upon circumstances.

**Who finances the post-16 education system?** Brings to the fore the role of students and this should be a paramount consideration.

This has become a very confused scenario across the UK; but it can be broken down into two basic demands from the post-18 education system.

- 1) That the institution is funded to support the costs of teaching and
- 2) That the student is adequately resourced for their living expenses.

In general, there are a variety of funding routes feeding the two demands above. In simple terms, these are the taxpayer (including borrowing and write-down of debts), the students themselves (including their personal debt) and their families supporting students. The increasing extent to which charities, including food banks, support students is largely ignored.

Maintenance grants for students that have no, or little family support is crucial to ensuring fairness. In England, the abolition of maintenance grants in 1998, their reintroduction in 2004 and abolition again in 2016, altered the balance of funding from the taxpayer onto the students then back to the taxpayer and then back again to

students. This chaotic approach fuelled a sense of caution in many families and sowed the seeds of confusion and lack of confidence in government. This caused many families to miscalculate what was needed and many advisory organisations changed their advice several times in this period. Scotland must therefore heed this lesson and improve the level of maintenance available for students to feel confident in attending any institution.

**The extent to which part-time employment** of students is financing Higher Education has largely been side-lined. Yet it is of great significance and feeds a sense of unfairness. Whilst over 60% of students do not appear to be burdened by time lost in term-time employment, others are diverted from studies to such an extent that they are immediately disadvantaged. Any funding system must address this imbalance across the system. There is ample evidence that attainment in university is adversely affected by diverting time away from studies.

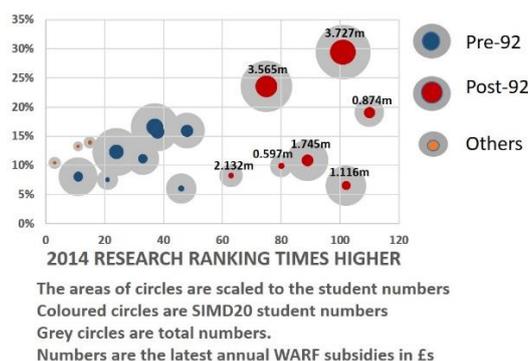
This dilemma for students should inform a new strategy of enhancing part-time studies and continuing education. Especially in preparing people to use and develop new technologies that must be installed.

TEFS has highlighted this anomaly that brings about an unfair 'two-tier' system in several articles. Scotland is not unique in this respect and the pattern is similar across the UK.

- [University student part-time working is a dangerous blind spot. June 16, 2020](#)
- [Students working in term-time: Overall pattern across the UK July 19, 2019](#)
- [The vast majority - one million - of students have no employment when in full-time studies. July 27, 2018](#)
- [Students working in term-time: Challenging the 'disadvantage' shibboleth August 09, 2019](#)
- [Students working in term-time: Commuter students and their working patterns August 23, 2019](#)
- [The cost of equalising the HE experience November 29, 2019](#)

**Widening access to the 'elite' universities** should be enhanced. More should be done to incentivise them to take many more students from poorer backgrounds. The distribution of access fund WARF subsidy (see Figure 1) should be looked at again in the light of this aim.

Figure 1: Scottish domiciled full-time first degree entrants at Scottish universities from 20% most deprived (SIMD20) areas as % and numbers (2017-18) vs 2014 REF research ranking



**The COVID-19 crisis** has uncovered the precarious situation of many students as part-time jobs disappeared. This will continue into the coming academic year, and it is painfully evident that nearly all universities are ill prepared for the demand on their hardship funds. They do not have any data on the numbers of hours their students spend in other employment during the term as outlined in my article in the Guardian 16<sup>th</sup> June 2020 [‘University students who work part-time need support – or they will drop out’](#)

The Scottish government must address this across the whole system and not leave it to individual institutions, and a variety of hardship funds, to react to the demand. We must avoid the scenario whereby students decide not to attend Higher or Further Education because of uncertain support, or worse, find they must drop out. All institutions must gather the information on who is reliant on part-time employment for funds so as to properly plan for the need. This must involve government intervention.

**The problem with fees**, will have to be addressed soon. The idea of a contribution toward fees arose from the Dearing report and came into being in 1997 under a UK Labour Government. This was intended to spread out the financial burden and raised funds from the more advantaged families from which most students come. Unfortunately, this has been extended to full fees and no number cap by successive Conservative governments. Scotland however resisted this in such a manner that its position on no fees became a ‘hostage to fortune’. Scotland must grasp the nettle soon and consider reintroducing a means tested contribution to fees to raise funds for less advantaged students and to increase the cap on numbers. But it must not travel down the route in England and demand full fees through loan repayments only. A compromise is needed.

