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Young people's views of tuition fees and their attitudes towards debt

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Key points

Scotland and England have taken very differing approaches towards the funding of higher education tuition. In Scotland, tuition is free for all Scottish and EU undergraduate courses, while students from the rest of the UK are charged up to £9,000 per year. In England, all UK and EU students are charged up to £9,000 a year for tuition.

Attitudes towards tuition fees

- Among Scottish pupils, free tuition in Scotland was almost universally praised – and often identified by Scottish pupils as a factor which encourages wider HE participation
- Fees of up to £9,000 in England were criticised by Scottish pupils but often poorly understood (some viewed it as an upfront fee)
- There was much greater support for tuition fees amongst pupils from the north of England, though some Scottish pupils also supported the introduction of a fee. In both countries, all pupils stated that £9,000 per year is too much, and many suggested that if fees are to be charged they should be set at between £3,000 and £4,000 a year.
- Perception among some that those who pay for their HE will value it more.

Knowledge and understanding of HE funding systems

- Respondents had a poor understanding of HE funding and student support
- Understanding was worse in Scotland where pupils tended to confuse the Scottish and English systems, particularly with regard to the different repayment thresholds
- Few pupils had detailed knowledge of the loans and grants available to them
- In both countries, pupils noted a need for improved information on student finance in schools/ colleges

Attitudes towards debt

- Scottish interviewees appeared more debt averse than those in the north of England – maintenance loans were frequently referred to as a ‘last resort’ by many Scots
- In contrast, debt was more normalised among respondents from the north of England
- In Scotland, and to a lesser extent in the north of England, those from non-traditional backgrounds were significantly more debt averse
- Where pupils understood how student loans are repaid they tended to be more comfortable with the idea of debt, as did those who had had close contact with those who had direct experience of loans
- Pupils planned to use a range of strategies to reduce student debt – living at home whilst studying, planning to work during term time, and relying on parents and grandparents for support
- Pupils in both countries were reluctant to estimate how much debt they might accrue at university, which raises the question as to whether young people go to university with a realistic idea of how they might manage financially.

Introduction

This working paper presents findings from research undertaken with young people as part of the ESRC project 'Higher Education in Scotland, the devolution settlement and the referendum on independence'. Interviews were conducted with 148 young people aged 14 to 19. The interviews were designed to cover some of the key areas of interest in higher education policy, such as the various funding systems within the UK, and to explore how further devolution or independence might impact on these areas. Questions explored young people's views on the benefits of going to university; their attitudes towards the funding of, and access to, higher education; and their attitudes towards Scottish independence more widely. This working paper looks particularly at young people's views of tuition fees and their attitudes towards debt. It begins with a background section which discusses current policy and some relevant research, before providing a brief discussion of the methods used. The findings are split into three main sections; 1) pupils' views on tuition fees; 2) their views on what may happen to fees in the future; and 3) their attitudes towards debt. The paper explores the views of Scottish pupils before discussing the views of those in the north of England. The paper ends with a discussion of some of the key similarities and contrasts between the views of those in Scotland and the north of England.

Background and context

This section provides a brief discussion of some of the literature around young people's views on tuition fees and student debt. This is a well-researched area; therefore it is not the intention of this paper to provide a comprehensive survey of the literature, but rather to point to some of the most relevant policy and research documents.

Tuition fees policy

Student fees policy in Scotland and England has become increasingly divergent in recent years. Tuition fees were first introduced across the UK in 1998. When, two years later, the Scottish Government made the decision to replace tuition fees with a graduate endowment scheme, this marked the beginning of alternative approaches towards the funding of higher education tuition between the two administrations. The other two devolved jurisdictions in the UK (Wales and Northern Ireland) also differ from England but to a lesser extent (see [working paper 6](#)).

The graduate endowment required students to contribute £2,000 to a graduate endowment fund when their income reached £10,000 – this could either be added to student loans or be paid off over time through the tax system. Some students, for example, those with disabilities or from poorer backgrounds, were exempt. The system was scrapped in 2007, and since then Scottish domiciled students studying in Scotland have received free undergraduate tuition. Tuition is also free for students from the European Union. On a per annum basis, the Scottish Government makes contributions directly to Scottish HEIs: £1,285 for HNC and HND and any other sub-degree courses; £1,820 for first degree or PGDE courses; £2,895 for medicine degrees that commenced in 2011-2012 or earlier; and £1,205 for courses at private colleges. Those coming to Scotland to study from the rest of the UK are charged up to £9,000 by individual universities which is paid via student loans; Scottish residents are similarly charged up to £9,000 to study in the rest of the UK. Finally, international students' fees are also set by individual universities and there is no cap on these fees.

Meanwhile, in the rest of the UK, tuition fees remained and have risen significantly in recent years. In 2003, the UK Government introduced legislation enabling universities to charge up to £3,000 per annum (later increased with inflation to £3,375). The tuition fees were paid via an income

contingent loan and repayment only began once the student's income reached £15,000. The funding of tuition in Scotland and England diverged further in 2010 with the publication of the Browne review which proposed lifting the cap in tuition fees charged by English, Welsh and Northern Irish higher education institutions. As a result of this, in England, tuition fees of up to £9,000 per annum were introduced in 2012/13. When the fee cap was increased, it was envisaged that universities would charge variable fees. In reality, most institutions have chosen to charge the highest fee or close to that. Students are entitled to a loan to cover the cost of the tuition fees, as well as loans to cover the cost of maintenance. Repayment of these loans is deferred until graduates are earning more than £21,000.

Given that such different approaches have been taken towards tuition in the two countries, it is interesting to explore the extent to which this impacts on the views of young people. Purcell et al.'s Futuretrack report, *Applying for higher education – the diversity of career choices, plans and expectations* (2008), explored students' views of tuition funding. They found that 54% of all respondents agreed with the statement 'Students in HE should contribute to its cost if they can afford to'. However, Scots were less likely to agree with this than those in the rest of the UK. Scots were also more likely to disagree that 'student loans are a good idea' and that that 'all universities should charge the same annual fees'.

How students view tuition fees is often bound up with their views as to the purposes of higher education, and their analysis of the costs and benefits of going to university. Callender and Jackson (2008) found that for low income students, the costs of HE were often seen as a debt rather than an investment, and that these students were more sensitive to the costs of HE than students from wealthier backgrounds. These students would use a range of strategies to reduce their debt levels, often choosing to live at home whilst studying. Recent research from BIS (2014) has also looked at the issue of studying and living at home. They found that those who lived at home during their studies gave less thought to the intrinsic value of HE than those who lived away from home, and were more concerned with how a course led to specific profession or occupation rather than studying a course out of a sense of enjoyment.

Such views echo HECSU research findings (Higgins, 2012) which point to public debate around the purpose and practice of HE, whereby the financial rewards of achieving an HE qualification are prioritised over the personal and social rewards associated with the experience itself. Alongside this, research conducted by the Higher Education Authority (2014), reports that students often discussed their motivations for going to university using language of self-responsibility and individualisation. Students spoke of needing to 'get out what you put in' in order to get a good overall return on their investment. In this context, the level of the degree achieved becomes paramount.

Student loans and student support

While tuition is free in Scotland, many young people take out student loans to cover the costs of living. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the bursaries and loans available to students from different financial backgrounds. The amount of support available is dependent on students' family incomes. In 2013, the Scottish Government changed the student support system. There is now a flat rate loan of £4,750 available per year to students. Those from families earning less than £34,000 are entitled to bursaries of up to £1,750 a year as well as an increased loan of up to £7,500 depending on income. Whereas previously, those living away from home received higher levels of support, now all students receive the same bursaries and loan entitlements regardless of where they live during their period of study. Income contingent loans are repaid once graduates

are earning more than £16,365 per annum, and loans are cancelled after 35 years from the April in which the loan became repayable.

Table 1: Student support available in Scotland

Household income	Bursary	Loan	Total
£0 to £16,999	£1,750	£5,750	£7,500
£17,000 to £23,999	£1,000	£5,750	£6,750
£24,000 to £33,999	£500	£5,750	£6,250
£34,000 and above	£0	£4,750	£4,750

The situation in England is somewhat different. Unlike the Scottish system which entitles students to a flat rate loan irrespective of whether they live at home or away whilst studying, the English system provides differing levels of loans dependent upon where the student lives, with the highest amount available to those studying in London. Table 2 below outlines the support currently available to English students in the form of loans for maintenance costs. It should be borne in mind that maintenance loans are on top of fee loans. Since 2012, debt is cancelled if it has not been repaid 30 years after the April in which the loan became repayable.

Table 2: Maintenance loan allowances for living costs in England

Full-time student	Loan for courses from September 2013	Loan for courses from September 2014
Living at home	Up to £4,375	Up to £4,418
Living away from home, outside London	Up to £5,500	Up to £5,555
Living away from home, in London	Up to £7,675	Up to £7,751
You spend a year of a UK course studying abroad	Up to £6,535	Up to £6,600

Source: <https://www.gov.uk/student-finance/loans-and-grants>

Table 3 outlines the grants available to students in England. As in Scotland, these are dependent upon the students' family income. However, the grants available to poorer students in England are greater than those in Scotland.

