

## UNIVERSITY FUNDING IN SCOTLAND: TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 1993

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### SYNOPSIS

This article charts the modernisation of higher education funding during the Thatcher years, and examines trends in funding since 1995-6. It demonstrates that support based on unit costs have been reduced in this period. The 1996 Research Assessment Exercise (which allocates funding to universities by assessing research performance) resulted in an increasing concentration of funding in high rated departments, with the traditional universities attracting more of the research-based funding and less resources awarded to the central institutions.

The authors also examine the implications for higher education funding of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). They show that, by maintaining the Conservatives' spending plans, further real reductions have occurred in 1998-9. Thereafter, the figures show a modest growth in spending but less than implied in Government press statements about the impact of the CSR. The authors conclude that the continuing emphasis on 'efficiency-based' savings will lead to increased teaching loads and a further squeeze in the higher education sector.

### INTRODUCTION: THE REFORMED SYSTEM

Since 1 April 1993, Scotland has had a distinctive set of administrative arrangements for higher education funding. This change arose from a combination of political and administrative logic. The Major Government had "taken stock" of Scotland's constitutional position in the United Kingdom, and as part of the policy response, extended the range of functions under the control of the Secretary of State for Scotland, and this administrative devolution included the universities (Scottish Office 1993). The Secretary of State already had responsibility for the central institutions, and the changes also made sense in the context of the Government's proposals to abolish the binary system of universities and polytechnics in England. In Scotland, the central institutions had:

remained more clearly subordinated to the universities, perhaps because of their Scottish historical significance as symbols of Scotland's separate identity. (Scott 1997).

This observation may or may not be accurate. Whilst Scotland had retained a distinctive degree system, and philosophy of education (Davie 1961) the universities themselves had lobbied successfully to remain part of the UK system during the devolution debate of the 1970s.

The result was that the funding for the 17 former Scottish higher education institutions and the 8 Scottish universities was to be determined by a Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. Academic research into funding developments under the new council is sparse. Scott's (1994) impressionistic assessment is that SHEFC's approach is similar to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in that:

In practice, its methodology for distributing research funds in 1993-94 was broadly similar to that used by HEFCE, although the spread of the weights attached to each grade was less than in Scotland than England. (Scott 1994, p81).

This is not surprising and consistent with developments in local government and the NHS, where formula funding has similar principles but differences in detail. The Scottish Secretary is a member of the British Cabinet following a uniform policy (Midwinter et al 1991). Scott's assessment is that SHEFC runs universities in a way they have probably never have run before, with a resultant:

emergence of a new control regime which encouraged - indeed required - institutions to compete with each other, incidentally degrading professional collegiality and enhancing managerial power in the process but within a tightly managed market that demands more cost-effective operation... (Scott 1994, p 91-92).

Scott's assessment lacks an empirical basis. However, the thrust of his interpretation has a degree of political realism. As Beloff observed in 1967, 'it is not possible to depend on the public purse - least of all a democracy - and expect autonomy' (Beloff 1990). In this paper we map out the key funding developments since 1993. We would not expect major differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK. Scottish public spending at the margins is delivered through a population based formula, and the political priorities of the Government apply throughout the UK (Heald and Geaghan 1994). However, the Secretary of State has power to allocate *resources within* his control according to distinctive Scottish needs, and to exercise administrative autonomy in their management. To gain a further understanding of the issues, we must first place the new system into its recent political and economic context.

#### CONTEXT: DEVELOPMENTS IN THE THATCHER YEARS

The modernisation of higher education funding has its origins in the Thatcher administration. Prior to that, *incremental funding* was the norm, whereby the resource allocation process was:

based on adjustments to levels of funding which carried between institutions and which were accepted as an inherent part of the range of variations desirable in a mature, flexible and non-standardised HE system. (Clayton 1988, p 138)

The Thatcher agenda for rolling back the state included reducing public spending, promoting efficiency through competition, and more market-based approaches within the public sector. For higher education, it would lead to cuts in funding, new mechanisms for resource allocation, and a greater emphasis on accountability and performance assessment, through what Christopher Hood has termed the 'new public management' (Hood 1991). This 'new' approach contained much that was not new, but what it did was give strategic management and performance assessment a formal status which such techniques had lacked before. In HEIs, this meant:

the development of strategic plans to underpin academic discussions and structures which bring *planning, resource allocation* and *accountability* (our emphasis) into one corporate process. (Sizer 1988, p 183)

The early stages of the strategy laid a strong emphasis on funding reductions, with 1981 regarded as a 'watershed' year. Firstly, funding support for overseas students was removed, reducing university income by 10% over a three year period. Secondly, recurrent grant for home students fell by 8.5% over the same period. The combined impact of these - because overseas numbers fell but were not eliminated - and thus brought new money into the system through higher fees - was a fall of income of 13-15%. (Moore 1987) The second round of cutbacks followed in 1986, with targets of 1.5% per annum, and was used as an opportunity to consolidate reforms in funding mechanisms. The establishment of a uniform cost system for teaching, and a performance-related research resource, were the key mechanisms.