## **2. Research linked to economic development and teaching.**

There are significant challenges for the economy, the environment and society approaching fast. A collaborative approach across institutions would be a sensible way forward. There are so many technical challenges that direct competition between institutions in a false ‘market’ is now a major risk factor. Collaboration should instead be encouraged across both teaching and research.

TEFS has argued that the REF has diverted the mission of the research intensive universities away from teaching to that of a REF driven research agenda ( See TEFS 29<sup>th</sup> June 2018 [‘Research and Teaching: The price of researchers not teaching’](#)). The idea of linking both has receded into the mists. We must rediscover the mission of teaching informed by research. Lectures, workshops, and secondments between different universities and colleges would open the system to more interdisciplinary collaborations that have clear goals. The COVID-19 crisis has shown how easy this is through online communications. There is no reason why staff and students should not attend online lectures from leading researchers on the latest technologies as part of their curriculum.

**Abolition of REF** must be considered in this review. It has caused considerable damage, if only by diverting significant energy into preparing for each round of REF.

This has impacted staff confidence, and stress levels and altered the behaviour of both management and researchers. The other anomaly is a narrow focus on the mission being only to produce research papers as a source of cash in the intervening years.

It is too late to stop the REF2021, but there is a chance to reconsider how funding is distributed after the results are in. Then develop, and phase in, a new system based upon adding a planning round not entirely based upon previous successes. This would be a bold statement that would change the whole approach to the essential need for research.

**Cross subsidy of research** from teaching income has emerged as a major risk during the COVID-19 crisis. A collapse in student numbers has starved universities of research income. This is so severe that the UK government has stepped in to prop up the system. The premise has been that less of international fee income has impacted research. However, there is also cross subsidy from all fee income. Some is reasonable if students accept that they should be taught by active researchers in aware of the leading edge in their field. The REF imperative has meant that research active staff, mostly paid for by student fees, are diverted away from teaching. Other staff are asked to take on a very high teaching 'burden' or load' and there has been a catastrophic rise in short-term contracts for those teaching. It is imperative that the funding structures address how teaching can be made more stable as a career.

**International collaborations** will be enhanced by providing a wider framework for university, college and industry cross-disciplinary collaborations. This approach has proved to be successful in the past. The QUESTOR Centre ran from 1989 to my retirement at the end of 2016. It reformed as the new [The Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy \(CASE\)](#). I was the lead scientist at QUESTOR and led many multimillion (£, \$ and €) interdisciplinary collaborations with other universities and institutions that spanned the EU and USA along with many multinational companies contributing (see [slide presentation](#)). The model used was the same as the USA's National Science Foundation '[Industry–University Cooperative Research Centers' \(IUCRCs\)](#) that have been a success for many years. A similar system could be used to enhance the effectiveness of deploying 'blue skies' research in technology development projects involving other universities, industry and colleges. In turn these could inform teaching and skills needed.

One caveat is that the huge success of Scotland's universities in accessing UK research funding must not be undermined. It is the bedrock of the other developments needed. The government must avoid trying to direct research and instead work with the various interests in its strategy to foster innovation by researchers. The '[Haldane Principle](#)', with scientists deciding what is best through planning and peer review, must be adhered to in encouraging 'high risk' projects with the potential for major gains that could be game changers. This must be balanced with technology demonstration and development projects through collaborative centres. The IPR and other rights should be shared through clear agreements at the outset.

## Overview.

Before designing any funding system, it must start with consideration of the **individual student** and work from that point.

Three principles in seeking a fair and equal education of high quality might be:

1. Every university provides defined, rigorous, and testing degree programmes that offer access to the full expertise of the most experienced staff. This would to some extent reverse the expansion of short-term contract staff that have supported the expansion in student numbers in favour expanding of long-term experienced staff.
2. Every student has the same access to time and resources to carry out their studies regardless of background. In making policy, the emphasis should be on ensuring that every student has the same time available for their studies. This would be the basis for assessing value for the money invested by the student, their families and the taxpayer.
3. The data that supports the policies should relate to the individual student. That data should be gathered by a body that is free from commercial influences and entirely independent of the institutions it is observing.

To achieve these goals, it will be necessary to create a means-tested funding system. This would be composed of two elements that ensure an equitable balance between contributions from the taxpayer and from the students and families.

- 1) Universities would receive from fees and government a flat rate of funding per student related to the amount of resource they devote to teaching in each area. This may vary according to the cost of the subject and the projected need for students in areas of shortage. Fees and loans would be means tested with the most disadvantaged students not paying fees. In effect these would be partly subsidised by the taxpayer.
- 2) All students would be expected to devote the same amount of time to their degree studies. Each individual student would generate a study plan that demonstrated this was possible and the expectation would be that more rigorous standards were imposed by the institutions in return. A mixture of grants that were means tested and loans would be available to ensure that this was possible in all cases.

This would move closer to the ideals of Robbins 1963 who noted that:

*“Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.”*