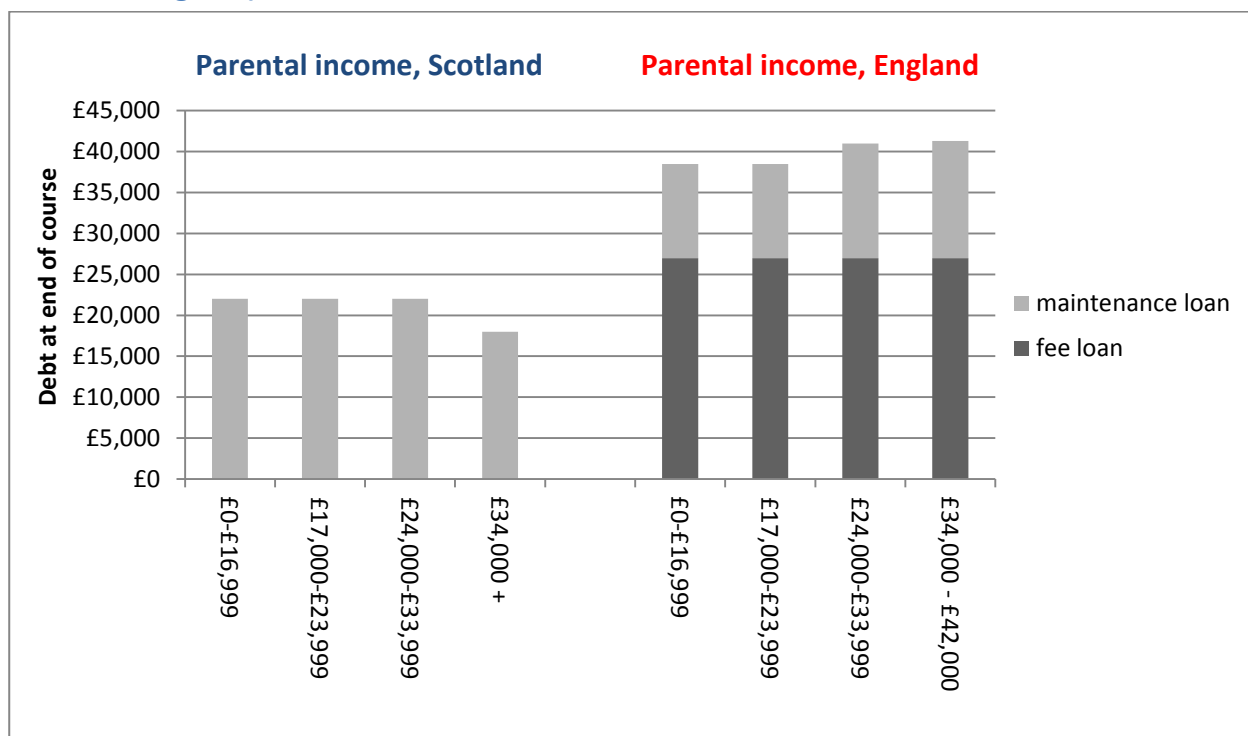
Table 3: Maintenance grants available in England

Full-time student – household income	Grant for courses from September 2013	Grant for courses from September 2014
£25,000 or less	£3,354	£3,387
£30,000	£2,416	£2,441
£35,000	£1,478	£1,494
£40,000	£540	£547
£42,620 (2014)	£50	£50
Over £42,620 (2014)	No grant	No grant

Source: <https://www.gov.uk/student-finance/loans-and-grants>

The differences in final accrued debt between students in Scotland and England are illustrated in Figure 1 ([Wyness, 2013](#)). It should be borne in mind that in Scotland students generally take 4 years to complete an undergraduate degree, while in England it takes 3 years. It is clear that students in England will potentially leave university with substantially higher total debts than those studying in Scotland.

Figure 1: Maintenance loans and fee loans available to students in Scotland and England by parental income for an undergraduate degree (4 years in Scotland and 3 years in England)



Source: [Wyness, 2013](#)

There are also differences in terms of take up of loans between the two countries. According to Student Loan Company data for England ([2013](#)), 87.5% of English students took out a maintenance loan in 2011/12. Using Scottish Government statistics ([2013](#)), Hunter Blackburn ([2014a](#)) estimates that 67% of Scottish domiciled students who were eligible for a maintenance loan took one out in 2012-13 (see Table 4). While this is lower than in England, it should be noted that among those on lower incomes, the likelihood of taking out a loan increases (from 57% for those from families earning more than £30,000 to 79% for those from families on less than £10,000).

Table 4: Take up and average borrowing by SAAS-supported Scottish-domiciled students 2012-13

Income as per SAAS data	All		Sub-degree		Degree	
	Take up rate	Average	Take up rate	Average	Take up rate	Average
	%	£	%	£	%	£
Assessed as nil	88	4965	91	5085	85	4865
< £10k	79	3715	74	3705	82	3721
£10,000 - £19,999	73	3625	66	3695	77	3595
£20,000 - £29,999	74	3565	63	3495	78	3587
Over £30k*	57	1983	47	2093	59	1964
Total	67	3115	65	3715	67	2902

*Includes all those who did not declare their income to SAAS: EU students removed from the totals for income undeclared.

Sources: All from Scottish Government statistics, October 2013. Take-up rate calculated by Blackburn Hunter; *sub-degree* from PQ response – take-up rate calculated by author; *degree* by extrapolation from first two data sets by Blackburn Hunter.

Hunter Blackburn's research ([2014b](#)) has also shown in detail how the distribution of debt within Scotland and England differs, with greater levels of debt placed on those students with the lowest incomes in Scotland. She suggests that the shift away from grants towards a greater use of loans is part of a 'reliance on increased loan to close the gap with England and Wales in spending levels' ([Hunter Blackburn, 2014b; 4](#)).

So how do such changes relate to young people's attitudes towards loans? Callender and Jackson ([2008](#)) point to the effect that higher fees have on young people and their attitudes towards debt, often opting to stay at home whilst studying to reduce costs. Such working class localism is also discussed by Christie and Munro ([2003](#)) who explored students' perceptions of the costs and benefits of student loans. The authors found that young people were very poorly informed about both the costs and benefits of higher education, and that most students underestimated the financial costs of going to university. The Sodexo Lifestyle Survey ([2014](#)) also found that students were likely to underestimate debt they would accrue at university. In 2014, 17% expected debts of more than £40,000 plus, while 58% expected at least £20,000. This seems unusually low given average debts of £27,000 for fees alone in England. Despite the differences in projected debt between Scotland and England, the Sodexo survey also found that worry about debt was almost as much an issue for Scots as it was for the whole of the UK (34% of Scots compared to 35% across the UK), suggesting that it is the principle behind the idea of being in debt rather than the amount itself. This provides the context for our findings; however, before turning to the findings of the research the methodology is briefly described below.

Methodology

The interviews were conducted in two stages. In the first round of the research 89 young people in nine Scottish schools and a Scottish college were interviewed. The interviews were filmed and formed the basis of a DVD which, along with a set of teaching resources, was sent out to all Scottish secondary schools. The film, '[Our Future: Young people's views on higher education in Scotland](#)' and the teaching [materials](#) were intended to stimulate discussion among young people in the run up to the referendum. A further 59 young people (32 in Scotland and 27 in the north of England) took part in the second stage of the research which involved in-depth interviews held in four schools and two sixth form colleges.

Participating schools, sixth form colleges and the further education college were selected so as to represent a range of different demographics and regions. While the Scottish participants came from eight regions scattered across the country, English interviewees came from just two regions – the north west and the north east. Both these regions traditionally have lower rates of participation in HE and this should be borne in mind when considering the data. These regions were selected as they are close to Scotland and students in this region may therefore be more likely to consider studying in Scotland.

Whilst our focus was predominantly on the future plans of those who wished to attend higher education when they left school, we were also interested in talking to those who were considering alternatives to higher education such as college or apprenticeship and work based routes. Participating young people were selected by school and college contacts. The great majority of young people who took part (74%) said they planned to go to university upon leaving school. Due to self-selection and teacher bias, the interviewees cannot be considered representative of the

wider 16-18 school and college population. However, they could be seen as representing the views of a particular sub-group of young people who are considering going to university. Scottish interviewees were generally younger than those in the north of England. In Scotland, the majority of interviewees (80 out of 121 Scottish interviewees) were currently in S5 (fifth, and penultimate, year of secondary school in which pupils are generally aged 16 to 17), while in England all were in Year 13 (final year of secondary school or sixth form college in which pupils are generally aged 17 to 18). There are then age and stage differences between the English and Scottish pupils. Most of the Scottish pupils were interviewed prior to completing their UCAS forms and applying to university, while English pupils were interviewed after making their applications. This meant that it was more difficult for S5 pupils in Scotland to answer questions about their future plans as these were still quite vague. Further details about key pupil characteristics can be found in the [appendix](#).