The uniform approach to teaching costs was achieved on a cost-centre basis, whilst quality in research was based on the Research Assessment results (Hamlin 1994). The Government made less progress in funding reductions and shifting to private finance. From 1987-90, the Thatcher Government's reforms of the public services were at their most radical, whereby market rhetoric and logic underpinned reforms. Sizer (1988) regards the White Paper of 1987 as signalling 'that ministers are no longer thinking in terms of grants and student numbers, but in terms of buying services' (p 183) Ministers had made it clear that they were seeking further changes, including:

- selectivity in the distribution of resources;
- rationalisation of small departments;
- better financial management; and
- improved standards of teaching (Cave and Weale 1994, p 5)

In practice, the reforms fell short of the demands of a market, and what emerged was a system of competition for student members based on planned figures and agreeing funding 'on behalf of final consumers' (Cave, Hannay and Henkel 1995). The Government pursued an expansion of student numbers, without an increase in costs (Sizer 1988), and the CVCP have estimated that between 1989-90 and 1994-5, public funding for students fell by 25% (although presentationally universities have often claimed this as a growth in productivity!) thus squeezing the unit of resource (Dolton, Greenway and Vignoles 1997). Despite the market rhetoric, what is emerging is a regulatory system (Hamlin 1994; Cave et al 1995) with greater emphasis on 'incentives' in research funding.

It is clear that in the areas of both teaching and research, the recent reforms have moved in the direction of providing more high powered incentive structures. In the case of teaching, the high powered incentive structure is operating in an environment in which quality is *de facto* non-contributable, while the structure operating in research significantly utilises quality integral funding mechanisms. (Hamlin 1994, p 50)

Pritchard (1994) concludes that the recent attempts to reform funding methodologies result in an increase of government power which is at variance with the doctrine of markets and consumer choice.

By 1992, however, public funding was about to face another period of fiscal squeeze. The expansion of student numbers would come to this end, and further efficiency gains would be sought by constraints on public sector pay. The replacement of Mrs Thatcher with Mr Major brought a change of style, but the new public management had become a conventional wisdom. The shift from incremental to formula funding within a system of strategic plans and performance audit was now embedded in administrative practice. This phenomenon has been conceptualised elsewhere as the growth of the regulatory state, described by Dowe (1997) as an "audit explosion" which has had a significant role in the production of organisational legitimacy. Hood, James, Scott and Travis (1998) have estimated the cost of such developments as approaching £1 billion per annum. The developments in regulating resource management in higher education are part of a wider process of change.

#### TRENDS IN FUNDING SINCE 1995-6

When the new system came into operation student numbers were entering a period of consolidation. Student numbers grew from 107,500 FTEs in 1993-4 to 118,700 in 1996-7, and this has since stabilised at 18,700. The Funding Council provides

grants for both recurrent and capital costs, whilst institutions also receive funds in lieu of individual fees from the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and other award-making bodies.

To allow appraisal of the resource implications of funding trends, we have converted the cash figures to a 1998-9 price basis. Funding had been growing in anticipation of growth in student numbers until 1995-6, so we use that as a benchmark year. It also marked the intensification of the financial squeeze on universities from the Government's stance on public sector pay, whereby any increases were expected to be funded from productivity gains. The assumptions underpinning the financial provisions were therefore spelt out in SHEFC Circular Letter 10/95. This argued that the recurrent resources available for allocation to institutions was only about 1% higher in cash terms than the previous year since Government inflation assumptions of 3.25% meant that 'resources are clearly very tight'. Whilst 1995-6 saw a growth of 2.5% in student places, thereafter these would be consolidated. The council concluded:

It is clear from the Government's expenditure plans for 1996-7 and 1997-8 that the resources available for higher education will continue to be very tight in these years. Indeed, the Government's planned figures do not keep pace with projected inflation and the very modest growth in student numbers expected, so institutions will need to continue to be innovative as well as exercising rigorous cost controls if they are to reduce unit costs and achieve *the significant efficiency gains* that are likely to be expected.(para 8)

