

THE CONVERSATION

 Subscribe

Election experts

Coverage of the 2015 election

A tale of two nations: how tuition fees in England and Scotland differ over debt and inequality

March 4, 2015 3.54pm GMT

Paul Cairney

Professor of Politics and Public Policy, University of Stirling

The Conversation's partners

The Conversation UK receives funding from Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

View the full list



'You say potahto and I'll say potayto ...' Jane Barlow/PA

The issues underpinning the debates about university tuition fees differ markedly in Scotland and England. As recently as 2010, the idea of putting fees up to £9,000 in England was highly controversial. Yet Labour's move to reduce fees to £6,000 per year has been received remarkably badly under the circumstances.

Student funding was the issue that helped the Liberal Democrats spectacularly break their pre-election promise of no fees, while the Conservatives wanted to go much further than the

Browne review's recommendation of £6,000.

If Labour had been elected in 2010 and put fees up to £6,000, it would have been heavily criticised. Now it is being criticised for reducing them to that level.

Changing centre of gravity

What does this experience show us? That the centre of gravity can shift very quickly, and parties have to address a tendency towards treating the status quo as the normal position.

Parties are now asked routinely where the money would come from to fund a policy. This has become an effective limit on ambitions even though the question is rather artificial, since governments don't plan overall funding in this rational way.

The UK coalition has a good story to tell about £9,000 fees: universities get more money, they use some of that money to give grants or services to students from low-income families, and such families may end up not paying the fees anyway.

This is hard for Labour to challenge, since its policy can be portrayed as spending money when times are tight to subsidise students that will have higher wages after graduation. Of course, the figures on the right level of fees are rather arbitrary (why not raise fees to £12,000 and redistribute even more?) but the status quo as it stands now is not self-evidently wrong.



Students in England can't get enough of tuition fees. Antony Bennison, CC BY-SA

What the Scots are up to

In Scotland we can see the other extreme. Tuition fees remain free for Scottish and EU students, though not for those from elsewhere in the UK, and there appear to be very few votes to increase them.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has made it a line in the sand to keep zero fees (see Alex Salmond's "the rocks will met in the sun" remark, delivered during one of the televised debates, and now immortalised on a stone carving).

And Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy has now confirmed that he would maintain free tuition in Scotland despite the London Labour policy. The party is now claiming it abolished fees in 2000 (in fact it reduced fees to £2,000 over four years, renamed the repayment the "graduate endowment" and removed the upfront element of payment – which makes little difference when students take out a loan, payable after graduation, anyway).

Scotland's free tuition fees tell a different but equally effective story: the universities get a lot of money direct from government, and student debt is much lower in Scotland than England (though admittedly it is rising sharply, particularly for students from poorer families).

We now have the odd position in which policy for England increases overall debt but can

reduce inequality, while policy for Scotland reduces debt but increases inequality within Scotland. Both systems are remarkably different, and underpinned by very different stories, but they both represent the default position in two areas of the same country during a UK general election.



No tuition fees from the Scottish Nationalists. Heriot-Watt University



- Universities
- Higher education
- Labour
- Ed Miliband
- Conservative
- Jim Murphy
- Lib Dem
- tuition fees
- PREVIOUS POST**

March 4, 2015 Forget the economy – Cameron is the ace in the pack for the Conservatives Mark Garnett

NEXT POST

March 6, 2015 In the social media campaign war no one is safe, and nobody wins Steven Buckley

Tweet48

Share5

Get newsletter