The findings

Scotland

This section examines Scottish respondents' views of the system of universal free undergraduate tuition for Scottish and EU students.

Scottish pupils' views on tuition fees

The majority of young people (76%) who discussed the funding of HE agreed that higher education should be funded by the state and that students should not have to contribute towards the costs of higher education. The main justification for the young people's support of free tuition was in terms of the perceived benefits of widening access. It was felt that the policy helps to encourage more young people to go to university, particularly those young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The link between free HE and wider access to higher education was mentioned by Scottish interviewees from all backgrounds and in every school/ college we visited. Some of interviewees also espoused strongly held beliefs that 'education is a right, not a privilege' as justification for this for their support of free tuition. These views can be seen clearly in the quotes below:

They should definitely be, I think they should definitely be universal to everybody. I mean tuition fees especially 'cause I feel that education's a right, not a privilege. So it shouldn't just be the elite people who get like put first and therefore get an education. (Emily, SIMD 51, Edinburgh South)

I think it's fine the way it is that the government pay for it. I think the SNP had a quote saying along the lines of that 'education should be judged on the ability to learn not the ability to pay'. So I'd quite agree with that, that the government should pay for our education and not the people that are getting taught. (Mark, SIMD 3, Fife North)

Scottish young people were proud of this system, not just because, as they noted, they were able to benefit from it, but because it gave people across Scotland 'equal opportunity' to go to university. Higher education was seen as improving people's life chances and as a means of

¹ Note that (for Scotland) SIMD (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) and (for England) IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index) figures are broken into quintiles. Figures range from quintile 1 (the most deprived 20%) to quintile 5 (the least deprived 20%).

helping them to become more socially mobile. That this is a universal benefit which treats everyone equally regardless of their background was considered its most important aspect, and interviewees variously described it as 'fair', 'equal' and 'open'. Means testing, or charging students from more affluent backgrounds, was seen as being too complicated to administer by most; one pupil described it as a 'car crash waiting to happen' (James, South Lanarkshire). Another suggested that it would stigmatise those receiving free tuition in contrast to those who paid. Some pupils from South Lanarkshire and Aberdeenshire schools were of the opinion that it would be 'unfair' to charge pupils from richer families.

I don't think there should be a divide. I think everybody should be equal. No matter if you can afford it or not. It's not fair that just because you have more money you should pay. I would say it should just be equal I think and all get it free. (Laura, SIMD 4, South Lanarkshire)

Yeah, I think you can't charge people for coming from a well-off background. (Paul, SIMD 3, Aberdeenshire)

A further justification for the government paying for higher education, highlighted by a small number of interviewees, was that those who have been to university will contribute towards the state by paying higher taxes. While most young people were supportive of free tuition, many noted that free tuition does not mean that going to university is free of costs, but they did recognise that they would face lower levels of debt than their counterparts in the rest of the UK. Interviewees suggested that in England pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds might be put off by tuition fees and the fear of greater levels of debt accrued from going to university, potentially leading to a situation whereby only the wealthiest are able to go to university.

Yeah it's good 'cause it gives a wider range of people the opportunity to go to university. [...] Well, like, people that maybe don't have enough money, that come from a poorer background. They might get a chance to go to university; whereas if they lived in England, they wouldn't. (Susan, SIMD 4, Aberdeenshire)

A number of young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds commented that they themselves would not be going to university were it not for free tuition, such as Steven from Glasgow.

It's easier for us because we've got the tuition fees covered. But if I was going down to study in England, the tuition fees would definitely put me off because it's no, I'm no in a financial situation where I could afford it. I know you can take loans and all that. But, it's the tuition fees that you receive here, it makes your life easier in the future cause you don't have to pay back all these loans and having debt on your shoulders. (Steven, SIMD 1, Glasgow North)

However, we found that Scottish interviewees understanding of the English tuition fee system was often inaccurate. Pupils in a number of the Scottish schools appeared to view the English tuition fees as an upfront fee, and there were a number of references to their families 'who would not be able to afford to pay £9,000 a year'. For example, Hannah in East Lothian thought the fees were paid 'at the start of every year, [or] at the end of every year'.

While universal free HE was widely praised, 14% of those who discussed who should pay for higher education suggested that some kind of cost sharing should be introduced for students from more affluent backgrounds. Belief in this kind of means tested approach to the funding of HE, whereby those who can afford to pay should contribute, was more popular in Scotland than in England. Most of the pupils in favour of this came from the most deprived SIMD areas, although interestingly one private school pupil also supported more targeted contributions.

A frequently expressed argument for universal free tuition was that it was deemed 'fair'. However, pupils held different understandings of what fairness meant. Those in favour of free HE tended to describe 'fairness' as everyone treated equally. In contrast, pupils in favour of targeted contributions tended to hold a view more allied to ideas of social justice and redistribution. Some young people, particularly those from the more deprived SIMD area suggested that it would be 'fairer' if those from richer backgrounds were asked to contribute towards free higher education for the poorest.

But I'm not too open to the fact that everybody gets it free. I think those that can pay should pay it, whether it's the full amount or not, I think anything they can pay towards it would help people who can't go at all. (Joanne, SIMD 2, South Lanarkshire)

Kieran, from Glasgow, pointed to the extra effort required from young people in deprived areas in order to achieve well over those from more advantaged backgrounds, demonstrating an awareness of the basis of contextual admissions policies.

I think it should be more targeted towards people who live in deprived areas because they're the ones really that if you look at it have more potential than someone goes to a private school. Say they get the same grades or whatever, the private school person will have had all the help they can get; whereas the deprived school child's had to work with limited resources and things like that. And so they should be getting it free or at a subsidised rate. (Kevin, SIMD 1, Glasgow North)

Cameron, a pupil at an independent school, praised free tuition for promoting social mobility and wider access. However, he clarified this by pointing to the fact that while everyone's taxes pay for free tuition in Scotland, not everyone who contributes towards the system will benefit from it.

The Scottish system is really, really effective but although it offers people a way out of say poverty because it means they could probably afford going to university; whereas in England they might not be able to. But all, the tuition fees come out of taxes. So people who don't go to university are just paying, paying for something that other people are benefitting off and they're not. So it's not necessarily a fair system in some cases but for the most part it is. (Cameron, SIMD 5, Independent school)

As is discussed in the next section on the future of free tuition, some young people who supported targeted contributions did so out of concerns about the affordability of free tuition, particularly in a period of austerity with increasing numbers of people going to university. Pupils like Ross from Fife called for richer students to contribute to the costs of HE so as to retain free HE for those who cannot afford it.

I think it's a good system but whether I agree with it is like different because I feel that there are some people out there who could definitely easily pay for higher education. And

I don't think it, if they keep taking money off the government to go to the university then eventually they might have to stop because we can't fund it. And that would be a shame because then all of a sudden you're going back to the previous [situation] where only the rich could go to university. (Ross, SIMD 4, Fife)

One in ten Scottish pupils suggested that all students should contribute towards the cost of HE; these pupils tended to come mainly from East Lothian and Aberdeenshire schools – predominantly from managerial and professional backgrounds and mostly from areas with the lowest levels of deprivation. These pupils expressed concern that free HE has made going to university appear almost 'compulsory' for young people leaving school, a situation exacerbated they said by schools which did little to encourage young people to consider alternatives to higher education. They complained that free HE may lead some young people to go to university when it is not the right option for them. Such views were borne out of fears about graduate employment opportunities and concerns that competition for jobs will increase in line with higher education expansion. This led them to support tuition fees, though none of the Scottish pupils advocated a fee anywhere near that of £9,000 – around £3,000 was the preferred amount. Free tuition was said in some cases to encourage young people to do a degree 'for the sake of it'. They espoused instrumental views of the purposes of education seeing the point of higher education primarily as leading to employment.

Yeah 'cause I feel like some people don't necessarily really want to go to university. And they don't know what they'd study but they'd feel like they should. And then they end up going. And especially when it's free tuition fees. It's almost a waste of money cause they either drop out and once they've finished they don't do anything related to that or they don't really get a job that's benefitted from them having that degree. (Lucy, SIMD 4, East Lothian)

Allied to this, some young people were of the belief that free higher education is 'taken for granted' by some students who do not 'appreciate' or 'value' their education. Some interviewees in Aberdeenshire were of the opinion that only some young people, those who 'work hard', are 'grateful' and especially those whose degrees would lead down specific career paths should be entitled to support from the state. Where young people do not work hard at university this can be seen as a 'waste' of government funds.

But then it is our responsibility in a way. Cause if people go there [to university] and they just fluke it and they don't do anything ... yeah and they just decide to go out then it's wasting the funds that we're getting. So as long as you are grateful for it and you go through with it, then I think it's fair enough that the government are paying for it. But if you don't, I would make them pay. I would tell them, 'here's what you've just wasted of our money, pay it back.' (Rona, SIMD 3, Aberdeenshire)

Jonathan from East Lothian said that if students were to contribute to the costs of HE then it was more likely to make them think through their decisions and take more responsibility for their actions. Some interviewees agreed with Jonathan, suggesting that they would be more likely to work harder at university if they paid tuition fees.