In 1997-8, however, pending the report of the Dearing Committee, the Conservative Government decided to maintain funding in real terms for that year, *increasing* the cash provision by 2%. Its plans for 1998-9, however, were left unchanged, and inferred a 5.5% cut from the new 1997-8 figure. In effect, the decisions kicked higher education funding into touch until after the General Election. The new Labour Government had made education a political priority, and on its return, *increased* the provision of the funding by £17 millions over the Conservative plans. Whilst this *maintained* the level of each provision inherited from the Conservatives, Labour had promised to get more resources into higher education, but in reality it delivered further real cuts in funding. This was acknowledged in the Funding Council's Circular Letter of 8/98, as:

...the total resources available to the Scottish higher education sector through Council Grant and student tuition fees which will be the same in cash terms in 1998-9 as in 1997-8. This implies a real terms reduction of 2.75%, using the Government's inflation assumption.(Para 3)

This erosion of public funding left the Funding Council with the difficult task of implementing these reductions. Over the four year period, two dominant strategies emerge. In terms of teaching, the strategy was one of *damage limitation* over the unit of resource, whilst in research, the strategy was to *maintain* the resource income of high rated departments.

The *unit of resource* was under considerable pressure because of the Government's policy of meeting pay increases through productivity gains. The Council therefore sought to protect the unit of resource by cutting other elements of the budget, including transitional arrangements, estates spending, or safety netting. In the SHEFC letter of 1995/6, for example:

The Council has taken the view that the appropriate efficiency gain for teaching in the light of available resources should be 3%. However, because of the reductions in some of the transitional recurrent grants which were

introduced in 1993-4, the overall efficiency gain can be achieved by applying a 2.5% real reduction in the unit of resource. (Para 15)

*Table 1: Increases in Teaching Unit of Resource since 1995-6*

	<b>U of R</b>	<b>Inflation Forecast</b> %	<b>Efficiency Gain</b> %
94-5	+1.6	+4.00	+2.4
95-6	+0.75	+3.25	+2.5
96-7	+0.25	+2.75	+2.5
97-8	+2.00	+2.00	-
98-9	+0.75	+3.50	+2.75

Source: SHEFC Circular

As we can see in Table 1, the financial settlements built in continuing efficiency gains each year, apart from 1997-8. These were well in excess of the target of 1% recommended by Dearing for future years. However, changes of this kind were common throughout OECD countries. An OECD report of 1990 observed that:

There have been changes in the proportions of central and local government finance, new mechanisms of central government resource allocation, increased contributions from ministries other than the Ministry of Education, and increased private sector contributions including in some countries student fees. In nearly all OECD countries there is discussion of new and alternative funding mechanisms. The heavy dependence of most universities and colleges on public funds makes them vulnerable to changes in political priorities. Their high unit costs compared with other branches of education make them attractive targets for governments wishing to limit public expenditure. (OECD 1990, p 9).

We turn now to consider research funding. Whilst there has been an increased emphasis on quality and performance, it is in research funding that resource allocation is most directly linked to performance, through weightings applied reflecting results in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Funding Councils have been developing transparent resource allocation mechanisms, for institutional funding (Cave and Weale 1994, p 5). Heald and Geaghan (1994) define formula funding:

as a mechanism for the transfer of resources from government to public quasi-public/private bodies which uses an explicit - though not necessarily published - distribution methodology. (p 268).

They regard such formulae as a key instruments of public management reform (Hood 1991; Henkel 1991) reflecting the desire since the 1980s to reward 'performance' and stimulate change. Formulae mechanisms are means of providing 'strategic steer' (Sizer 1992, p 29) to the system.

Disaggregating grants at national level may make sense, but it is difficult to apply in a university budget, with recurrent costs and the pervasiveness of incremental change. In practice, whilst accountants can attribute portions of workload and finance to research, it is impossible to separate teaching from research costs in an accurate way, as the use of resources is salary based. The Funding Council has recognised this by continuing to stress that institutions have the flexibility to allocate resources broadly:

The Council is conscious that a centrally determined method for allocating resources to institutions cannot reflect fully the individual local circumstances and needs in institutions. In making their selective internal allocations, institutional arrangements are therefore encouraged to exercise strategic judgements which reflect local positions.(Circular letter 10/95).

