
SCONUL conference: panel discussion on the impact of student fees

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Among the highlights of the SCONUL conference in June was this very lively panel session chaired by Ann Rossiter, SCONUL Executive Director. The participants were: Gordon McKenzie, Deputy Director for Higher Education (HE) Shape and Structure, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills; Professor Phil Gummett, Chief Executive HEFCW; Julie Lydon, Vice-Chancellor, University of Glamorgan; Professor Elizabeth Treasure, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Cardiff University; Colin Offler, Student Union President, UWE Bristol; and Sarah Ingram, Cardiff University Students' Union.



Panel

Ann began by outlining the differences between the different parts of the UK from 2012: in Scotland there will be no student fees for Scottish students; in England fees rise up to a ceiling of £9000 per annum; there are lower fees in Northern Ireland; the Welsh Government will fund Welsh students. The consequences of the changes to fees could include a change to a more consumerist culture, uncertainty over student numbers and perhaps a change in the types of students entering higher education. Each of the panellists started by giving their perspective on the changes. Julie Lydon emphasised the need for equality of access

for students from all backgrounds, not just those who could afford to pay most. Elizabeth Treasure voiced concerns about how to fund high-cost subjects and how to identify the students most 'in need' of additional support, who are not necessarily those from the least well-off backgrounds. Gordon McKenzie stated the UK Government's over-riding objective to reduce the UK budget deficit, to improve teaching and the overall student experience in universities, to increase student choice and to ensure that higher education is sustainable. Phil Gummatt pointed to the interesting divergences in the different parts of the UK – a key challenge for all institutions will be to demonstrate benefits and value for money to students. Colin Offler was very clear that students will demand more than they get now and will expect high quality facilities. He acknowledged that libraries have come a long way from the 'dusty books and shushing librarians' era with the introduction of flexible study spaces, e-resources and other facilities, and emphasised that students can be a key partner for libraries in providing the feedback necessary for change implementation. Sarah Ingram, giving the Welsh perspective, recognised that although some students will pay more, others may in fact be better off in the new system, and that a constructive dialogue with university managers will help to bring about enhancements.

BRAIN DRAINS AND STUDENT TOURISM?

The first question to the panel was about the possibility of large numbers of students moving away from Wales to study in England. Sarah Ingram felt that there was a lot to gain from staying local and that at first there was unlikely to be much change. Phil Gummatt could see no rationale for unbalancing the current equilibrium, particularly as there was so much uncertainty at present. Elizabeth Treasure thought that we may see changes in the behaviour of students from other European Union countries, who will be paying lower fees, and that it is up to each university to set out its stall and make very clear what students can expect not just from teaching, but also from factors such as living conditions and employability. There is also the possibility that more students will choose to go to the Irish Republic where there are no annual fees, just the €3000 registration fee. At one point in the debate the divergence in fee régimes throughout the UK was described as 'barking' and although the panellists had different views on the impact of devolution, all felt that ensuring students understand what it means to study anywhere in the UK is a very important message to get across clearly.

FEEDBACK, COLLABORATION AND SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

All libraries make efforts to consult students and respond to feedback, but many service directors feel that we need to be moving towards a more collaborative relationship and the panel was asked how this might evolve. Developing a mutual understanding of resource allocation and service development will require a different approach – students might have very strong views on short-term improvements while library managers may take a longer-term approach when hard choices between, for example, more textbooks or longer opening hours have to be made. Sarah Ingram felt that students need to be well informed to be fully involved and that the student union officers are likely to make the best partners if they are on the right committees and boards. Phil Gummatt agreed that students should be full members of university governing bodies and stated that student observers were now being invited onto bodies such as HEFCE as a first stage towards greater involvement. Elizabeth Treasure argued that the bulk of student fee income is replacement, not additional, funding, and that all university staff will need to work smarter to deliver an enhanced student experience for the same amount of money. Julie Lydon paid tribute to library services on their good track record on student engagement and said that at the University of Glamorgan public meetings will be held with students on university issues.

SATISFACTION VS EMPLOYABILITY AND THE IMPACT OF PRIVATE PROVIDERS

Several questions were grouped together towards the end of the panel session, identifying a range of issues that will be the subject of much debate over the next few years. There is a tension between giving students exactly what they demand and ensuring they are actually challenged on their courses so that they develop the skills they need. One delegate remarked that in her experience it is parents who are often becoming more demanding and asking very pointed questions, and this is a group we may need to reach in communications about quality and value for money. The professions and other private providers may come into the market and offer cheaper qualifications. Gordon McKenzie felt that some provision of for-profit education in the sector is not necessarily a bad thing, but that it will be essential to get the right quality framework in place. Julie Lydon argued that 'quality' relates to the totality of what universities do and that private providers will not offer the holistic experience and community

engagement that has been part of university life. Phil Gummatt agreed that communicating to parents is important, as is helping students to understand how their degree will contribute to their ability to get a job and what they will actually get for the money they pay in fees. Sarah Ingram emphasised the importance of providing very simple messages, for example, how much per week/month students will pay back when they start earning. She stressed that both governments and universities should give students very clear information that is truthful about the uncertainties.

This panel session took place at a time when the implications of the introduction of student fees in the UK had not yet been discussed in depth in the media. The range of views, all from valid stakeholders in the debate, helped to provide a much fuller picture of the evolving higher education landscape. The opportunity to hear from the students in particular was much appreciated by all the delegates in this very informative and entertaining session.