The future of free higher education in an independent Scotland

In our Scottish interviews, we asked young people whether tuition would still be free in Scotland in five to ten years' time. Despite the majority of young people being very much in favour of free

tuition, a significant proportion (87%) of those who discussed it were concerned that the system was unsustainable and suggested that fees may be introduced in the near future. Almost three-quarters (71%) of those who discussed the future of free tuition suggested that fees would be more likely to be introduced under independence, while 16% suggested fees would be introduced irrespective of the outcome of the referendum. In contrast, 13% pointed to the SNP's commitment to maintaining free tuition and said that the introduction of fees in an independent Scotland was highly unlikely, and saw the policy as being more under threat were Scotland to remain part of the union.

While young people were very supportive of the ideology behind free tuition, they were concerned for the future of the economy and worried that it would be unaffordable in an independent Scotland, particularly in an age of austerity and with increasing numbers of young people going to university. This ties in with findings of a recent survey of young people conducted by Carrington Dean Associates which found that 64% of respondents worry about the economic outlook in an independent Scotland (Carrington Dean, 2014).

Two boys interviewed in South Lanarkshire expressed contrasting views on the future of free tuition. Iain had signed up with the armed forces. Originally a 'yes' voter, he now planned to vote 'no', and said that there would be too many financial pressures to retain free HE.

It's hard but deep down I don't think we will [retain free tuition]. I think maybe in the next 8 to 10 years I see, especially with the independence thing coming in I think if Scotland got independent we won't be able maintain the National Health Service for a start. I don't think we'll be able to continue free Health Service, Dental Care and stuff and education I think will be pushed to the side and we'll be more focussed on money towards Health Care rather than money towards education so I think education will just drop as well. Yeah, 'cause I don't know where, it's not been made clear enough. (Iain, SIMD unknown, South Lanarkshire)

His friend Daniel disagreed, suggesting that a devolved Scotland would feel more pressure from England to introduce fees if it remained part of the UK. Daniel said he was swaying towards a 'yes' vote.

I'd like to think so [free tuition would remain] but I don't know if it's sustainable. But I think there's more chance of free tuition fees staying in Scotland if we go independent than there is with staying in the Union because the English students would look and say, 'well we're paying £9,000 and they're getting it for free so that can't be right' so there would be more pressure to make Scottish students pay cause it would be seen as unfair. (Daniel, SIMD 5, South Lanarkshire)

We found that young people's understanding of devolved powers and how taxes are collected and spent within the devolved nations was somewhat confused which may have contributed to their beliefs about the future of free tuition. A few pupils suggested that English and Welsh taxes contribute towards free HE in Scotland (this was a view expressed by some of the English pupils also).

Well it's free the now but we're part of the UK. So they're paying it. Like, England and Wales are paying a part of this for us. So like they [independent Scotland] won't have

enough money, I think. I think we'll pay a little bit. We won't pay as much as England or Wales. (Sean, SIMD 3, FE college)

A few pupils also raised concerns about the position of rUK students in an independent Scotland, and whether universities would still be able to charge these students fees. This led some pupils to conclude that there may be more English students at Scottish universities, and they expressed concern that this might threaten Scottish places and increase competition.

because if we become independent then the rest of the UK gets treated as EU citizens and they'll no longer have to pay for tuition fees. So many people will be coming up to university that they'll start to become a bit overcrowded. (Orla, SIMD 2, West Lothian)

As we outlined above, some interviewees argued that independence would help to protect free tuition. Some, though not all, of these young people said they intended to vote yes. They pointed to the fact that the SNP had introduced the policy and that they would try to defend free HE. They suggested that Labour would try and introduce fees. Callum, from South Lanarkshire, an 'undecided' voter, suggested that it would remain because the ideology of the policy resonates so much with the electorate.

I think Scotland will always have the free tuition fees. I think it might be one of the things that people really agree with in Scotland. So I think the free tuition fees will stay. (Callum, SIMD 4, South Lanarkshire)

Scott, a 'yes' voter from Edinburgh, was also positive about the future of free tuition:

I think if we stay as part of the Union we're more likely to have tuition fees because I don't see the austerity sort of we're having just now slowing down any. And I know that's having a big impact on the Scottish budget. So I think that any Scottish government, no matter what party is gonna have to make difficult choices about how to deal with all these budget cuts. (Scott, SIMD 3, Edinburgh South)

Attitudes towards debt and the cost of going on to higher education

Our research was interested in hearing from young people about their views on debt and whether and how this was related to their views on tuition fees. In the second round of interviews, young people were asked whether they intended to take out maintenance loans while at university and to estimate how much debt they might accrue while in higher education. Just three pupils out of 32 provided a figure of their estimated debt (these ranged from £18,000 to £45,000; all three pupils who provided an estimate of accrued debt were from East Lothian and came from professional and managerial backgrounds). The remaining 29 pupils either said they planned to leave university with no or as little debt as possible, or had not yet thought about what level of debt they might have when they graduate.

With regard to attitudes towards debt, we found that the Scottish pupils' tended to fall into one of two categories: 1) those who planned to try and avoid student debt as much as possible; and 2) those who were comfortable with the idea of student loans and welcomed the funding as a means of helping them through university. We discuss each group in turn while also exploring the pupils' understanding of the student loans system.

1) Debt avoiders

The majority of Scottish interviewees could be categorised as debt avoiders. They held negative views of being in debt, were apprehensive about getting into debt, and spoke of feeling 'worried', 'daunted', 'stressed', and 'scared' by it. Many said they would take out loans only as a 'last resort', and planned to avoid student loans either completely or by keeping their debt to a minimum. Many pupils said that they hoped not to take out a loan at all or to take the minimum available to them. As research shows that 67% of Scottish students take out a loan (Hunter Blackburn, 2014a), there appears to be a gap between their aspirations to be debt free and the reality, and one wonders whether they are aware of the true costs of going to university.

I think that would be the last resort. If I really needed to take out a loan I would but I really don't plan on taking out a loan. (Callum, SIMD 4, South Lanarkshire)

I don't want to be in debt at all. Aye, cause you don't want to have to owe people money. It's just the back of your head and doesn't help you concentrate or anything. It just makes you think, 'oh how am I getting that money?' (Craig, SIMD 1, Glasgow South)

Debt avoiders tended to come from families where neither parent had been to university, or were living in the most deprived SIMD postcode areas, and/ or (to an extent) came from families with intermediate or lower occupational backgrounds. All the pupils from South Lanarkshire, Glasgow North, and Glasgow South were debt averse and all planned to live at home while at university, as did significant proportions of pupils from the two Fife schools. They planned to employ a range of strategies to avoid loans, including living at home whilst studying, working part-time during term time and relying on financial support from family members. Of these, living at home was seen as the most important in terms of reducing the high costs of accommodation.

My family, they don't see the idea of student loans and getting into debt at the end of it, so it's just if you stay at home you've got a lesser chance and it's going to be a minimal even if you do have to get a debt or whatever. We've got the facilities here to be able to stay here so if you have the opportunity why not stay here instead of moving away and getting just the same education. That's the way I see it. (Joanne, SIMD 2, South Lanarkshire)

Many of the pupils in this group either already worked part-time or said they planned to find part-time work while at university, though some pupils recognised that working while at university may involve a bit of a balancing act.

Just work. Just get a part time job and pull myself through it. And I know that if I am struggling my mum will try her best to help me so hopefully I won't have to take out massive loans and stuff. (Isabella, SIMD 3, Aberdeenshire)

Unlike those who were comfortable with student loans, debt avoiders living at home tended to be the first in the family to go to university. This meant they had fewer people with whom to share their experiences of university and funding. Their references as to whether student debt was manageable tended to come from extended family or teachers, and sometimes served to make them more worried rather than reassured.

'Cause I mean one of my family members have just come out of University. It's a cousin. And they're like, 'there's no point in getting a student loan because you've just started your working life and everything like that and yet you've already put yourself in debt. And

you're gonna be working it off for the rest of your life'. And it's a good point to make 'cause I mean I don't want to be in debt since the moment I step out of university, you know. It's just not fair [laughs] in some sort of way. (Chloe, SIMD 2, Fife)

Some pupils' comments pointed to quite simplistic notions about loans and debt, and displayed a lack of understanding as to the real cost of going to university. For example, when talking about what one might have to pay for at university, books tended to be mentioned far more frequently than food, accommodation and socialising. One might wonder then just how realistic the intentions of this group to completely avoid debt were. It may be that age is a factor; a substantial proportion of the Scottish interviewees were still in fifth year, and it may be that they haven't yet considered the costs of going to university, or had this explained to them. Additionally, pupils in this category tended to have a very poor understanding of student finance. Few knew what level of loan they were entitled to or were aware of the ways in which student debt is repaid. Pupils invariably overestimated the threshold at which loans are repaid – most suggested the threshold was around £21,000 rather than £16,365, possibly confusing the threshold with that of England. More worryingly, a minority of pupils clearly associated student debt with commercial debt, and thought that it had to be paid off as soon as they graduated (this was particularly the case in South Lanarkshire). One pupil's parents were so keen for their children to avoid student debt that they had taken out a commercial loan to support the pupil's sibling through university. She was one of the only Scottish pupils who showed an awareness that loans would accrue interest, which added to her worry about taking out a student loan.