The same circular stressed the objective of maintaining the unit of research funding for high-rated departments. In practice, however, such resources would flow to institutions, not directly to departments, and such budgets are often 'ring-fenced', making it difficult for funds to flow to the highest value case as efficiency requires. (Hamlin 1994, p.313). The Council made clear its wish to both protect high rated research, and to stimulate progress in low rated departments by earmarking 5% of research funds to support low rated departments. It signalled the prospect of consolidating research funding in high rated departments from the RAE of 1996. RAE based research income reflects the *volume* of active researchers submitted to the assessment, and their *research rating*, whereby an institution's share is the product of a transformed indicator of research quality and a weighted indicator of research volume (see Table 2). Prior to the 1992 RAE, the central institutions received no such funding, and their eligibility for it would have some redistributive effect.

Table 2: Weightings for Research Quality

Rating	1992	1996
1	0	0
2	1.0	0
3b	1.4	1.4
3a	1.4	1.55
4	1.96	2.40
5	2.74	3.72

Source: SHEFC Circulars

The Scottish weightings reflected the decision not to make additional weightings for 5\* departments, but reward these with one-off payments. The incentive approach led to better research performance in 1996, with fewer staff rated lowly, and a large increase in high rated staff (see Table 3). This considerably reduced the resources available for low-rated departments.

Table 3: Numbers of Staff in Research Rating Categories

Rating	1992	1996	% Change
0	4	0	-100
1	467	185	-60
2	799	316	-60
3	2080	1986	-5
4	1304	2082	+60
5	910	1233	+35
All	5564	5802	+4

Source: SHEFC

As shown in Table 4, during this period, the research share of total grants remained broadly stable at around 19-20%, although of course these figures reflect real reductions in funding for research.

*Table 4: Research Grants 1995-6 to 1998-99*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Research £m</b>	<b>Total £m</b>	<b>Share %</b>
1995-6	102	491	20.8
1996-97	102	531	19.2
1997-98	106	551	19.2
1998-99	118	574	20.6

Although research grants grew by 4% in cash terms overall, the 19 institutions in receipt of grants faced dramatic shifts, from -100%, to +247%. Eleven of the nineteen institutions gained resources from the changes, and eight lost.

*Table 5: Changes in RAE-based Research Grants\**

	<b>1996-97 (£k)</b>	<b>1997-98 (£k)</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Aberdeen	6,996	£7,818	+11.7
Abertay	307	283	-7.8
Dundee	6,856	9,201	+34.2
Edinburgh Coll.	785	463	-41.1
Edinburgh	29,170	30,940	+6.0
Caledonian	704	866	+23.0
Glasgow School of Art	88	306	+247.0
Glasgow	21,465	19,637	-8.5
Heriot Watt	4,987	4,597	-7.8
Moray House	471	477	+1.2
Napier	269	747	+177
Northern College	178	-	-100
Paisley	189	220	+16.4
Queen Margaret College	445	406	-8.8
Robert Gordons	779	861	+10.5
St Andrews	5488	6629	+20.8
Scottish College of Textiles	157	94	-40.1
Stirling	3956	4114	+4.0
Strathclyde	13025	12585	-3.4
Totals	96,315	100,244	+4.0

Source: SHEFC Circulars

\*Some of the changes reflect the end of the transitional arrangements between the old and new funding systems.

These figures reflect the improved results at 4 and 5 ratings and the increased relativities of high ratings. There are still major differences in research funding as a proportion of grant income, and clearly institutions are not being assessed on a level playing field. This is consistent with the drive to reap economies of scale in research which began in the 1980s. The figures on research grants as a percentage of total grants in 1998-99 vary from 0% to 37.9%. But the older universities have traditionally secured a much higher level of research grant funding

The notion of performance rewards however, is problematic with declining resources, as Heald and Geaughan (1994) observed:

...the transparency of the allocation system, in conjunction with sharp resource shifts between universities, will inevitably lead to far more attention within universities to the patterns of resource use, 'profitable' cost centres will complain about having to cross-subsidise 'unprofitable' cost centres. The difficulty for many will be that uncommitted resources are not available to transfer to high performing cost centres because of the net position at institutional level and because of the inflexibility of their contracts with employees in underperforming cost centres. (p 274)

The Council has recognised this problem, and is now requiring institutions to explain how they allocate and manage research resources selectively. This will nevertheless remain a source of tension if efficiency gains continue to be required, and as the scope for further revisions to the weightings diminishes.

