

Ross Martin: Time for Radical Thinking on Education

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OUR higher and further education institutions must work harder to serve Scotland's needs and help youngsters fulfil their potential

Higher education institutions don't exist as islands. Our universities can no longer function in ivory tower isolation, they must play a full and active part in the society which they seek to serve. In Scotland, this means that they must serve the whole community, which currently they are not doing. Trailing well behind their English and Welsh counterparts, Scotland's universities attract just over a quarter of their intake from the poorest sections of society, compared with a third south of the Border. They must do better.

Another indicator that all is not well is the drop-out rate from Scottish universities, running at nearly one in ten in some places. Again, the retention rate is lower than that of universities elsewhere in the UK, and signals the need for change. Whether these two indicators are directly linked is a discussion for another time, but given the scale of the economic challenge which Scotland faces in an increasingly competitive world, it is essential that we maximise the life chances for every single one of us.

Participation of under-represented groups in higher education (from NS-SEC classes 4, 5, 6 & 7)¹

	2010/11	2009/10	2007/08 ²	2006/07	2005/06
England	30.7	30.1	29.4	29.8	29.1
Scotland	27.2	25.8	26.3	25.9	27.3
Wales	31	30.2	30.4	30.1	29.0
N. Ireland	39.4	39.1	40.6	41.7	41.0
UK	30.6	30	29.5	29.8	29.3

I grew up in the Wester Hailes area on the fringes – economically and socially as well as geographically – of Edinburgh, where the community's own slogan was "Full of Potential". We were. The individual promise in each and every one of us was recognised by our excellent school leadership. Sadly now a shadow of its former self, at least in terms of pupil numbers, the ground-breaking local high school, the Wester Hailes Education Centre (WHEC), specialised in identifying the most positive path which each pupil could take as their first steps towards adult life.

Whether it was becoming a world renowned jazz musician, a leading expert in IT, an excellent tradesman, a teacher, an engineer, a newspaper editor, a hairdresser or even a politician, the fantastic staff at the WHEC identified the early signs and then pointed each of us in the right direction. For some that meant moving on to college to learn or develop a skill, others were better suited to full-time employment and for a few of us, given the limited places available in universities in the 1980s, the decision was which wonderful campus looked most attractive.

Nowadays, given the access and drop-out statistics of Scottish universities can it be said that they are doing all they can to best serve their single, common community of interest – meaning Scotland?

¹ "HESA Performance Indicators in Higher Education in the UK", PIs: Widening participation of under-represented groups (tables T1, T2). [Read more](#)

² Note: Data for 2008/09 is age adjusted and not comparable hence the omission.

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As access to Scotland's universities has risen dramatically, at least in terms of numbers, how have they fared in serving the national interest? What contribution are they making to the development of Scotland's best, most precious resource: its people?

Whether you believe that our universities are performing well or not, one thing is certain, with no additional evidence required: They can do better, especially on the point of widening access to the whole community.

The Scottish Government's forthcoming post-16 education bill may offer an opportunity for a strong change in participation rates from those with poorer backgrounds, backed up by fiscal penalties, akin to the carrot-and-stick finance mechanism used to secure the council tax freeze.

But what more can be done to ensure educational excellence for all? What lessons can be learned from other parts of the education system – or the rest of the public services? And are there wider implications for Scottish society to getting it right with our universities?

First, there are too many individual institutions. The sector is surely ripe for rationalisation. Just as the number of Scotland's schools has come under pressure, with a rebalancing into larger units, so is further education experiencing significant change, with mergers and amalgamations sweeping the sector. Scotland's universities should similarly restructure, leading to single, or at least fewer, institutions in each of our city regions, cutting down on bureaucracy and pushing more resources into lecture theatres and labs.

The shared service agenda which is currently exercising the best minds of Scottish local government and the NHS offers another opportunity for higher and further education institutional collaboration. At Forth Valley College, for example, which is struggling to secure the financing for a rebuild of its main site in Falkirk, what thought has been given to a formal link-up with Stirling University, bringing the buildings on site or not, but creating a larger, more efficient institution with an even stronger sense of community?

A move to larger, more powerful institutions would enable a vast improvement in the education environment, especially if local authorities were willing to work alongside universities in creating inspiring, attractive campuses. In Glasgow, for example, imagine the entire area between Queen Street Station and the cathedral, bounded by the Merchant City along the south and the M8 to the north, being pedestrianised and redesigned as a city centre campus, linking Strathclyde and Caledonian universities and the colleges (which themselves are merging).

The other obvious restructuring which is required is the relationship between universities and Scotland's schools. Six years of school study followed by four years of core degree time could easily, and more effectively be reduced. If the four-year degree is reduced to three, alongside better integration of content and assessment between the two tiers, then up to 25 per cent of cost could be saved. This cash could then be redirected into ensuring the continuation of free tuition, a political priority of the Scottish Government.

Equally, if we are really to start a realistic assessment of demand for public services, rather than simply turning the supply on even further, then a mature debate about the randomly-chosen 50 per cent target for entrants must be begun. A more targeted approach would surely focus more on a wider range of positive destinations for school leavers, getting a better, more sustainable balance between further and higher education, employment and training.

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For some school leavers, none of these traditional pathways excite, but the chance to show, develop and demonstrate an entrepreneurial flair is exactly what is required. The ESpark incubator set up in Glasgow by Willie Haughey and Tom Hunter is a model the rest of the country should consider. Scotland's small business birth and growth rate is also bottom of the league and initiatives like this are much needed.

For those who don't find any of these routes attractive, or are just not ready to decide, how about a national civilian service, offering opportunities across the whole range of public service provision? In caring for our elderly, developing a new dynamism in healthcare or helping to redesign public services our nation's young people could play an energetic and effective role.

As Scotland debates its constitutional destiny we must leave no stone unturned in fighting the scourge of youth unemployment. Whether it is opening access to our universities, increasing the opportunities for training, or providing the support for our young people to take those all-important first steps on a career path, we all have a job to do.

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