Those classed as debt avoiders weren't just planning to live at home to save costs. Some young Scots from more affluent backgrounds also said they planned to rely on support from family members to avoid loans. Some pupils explained that their parents or extended family members had been saving towards the costs of them going to university for some time, and that this would allow them to avoid or reduce the amount of debt they would accrue. Some young people planned to rely entirely on family support, while others planned to use a combination of living at home, working part time and family savings – this tended to depend on the financial background of the pupil.

2) Comfortable with loans

This group were far more comfortable talking about the debt they might accrue at university and pointed to the benefits of having loans to support them through their studies. They tended to have more realistic estimates of levels of loans they might require and, in contrast to debt avoiders, they tended to have a better, though not perfect, understanding of the student finance system. Most of the pupils in this group came from East Lothian and Aberdeenshire schools, and mainly from managerial and professional backgrounds and the least deprived postcode areas.

I think I will because I think it will just make things a little easier in the long run, just as long as it's not too big and I manage my money okay at the time. But I think I am going to need it [laughs]. (Jane, SIMD 3, Aberdeenshire)

They pointed to the fact that it is an income contingent loan which is paid back in 'small' monthly instalments.

Yeah it's not a pressure loan. It's not like, not that I would want loans but it's not one that you have, not you have to pay it back but it's not one that's debt collectors, like they are

going to force you to pay it now or deadlines to pay it and things like that. They just take a little bit at a time. (Catrina, SIMD 4, East Lothian)

While this group were more comfortable with the idea of taking out loans, they were not without apprehension – it's just that their better understanding of the system reassured them that it would be possible to repay the debt.

It's a wee bit daunting having, you know, debt and only being eighteen. But you don't need to pay it back until you're earning over a certain amount. And even then it's not too much you pay back each, eh, month I think. So it's not too bad but it's a bit scary [laughs]. (Martin, SIMD 3, FE college)

A number of pupils in this group made the distinction between student debt and 'real debt'.

If it's something like SAAS it's not so bad, because the way you pay it back, you just have to account for it in your income because it is just taken straight out of your pay. So it's not like you are signing a cheque every month going, here is all my money'. And it's quite a small amount they take out each month and stuff but I think an actual-loan loan would be terrifying. (Jane, SIMD 3, Aberdeenshire)

In terms of their outlook on loans, this group were closest to the English pupils where debt was seen as a normal part of being a student. Jonathan from East Lothian was considering studying in England and was therefore weighing up the pros and cons of the two systems. While his parents were in a financial situation where they would have been able to support him, he was keen to take out student loans as, he said, 'I would far rather take on the financial responsibility for myself than have my parents do it'.

I figure that I've got my whole life and career ahead of me to pay back any debts, and as I said earlier it's probably one of the best investments you can make for some people anyway, I don't know, hopefully [laughs]. (Jonathan, SIMD 5, East Lothian)

In a number of cases, the young people in this group noted that their siblings had also taken out loans when they attended university. This helped them to understand the financial system better and it made them feel more comfortable.

Yeah my brother, he's been out of Uni for about three years now and he's still paying his back. But he's saying it's okay. Like it does, they don't charge a lot on the interest. But he's finding it alright [laughs]. So I think I'm alright with the idea. (Shona, SIMD unknown, Western Isles)

Often, they noted that they would also be able to rely on support from immediate and extended relatives who had saved towards the costs of them going to university for some time. Pupils in this category often said that they would receive support from their parents or from extended family members.

I think yeah I probably will have to take out a student loan. My grandparents say that they've set money aside, well they did for my brother and sister as well and they have for me. But they've said that they'll help me with some costs. And also I have a job and I'm planning on trying to work a lot in the summer to try and make as much money as I can.

But I think I probably definitely will have to take out a student loan. My brother and sister both did. I've not really looked into it too much, I'm just working out where I want to go first [laughs]. (Alice, SIMD 5, East Lothian)

Unusually among our interviewees, a pupil in Aberdeenshire said that she planned to take out the loan but put it in a savings account as her family had said that they would support her through university.

While this group of interviewees tended to have better understanding of the student loans system than debt avoiders who planned to live at home, they did, nonetheless display a number of misunderstandings with regard to their loans. Again, very few of these interviewees knew how much loan they were entitled to, and few were able to identify the threshold at which students begin to repay their debt, confusing it with that of England. Young Scots were similarly in the dark in relation to grants and bursaries. While a number of young people suggested they would be able to rely on bursaries to support them in their study, few had actually looked into the issue and had checked whether they were eligible. Additionally, very few knew the level of bursary available or were aware that the grant has recently been reduced and replaced by a larger loan.

As we have shown, both debt avoiders and those who were more comfortable with the idea of debt had poor understandings of student finance. Respondents across Scotland and in the north of England pointed to a lack of information in schools about loans, grants and fees. Some pupils said that while substantial amounts of school time was given over to preparing personal statements and applying to university, very little information was provided about the practicalities of going to, and paying for, university. Where schools ran information sessions on finance, pupils complained that these were too little too later, often coming after applications had already been made. If pupils are to make the right decisions about their future, such information should, they said, be provided prior to them making their applications.

England

English pupils' views on tuition fees

Most of the pupils in our sample of English interviewees said they would be attending universities which charged £9,000 per year. Six pupils planned to attend newer universities. Some pupils said their fees at Northumbria would be £6,000. Interestingly this information is not correct as Northumbria will be charging £9,000 per year in 2014 except for Health Professional courses which are funded by the NHS (<http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/brochure/courses/fees/home/ftugf/>). Students intending to study medicine estimated they would have the highest tuition fee costs of £9,000 over five years totalling £45,000. Pupils who planned to study NHS affiliated degrees such as nursing, midwifery etc., would accrue the least debt for their tuition fees as their course fees would be paid by the NHS; three English interviewees were intending to undertake NHS funded courses. It was interesting to note that interviewees did not always know what fees their preferred universities charged.

While many of the English interviewees were envious of the Scottish system whereby the government pays fees, three quarters of respondents in the north of England were in favour of some form of cost sharing between students and the state. However, none of the young people supported the charging of up to £9,000 per year for tuition; most advocated a charge of around

£3,000 a year. A small number, six pupils (24%), said that higher education should be funded entirely by the state.

Pupils in the north of England were more likely than those in Scotland to view university as an 'investment', and those who viewed it in this way were more likely to be supportive of tuition fees. In the north west, Harry said he supported tuition fees of some kind because 'it's your choice' to go to university' and that 'if you want a job that's a bit higher qualified you should have to pay for it'. Another working class pupil, David from the north east, said 'it's like an investment into your future. The more you spend on your tuition, the more it should return'.

Emma, a working class pupil from the north east, agreed that students should contribute. However, she, like some of her fellow pupils, felt that the government should also contribute more, particularly as so many young people are now expected to go to university.

Oh definitely. I think a student has a responsibility to contribute to their education. But I think that if there's an expectation of a generation to go into higher education then the government should be obliged to contribute. And I'm not saying that I expect a lot [laughs] from the government. But I think if you're promoting higher education then it should be there. (Emma, IDACI 3, North East Sixth Form College)

Amongst the arguments for making students contribute to HE was the idea that paying fees makes young people 'appreciate' their learning more. This was an argument which was also put forward by some of the Scottish interviewees, but was mentioned more frequently by the English pupils. The idea that you should 'use your time wisely' at university and not 'waste time' was again raised. Ross from a school in the north east of England said, 'if they're paying in excess of £10,000 a year for it they're not going to be wasting their time – they're less inclined to waste their time'. Others agreed:

I would probably say half and half [funding should be split between student and state]. 'Cause I do agree with what you're saying that I don't think they would appreciate it as much if it's free. 'Cause I don't think I would cause I don't think you appreciate something that you get for free, but something that you're going to have to work hard for, I think you cherish it more. So I think if it was half and half, then it'd be good. (Michelle, IDACI 2, North East School)

It's not our fault that our parents came to live here and we were born here. I think the price shouldn't be based on where you live, it should be based on a few things, like, what your previous studies are. So if you have shown to work hard then the government should help you towards that. But if you are like, 'oh I'm not going to do any work but I am going to go to uni for the sake of it' then they should have to pay for it, because at the end of the day they are probably not going to come out with the best degree they can. (Samantha, IDACI 5, North West Sixth Form College)

Another argument for having students pay for HE was that it stops too many people going to university. Young people were very concerned about graduate employment opportunities, particularly in light of higher education expansion and the perceived impact of this on job prospects. The concept of credential inflation was something which was referred to by a number of pupils. David felt that the 'elitism' of university should be retained so as to ensure degrees remain valued in the jobs market.