#### PROSPECTS AND ISSUES

In the 1997 General Election Labour committed itself to maintaining the Conservative spending plans for two years, and to undertaking a Comprehensive Spending Review and creating a 'new strategic approach to public spending'. This promised new money for science and the universities, but it would be money for modernisation (HM Treasury 1998). In addition, higher education funding has become a responsibility of the new Scottish parliament. In the Government's News Release, the CSR was described as the government's expenditure programme for the first Scottish Parliament in 300 years and claimed that it was the result of a zero-based examination of all the main areas of expenditure. (News Release 15.7.98) Over the period of the Comprehensive Spending Review an additional £230 millions will be provided to higher education, and 'the addition for 1999-2000 will be £53 million', which will mean that 'the substantial funding deficit inherited from the previous administration will be more than made good. Universities would only be required to deliver 1% in annual efficiency gains, as recommended by the Dearing Committee'.

This rosy scenario requires some qualification. As we have pointed out elsewhere, the figures are misleading as they present the cumulative total of new funding promised by double and treble counting some years in a 'cumulative' total. (Midwinter and McVicar 1998) In the remainder of this section, we ask whether the plans are attainable and consistent. That is, can institutions continue to deliver efficiency gains and maintain quality and improve research performance? Given the growing emphasis on 'evidence-based' decision-making in government, and on quantification, whereby in Whitehall:

The budgetary process is now more favourable to those with discrete and measurable activities, particularly if costs can be matched with outputs. In a climate of consistent expenditure review, therefore, resources are more likely to be protected by an ability to prove (i.e. in the language of FMI) that a reduction in costs will be followed by a measurable loss of service. (Gray, Jenkins, Flynn and Rutherford 1991, p 52)

Table 6 displays the additions to the expenditure plans over the CSR period and reveals the slow improvement planned in university funding. In real terms, the figures for the next year imply a further cut in funding in real terms. This highlights the importance of realism in the efficiency assumptions. Only in 2001 do we see the prospect of modest growth, and only then, the sums provided will be greater in real terms than 1995-6 (£734m compared with £718m) But for 1999-2000 the overall increase in real money is £14 millions, not £53 millions, over 1998-9.

*Table 6: CSR : Higher Education*

	<b>98/99</b>	<b>99/00</b>	<b>00/01</b>	<b>01/02</b>
Current Grant	530	530	530	530
Tuition Fees	138	99	99	99
CSR 'extra'	-	53	72	105
<b>Total</b>	<b>668</b>	<b>682</b>	<b>701</b>	<b>734</b>
		+2.0%	+2.8%	+4.7%

In schools the Government are arguing for smaller classes as 'improvement'. Rising staff-student ratios (SSRs) have been the norm in higher education in the 1990s, with larger classes, tutorial groups and more extensive marking for staff as a result. On these expenditure plans it seems that a further erosion of SSRs is likely.

This brings us to the second issue, the increasing constraints on further rewarding high RAE rated departments from a shrinking funding base. After the 1992 RAE, 40% of staff were located in 4 and 5 rated departments, and this rose to 57% after the 1996 RAE. Whereas after the 1992 RAE some 95.4% of the RAE-based grant went to the eight traditional universities, by 1996, after the growth of high rated staff, it remained at 95.2% - reflecting some change between institutions but minor changes overall. This suggests there is a clear need for empirical research in Scotland to examine the relationship between resources, efficiency and quality. A recent study concluded that:

from a research perspective, this analysis does not provide support for a policy of continued weighting of research funding in the top universities. Product specific economies of scale show declining returns to scale for the top and middle group and constant returns for the middle group. (Glass et al 1996, p 63)

Increasing performance is dependent on the capacity to deliver rewards. This preliminary assessment questions the scope for this in the context of continuing efficiency gains. Research has revealed a statistical relationship between the size of cost centres and RAE results (Johnnes and Taylor 1992), rather than staff workload, and empirical analysis of the 1996 RAE impact is not yet available. The Government intends to maintain the planned numbers of students and to continue to improve the quality and relevance of teaching and research in Scottish higher education institutions. Present policy is based on assumptions that this can be achieved within a context of continuing efficiency gains, and has a target of improving the average rating of Scottish HEIs in the next RAE.

The scope for this has been reduced by past success and the subsequent concentration of resources, the increasing pressures on teaching workloads resulting from cash releasing efficiency gains and the limited scope for budgetary redistribution to ensure resources follow performance within institutions. The evidential basis

of performance remains slight, and there is a clear need for a rigorous research programme which addresses the relationship between resources and teaching and research performance, to convert the optimism of the Comprehensive Spending Review into real progress in universities.

Finally, the whole issue of student finance emerged as a key issue in the Scottish parliamentary elections, and a committee has been established to undertake an independent review. Student fees were defended politically as a means of attracting *additional* resources for higher education. As we have seen, they have simply become an alternative source of financing a tightly constrained programme. Unless the underfunding issue is addressed, problems will remain.

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