Well yes [student should contribute something], but not as much as you do now. Cause then anybody who'd want to go to university, I think a lot more people would go to university if it was free and that would be countering the point of going to university. If everybody comes out with degrees, it would be pointless having degrees. (David, IDACI 1, North East Sixth Form College)

As in Scotland, a minority of young people argued that fees should be more differentiated depending on family income. Ben, a working class pupil from NE1 who was eligible for grants, felt that richer people should contribute more to the costs of HE.

So if you are on a low income and if your kid might have the intelligence to go but you might just not have the money, and I know you can get things like scholarships and things like that but it should definitely go on if you've got the money to send your child then you should have to pay. And that's one of the strong things that I stick by. (Luke, IDACI 3, North East School)

In contrast, Harry from the north west of England, who was also eligible for grants, argued that everybody should pay the same for their fees regardless of their income or family background. He made the argument that it is the individual's future salary which will benefit from going to university, 'not their mum's or dad's salary' so it is the individual who should pay. This was an argument which a number of the Scottish interviewees also made.

It's like the lad who's rich and has got a good background, he was born into the family, he can't help that he's fortunate. And the guy who is born into a poor background, he can't help that either. (Harry, IDACI 1, North West Sixth Form College)

That young people themselves are being tasked with paying for their own higher education means that young people are increasingly taking on the role of the consumer. This change was noted by John, a working class pupil from the north east, who argued that the rise in fees has meant universities are now much more like businesses, and that 'university is becoming a luxury [...] for people with more money'. This would, he said, mean young people from poorer backgrounds would not go to university in the future.

Yeah definitely [universities are like businesses] 'cause the way that they run it and the way that you see it as a student, you see it as something which has got a lot of money and that you just pay for a product. And the product's the education. So how is that different from just buying a product from a shop or something? (John, IDACI 2, North East Sixth Form College)

While respondents in the north of England were largely in favour of some form of student contribution, they still held misgivings about the current level of tuition fees, and about the extent to which they rose in 2012. Young people struggled to understand why fees had increased so dramatically from £3,000, which was generally considered reasonable, to £9,000, which was not. They frequently questioned what the fees went towards, and there was a demand for greater information about how the money is used.

£9,000 a year is pretty, wow [respondents laugh]! I didn't understand the need to put it up at the time. And I still don't. And I don't feel like it's ever been explained to me. So

from my point of view I don't understand what I'm paying for if that's a relevant point. (Emma, SIMD 3, North East, Sixth Form College)

So I don't see why they should have to charge £9,000 when some Universities for the same course will charge a few thousand less. I just don't understand what all that money's going towards. (David, SIMD 1, North East Sixth Form College)

The fact that tuition is free in Scotland but not England also made young people question the level of fees charged. Pupils in the north of England tended to talk enviously of free tuition in Scotland. A girl who had applied to study in Scotland but had decided to study in England where her fees would be paid by the NHS (as opposed to having to pay £9,000 a year to study in Scotland) was annoyed that she would be charged to study in Scotland, but she said she could understand why so few Scots would leave to go to university in the rest of the UK.

I know because I've had a look at all the Scottish Universities and they're all reputable and they're all really good. So if you can go to one of them for free and get in, that's the best. Why would you not want to go to university to get it free? (Jenny, SIMD 5, North East School)

However, while pupils in the north of England were all too aware that undergraduate higher education in Scotland is free, few had realised that it is also free for European Union students. This led them to question the fairness of a system which allows different countries within the UK to charge different amounts for HE. This was partly as a result of having little understanding of what devolution means or how it works. Few understood that as a devolved administration Scotland is in charge of running higher education as it sees fit. To them, Scotland was part of Great Britain and as such should be governed by the same rules.

I don't know cause I think it's quite unfair because isn't Scotland still part of the UK at the minute? Like they are not independent yet, so why are their Universities different to ours? (Erin, SIMD 1, North East Sixth Form College)

But I just don't understand why, if we're Great Britain, and we're obviously not the same country but, basically it's like the same country, I don't understand why. I'm not bitter about it, I just don't understand why Wales and Northern Ireland and Scotland are exempt from the £9,000 a year. I just don't get that. If we're all living by the same rules and we all share the same, what's the word? Like if we all share, live by the same... lifestyle and everything, or if you're not separating us as an imaginary border, I don't understand why they're exempt from. (Harry, SIMD 1, North West Sixth Form College)

In contrast, Jalil was one of the only English respondents to note the fact that Scotland has a devolved government and is able to decide how to fund higher education.

Obviously you're part of the UK, but you still are a separate country, separate government. So if you want your country to have a better different system, it's your choice isn't it? Obviously you can't complain. So if it was the same government, that's unfair, isn't it? But you are a separate government so it's your choice. (Jalil, SIMD 1, North East Sixth Form College)

Almost a quarter of pupils who commented on who should pay for HE said that tuition should be free for all and the costs should be borne by the state. Some of the pupils echoed the sentiments of Scottish pupils regarding the principles of free HE and criticising the marketization of the current system. Sam, for example, from the north east, said 'education should not be for the privileged. Education should be something which is accessible for everybody'. He pointed to friends of his who had been discouraged from applying to university due to the fees and he was clearly concerned that this might impact on access to higher education.

I know plenty of people who are doing foundation degrees or not going at all – getting apprenticeships – because the fees intimidate them. And I think it's sad that people are intimidated to do something they love these days. I know many people who aren't going to go to university 'cause it's that expensive and it's a real shame for them. (Mark, IDACI 5, North East Sixth Form College)

Samantha from the north west also said she knew people who had been deterred by the fees. She worried about the prospect of balancing her estimated £45,000 debt with the desire to own her own home in the future.

Yeah exactly it's just like fair enough I don't think they should have put the prices up so much 'cause I know some of my friends are really smart and they just are like 'I am not going to uni, because I don't want to leave with so much debt'. And it is quite daunting, the fact that at eighteen I am going to have to consider when I get out of education I have got £45,000 debt. Then I am going to need to buy a house because I don't want to live with my parents for the rest of my life. I have got to find a job, a car. And it's just ridiculous. It's just I don't know how I am going to afford it all but it's going to have to be worth it. (Samantha, IDACI 5, North West, Sixth Form College)

The young people in the north of England expressed considerable concern about the impact of fees on access to university. They also thought that the reforms to A-levels which include removing module exams in January and replacing them with a single summer exam would be detrimental to access. Mark made reference to this, explaining that if he fails his A-levels this year he will have to pay £1,000 to re-sit because he will be 20. Several pupils from a range of different backgrounds thought that these reforms, combined with the increased cost of tuition, may have a detrimental impact on access for non-traditional students. This was the view of Sabina, from the north west of England, as can be seen below.

That will impact on more working class people, because they can't afford, people from poorer backgrounds they will have jobs, they will have to support their families, they can't afford private tutors. So my opinion of what they are doing is by doing all these changes in education, from college, and even in high schools well by cutting the coursework. That's impacting on working class people. And then if you are going to triple the tuition fees as well, that's going to completely put them off ... (Sabina, IDACI 4, North West Sixth Form College)

She directed her anger at the Prime Minister:

I would like to say to David Cameron 'can you imagine being in our shoes?' can you actually imagine it? [...] I think I'd like to put him in the position whereby he has to live as

someone who is from a poorer background. Because I don't think it's fair what the government are doing. (Sabina, IDACI 4, North West Sixth Form College)

The future of fees in England

There was a perception amongst many of the English pupils that fees may go up further in the coming years. This was seen to be the case particularly if the Conservatives remain in power. A number of young people suggested that if Labour were to win to the next election this might lead to a reduction (though not removal) of tuition fees. However, such a view was disputed by a pupil who pointed to the fact that the fees were introduced by Labour and that they would struggle to reverse the policy due to the state of the economy.

A boy in the north east of England suggested that people would still want to go to university, even if the fees went up to £20,000. He felt that £12,000 would still be 'reasonable'; however, his friend disputed this saying that would be 'ridiculous' and that £9,000 is already too much. Pupils in another north east college also suggested that fees would rise in the future. However, they said that once the fees move in to double figures this will impact on participation rates.

I think that's going to be, if they started raising it above double figures, I think that's when people are really going to be like, 'how beneficial?' Cause some people just go to university, just pick a course and just go for the experience and then realise that's not what they want to do or they're not dead set. (Laura, IDACI 2, North East Sixth Form College)

A north of England interviewee pupil also alluded to the fears of his Scottish counterparts regarding the future of free tuition in Scotland. Whilst he supported the ideology behind the policy he wondered whether it was sustainable.

But I think that will Scotland be able to finance all of the students who are in Scotland with the university thing? Or after a few years are the government going to go, 'oh we can't afford it any more' and then have to put up the prices like they did in the UK? (John, IDACI 2, North East Sixth Form College)

English pupils' attitudes towards debt

We found that English pupils were more likely to have considered the level of debt they might graduate with, in contrast to the Scottish young people who said they planned to avoid student debt as much as possible. The English pupils tended to have a more realistic sense of how much debt they might accrue – possibly as a result of having to pay the tuition fees. It may also have been because they were older and closer in time to applying university. The levels of debt accrued by graduation estimated by English pupils ranged from £100,000 (for those studying medicine) to £13,000 (maintenance costs only, fees paid by NHS). However, not all English pupils were comfortable in providing an estimate of the debt that might be accrued. A number of young people, particularly those from working class backgrounds, declined to provide a figure and said they were reluctant to think about it.

The pupils differed, then, in terms of how they responded to student debt. Students tended to fall into one of two categories: 1) those who were *resigned but accepting of debt*, saw university as an investment and were keen to go to university irrespective of the cost, and 2) those who were *resigned but resisting debt* were worried and angry about the long term consequences and questioned the benefits of going to university. We explore each of these groups in turn.

1) Resigned but accepting of debt

A term frequently heard from English pupils with regard to student debt was 'I'm not bothered'. This group of pupils put great value on the need to get a degree and it was clear that they were determined to go to university despite of, and in some cases whatever, the cost. While some in this group expressed worry about the level of debt they would accrue, they believed it would be worth it in terms of employment benefits and the chance to study a subject they loved. Pupils in this category tended to come from more working class backgrounds and often came from families where neither parent had been to university.

Amongst the English pupils, some did not know what fees were charged by the universities they had applied to, and it was clear that they had either purposefully avoided such information as they did not want to think about it, or that they thought all universities charged more or less the same fee of £9,000 so they saw little point in confirming this. Few in this group provided an estimate of how much debt they would have when they graduated, and a number said 'I don't want to think about it', such as these working class pupils from NE2.

I haven't yet but I don't really want to think about how much [debt] I'm going to end up with. (Laura, IDACI 2, North East Sixth Form College)

Yeah. I know it's going to be expensive but it's just something that I'm going to have to deal with. (Maria, IDACI 2, North East Sixth Form College)

In contrast, a working class pupil from a sixth form estimated that he could leave university with a debt of up to £100,000. He was hoping to study medicine but had failed to get the right AS Level grades so was intending to study medical sciences and then either transfer into a medical degree, or do the BSc and then do medicine as a post graduate. He discussed his feelings towards this level of debt:

...if I was to stay in England, if I was to do biomedical science and then medicine, it would probably be approaching a hundred [thousand pounds]. I seem to take it considerably less seriously than my friends do, in that it doesn't go on my credit record, and it's just going to be a bit of money each month. [...] Yeah perhaps I'm just being naïve. But I'm trying to avoid worrying about it because I don't think it's going to have too much effect. (Ross, IDACI 1, North East School)

Ross likened the fees to a 'tax', saying he 'wasn't too bothered about it because it'll get paid off gradually over decades'. Pupils in this category tended to have a good understanding of the tuition fees and loan system. They said they felt reassured about the student debt because of the way in which it was paid – coming straight out of wages, and only being repaid once earning in excess of £21,000. Unlike the Scottish pupils, nearly all the English interviewees identified the correct repayment threshold. Harry, from IDACI 1, agreed that the way in which it is repaid is important:

Yeah, because it's not immediate debt, is it? It's like you go in there and no money's physically coming out of your pocket yet. (Harry, SIDACI 1, North West Sixth Form College)

Loans for fees and maintenance costs were seen as being distinct from 'proper loans'. Jalil from the north east sixth form college said, 'it's not really proper debt. If you've got debt by a bank they'll obviously want their money back'. Pupils who said they were unfazed by the loans

repeatedly pointed to the fact that the debt is wiped after 30 years (some said it was 25, which was the case up until 2012) and suggested that they would not have to repay their loan in full anyway. Becky, a working class pupil from the north east, estimated that her debt upon graduation would be £45,000. She said 'it's not going to affect how I live, 'cause if I do end up with a crappy paid job I won't have to pay it back anyway'. Another working class pupil from the north east agreed:

Yeah my teachers in school were like just don't bother looking at the price, just go to the Uni you want to go cause you don't have to pay back [laughs], it doesn't matter. (Keeley, IDACI, North East Sixth Form College)

Some, however, noted that if they were on such low wages that they did not pay back their loan this would actually defeat the purpose of having gone to university in the first place.

I didn't really think about the cost, cause you just get loans and you pay it back, and if you don't pay it back they just write it off [...] If I'm not earning enough after university to pay off the loan, it would have been pointless going to university. (David, IDACI 1, North East Sixth Form College)

Those from more disadvantaged backgrounds also pointed to the fact that they were entitled to extra student support in the form of grants. Whilst some of these pupils said that they were determined to go to university irrespective of the costs, the grants were considered helpful in encouraging them to go to university. None of their parents had been to university and they all came from areas with very low IDACI scores. However, as with the Scottish pupils, investigating whether they are entitled to grants and bursaries appeared to be the last thing the prospective students in England did and there was poor awareness among the interviewees as to what they were entitled to. This is perhaps unsurprising as there are considerable differences between universities in the level of grants and whether some of this grant has to be taken as a fee waiver.

2) Resigned but resisting debt

The second category is made up of those English pupils who appeared resigned to the idea of debt, but were nonetheless worried and in some cases angry about the degree of debt they would accrue by going to university. English pupils within this group tended to express anger at the level of tuition fees charged and that they had increased so dramatically in a short space of time. This group were much more likely to think about the longer term problems they might face from having such large amounts of student debt.

Such worries led pupils to question the value of a degree and to consider alternatives to higher education such as apprenticeships. Sabina hoped to get a higher level engineering apprenticeship but had applied to university as a back-up. She had great misgivings about going to university due to worries about debt.

It's worrying, and I feel genuinely scared. I know they say that it won't affect your mortgage or anything like your credit notes and stuff, but for me it's just that ...yeah if you ever fell behind with any of your payments, what's the interest that's going to come on it? How long will they be paying it for? There's always going to be money taken away from me for, because it was so expensive. People who, when they were at uni, had the £3,000 loans, it will be ... well not so easy, but a lot easier for them to pay it back. And after

twenty years it can come off them because they will have paid most of it back. For us it will go on until we have retired. (Sabina, IDACI 4, North West Sixth Form College)

John, a working class pupil from the North East also said that the fears about debt had made him think carefully about whether or not to go to university. Reflecting the views of those who said they were 'not bothered' about debt, he suggested that young people are going to university without considering the consequences of such high debt.

I've been thinking about university since high school. But the impact of the fees obviously hit after that. So since I had the thought about going, it's just kept going. But I think with the fees we're thinking, 'oh we don't have to worry about it. We'll pay it back ages away. It's in the future. We'll live for now'. Because there's still people in university right now who have got the lower fees. So once that's completely out of the system I think that the lower years are going to be a bit more worried about debt. But we're still in that state where, 'oh it doesn't matter. We'll get along with it'. (John, IDACI 2, North East Sixth Form College)

John was one of only two young people out of the 148 interviewed who raised the issue of interest rates and how this impacts on the final amount which is paid back by the student. He emphasised that it is difficult to calculate how much debt you might incur because the interest rates change so frequently. He said, 'nobody really knows. To be honest we don't know how much debt we're going to be in. [it's hard to work out] because the interest rates go up all the time'. Working on the basis that he would owe a baseline figure of £40,000 (three year's fees at £27,000 plus £13,000 maintenance), he estimated the final amount he would have to repay would be £120,000. He went on to say:

'Cause I think a lot of people are going to get a shock. Especially looking at interest because it goes up 'cause it's not a fixed interest rate either with the student loans. They can go up. So depending on how the economic stage of the country goes, we could be charged even more. So basically we're just like a steady income for the government, I would say. (John, IDACI 2, North East Sixth Form College)

John, along with other pupils in the north of England complained that financial information about fees, loans and grants is often delivered in schools and colleges after applications have been made to university; he said, 'so in a way I think it's just kind of been pushed into it and then we just think, "okay, oh".'

Another pupil at the North East Sixth Form College, Mark, was also weighing up whether to go to university or to do an apprenticeship. He too questioned whether the costs of university would be outweighed by the benefits.

I don't want to think about it but... I'm reckoning about £40-£50,000 - which is a lot of money. [laughs] [...] I try not to [think about it], but I sometimes think why am I doing it? Is it really worth it? Should I really be doing this? That's why I think potentially I might end up dropping out right before I enter. It depends on how I feel at the time. (Mark, IDACI 5, North East Sixth Form College)

Discussion

This section seeks to draw out some of the key similarities and contrasts between the views of pupils in Scotland and the north of England.

Views of tuition fees

In relation to fees, young people in the two countries differed quite substantially in terms of the extent to which they believed students themselves should contribute towards the costs of HE. As might be expected, Scottish pupils were largely supportive of free tuition, while English pupils were largely supportive of some form of student contribution. Amongst Scottish interviewees, free tuition was perceived as a means of ensuring working class participation, something which pupils in the north of England also alluded to. Whilst there was greater acceptance of fees in England, where these pupils have grown up with the notion of tuition fees, there was however still significant anger amongst some interviewees with regard to the perceived high level of fees. Amongst all those pupils who supported tuition fees, be they Scottish or English, none supported the current variable fee level of £9,000 a year. Most of those in favour of tuition fees suggested that £3,000 to £4,000 a year would be more manageable and would serve not to deter prospective students from going to university.

Amongst Scottish interviewees, particularly those from more deprived areas, there was some demand for student contributions from 'those who can afford it'. However, targeted contributions were on the whole disliked by the majority of Scottish interviewees, with a preference for free tuition for all. Very few pupils in the north of England supported this notion. In both countries, some young people disliked the idea that the more affluent should contribute, borne out of alternative notions of fairness. Amongst the majority of interviewees in both countries, fairness was understood as treating everyone equally, rather than something which is based on ideas of redistributive social justice.

Despite differing with regard to their views as to who should pay for higher education, there were similarities between the wider views of Scottish and English pupils towards the concept of student contributions. Participants in both Scotland and the north of England expressed views about the fundamental right of free higher education, and the benefits that free tuition may bring with regard to widening access. They also pointed to the almost ubiquitous requirement of degrees for employment, and the emphasis placed upon higher education as a positive post-school option as reasons for greater levels of government investment in HE.

Likewise, young people in both countries raised the issue as to whether a young person 'deserves' to have their higher education paid for by the state. The idea that young people should work hard and not take their learning for granted was espoused by young people in both Scotland and the north of England. They worried that where higher education tuition is free this would encourage students to study 'for the sake of it', which might possibly lead them to 'waste' government funding. This was seen as particularly likely where young people studied subjects which did not necessarily lead to a particular career. For many interviewees, then, the intrinsic value of learning came secondary to the discourse of employability. Fears about graduate employment opportunities and estimates of accrued student debt at the end of a degree led some to question the value of higher education, particularly those in the north of England, where some interviewees were investigating the possibility of undertaking apprenticeships instead of going to university.

The recent Sodexo University Lifestyle Survey ([Sodexo, 2014](#)) found that ‘students in Scotland are less job-focused when choosing their course than those at English institutions – an idealistic streak arguably linked to the absence of tuition fees for Scottish residents’. In contrast, our Scottish interviewees appeared even more focused on finding employment after university than those in the north of England. HEA research ([2014](#)) points to ‘increasingly utilitarian language used by contemporary students, based on economically-centred discourses of investment, employability and outcomes’. It is interesting that such language was evident in Scotland where tuition is free, suggesting that such views are not entirely related to the cost of higher education but are perhaps indicative of a wider cultural shift in attitudes.

Knowledge and understanding of HE funding systems

There was a lack of knowledge and a poor understanding of student finance and loan repayments in both countries, but understanding was noticeably worse amongst Scottish pupils, and particularly amongst those from more deprived areas and those who were the first in the family to go to university. English tuition fees were seen by some Scots as upfront charges, and they also confused the loan repayment thresholds of Scotland with those of England. While understanding was somewhat better in England, pupils still had poor knowledge of grants and bursaries available to them. Pupils in both countries noted a need for improved information relating to student finance in schools and colleges and requested that it be provided prior to applying to university.

Attitudes towards debt

As can be seen in the background section of this paper, young people in Scotland would be likely to leave university with significantly smaller debts than those accrued by English pupils. Despite this, the Scottish interviewees were significantly more debt averse than their English counterparts. In Scotland, where young people had a poor understanding of the student support system (possibly linked to the larger proportion of younger S5 pupils), interviewees were very debt averse and hoped to avoid student debt as much as possible. Debt aversion was highest among those from the most deprived areas and first in family students. In contrast, in the north of England, where higher levels of debt were anticipated, young people were more accepting of debt as a normal part of going to university. Here, those from the most deprived areas and first in family students tended to be resigned to and accepting of debt. This echoes findings from HEA research ([2014](#)) which found that though debt is a concern students were resigned to its reality and were reassured by the income-contingent nature of fee repayment.

Amongst debt avoiders in Scotland, most planned to live at home whilst studying. It is worth bearing in mind that Scotland has the greatest proportion of students living at home. According to BIS ([2014](#)) half of Scots live at home, while high proportions of students in Merseyside, Greater London and the North East also live at home. Hunter Blackburn ([2014a](#)) has questioned the social equity effects of students using living at home as a strategy for keeping debt down, the limitation on choice (not just course, but level of study) that this carries and the long-term effects of that.

Many Scottish pupils, particularly those from the most deprived quintiles stated an intention to avoid debt completely or as much as possible, while north of England pupils were more likely to say that they would accrue some form of maintenance debt. As the majority of students take out a student loan, particularly those from low incomes ([SLC, 2013](#); [Hunter Blackburn 2014a](#)), it is questionable then as to how realistic some of the Scottish pupils from the more deprived quintiles were in their intention to avoid debt completely. It may be that age and stage is a factor in the

views of Scottish young people, and it would be interesting to see if fifth year pupil's attitudes towards debt changed at all in sixth year.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence from this research suggests that young people are becoming increasingly focused on the labour market opportunities that a degree can provide. Pupils in the north of England questioned the high tuition fees at English universities but accepted the principle of a student contribution to tuition fees. Scottish young people were on the whole supportive of the principle of free tuition but a quarter felt that a contribution from those able to pay might be a more sustainable option. A number of pupils, Scottish and English, felt that tuition fees might eventually deter people from poorer backgrounds to attend university. Pupils differed in their attitudes to debt with some Scottish young people, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, intending not to incur any debt. Research suggests that this is an unrealistic intention. English young people also differed in their attitudes to debt and this had led some to question the value of going to university. The level of understanding of student finance was generally poor and worse among the younger Scottish pupils, and is an area which may require further consideration from relevant bodies in the future.

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Appendix: Overview of research participants

Country	School Pseudonym	% of school leavers going to HE ***	% eligible for free school meals	SIMD/ IDACI quintile of school **	No. of interviewees	Number of participants		No. of BME pupils	No. of pupils in each SIMD/ IDACI quintiles**						Whether parents have been to university				NS-SEC occupational classification			Plans to study at...			
						Boys	Girls		1	2	3	4	5	*	Neither	One	Both	*	1-2	3-4	5-8	Home	Away	DK	*
Scotland: interviews filmed for DVD	Edinburgh North	18%	27.1%	5	3	1	2	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	1	0	0	*	*	*	3	0	0	0
	Edinburgh South	67%	3.6%	5	8	2	6	1	0	0	1	2	5	0	1	2	3	2	*	*	*	0	8	0	0
	Independent School	Unknown	Unknown	3	11	7	4	0	0	0	0	3	8	0	0	2	1	8	*	*	*	0	7	3	1
	Fife South	18%	27.8%	2	11	7	4	1	2	6	1	1	0	1	5	3	1	2	*	*	*	5	5	0	1
	Fife North	20%	34.4%	1	9	4	5	0	0	7	0	1	0	1	8	1	0	0	*	*	*	3	4	1	1
	FE College	N/A	N/A	1	8	4	4	0	1	3	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	8	*	*	*	2	0	0	6
	Glasgow North	21%	40%	1	10	7	3	0	9	0	0	0	0	1	7	0	0	3	*	*	*	9	0	1	0
	Glasgow South ****	20%	47.6%	1	15	6	9	2	6	0	2	0	0	7	9	3	0	3	*	*	*	8	0	1	6
	Western Isles	32%	9.2%	2	6	2	4	0	0	1	2	0	0	3	0	3	1	2	*	*	*	6	0	0	0
West Lothian	27%	24.5%	2	8	1	7	1	1	2	3	0	2	0	2	4	1	0	*	*	*	3	4	1	0	
Scotland In-depth interviews	Aberdeenshire	29%	9.1%	4	14	3	11	0	0	0	7	5	2	0	8	5	1	1	7	4	3	1	7	4	2
	East Lothian	58%	5.3%	5	8	1	7	0	0	0	0	3	5	0	3	3	2	0	7	1	0	0	8	0	0
	South Lanarkshire ****	34%	24.1%	2	10	5	5	0	0	3	2	3	1	1	6	4	0	0	8	2	0	9	0	0	1
England In-depth interviews	Lancashire	N/A	N/A	1	8	3	5	1	3	0	0	1	3	1	3	4	1	0	6	2	0	0	7	1	0
	Tyne & Wear North	N/A	N/A	1	11	4	7	1	4	4	2	0	1	0	8	3	0	0	2	1	8	3	6	2	0
	Tyne & Wear South ****	N/A	5.8%	3	8	4	4	3	2	1	1	1	3	0	6	1	1	0	3	5	0	3	4	1	0
Totals					148	61	87	11	28	27	24	22	30	17	68	39	12	29	33	15	11	55	60	15	18

* denotes missing data.

** SIMD is the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. IDACI is the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index. In both cases, the lower the quintile the higher the level of deprivation.

*** Note that for Scotland, this figure comes from the school leaver destination statistics for each school. The Scottish average is 36% of school leavers who go to higher education. This data was not available at a school/college level for the English institutions.

**** denotes Catholic or Christian ethos denominational school.