COMMENT

For an issue of Student to appear in the tenth week of term — in whatever form — is an extraordinary event in itself. But at the risk of sounding clichéd, these are extraordinary times, and Student feels duty-bound to continue its efforts to keep the Edinburgh University community fully informed concerning the current grants crisis.

Many students may be under the impression that Sir Keith Joseph's abandonment of tuition fees last Wednesday signified victory for the recent grants campaign. It did not. Essentially, Sir Keith Joseph remains unpersuaded of students' worsening plight, and the withdrawal of tuition fees was nothing more than an act of appeasement, a face saving compromise designed to mollify Tory backbenchers besieged by sackfuls of letters.

Sad to say, these thousands of letters written by students and their parents before last week are now redundant. The minimum grant will still disappear, and combined with the paltry 3% rise in the grant as a whole, that change must still mean increased financial hardship for many students next year.

The letter writing campaign must — inescapably, inevitably — start all over again. Once again it must be borne in upon the Government that while they calmly endeavour to balance their books in preparation for £1,500 million of tax cuts next spring, their actions will place an intolerable strain upon students. As, ironically, they too seek to juggle with debits and credits — figures the magnitude of which is a mere spit in the ocean to the Treasury.

We have won one battle. The next will be even more demanding, but it too must be won. And it can be won if we remain as determined and united in the months ahead as we have done so far. Mrs Thatcher is fond of quoting Winston Churchill; perhaps one of her quotations can provide us with our motto for the rest of the campaign. If defeat will mean penury for British students, then surely defeat, as the Prime Minister might put it, is unthinkable.
Joseph turns tail over tuition

To sounds of cheering from his own backbenchers, who had already won a division from the Opposition, Sir Keith Joseph told the House of Commons last Wednesday that he was going to scrap his plan to introduce a system of grants for students with well-off parents.

However, this plan to abolish the minimum grant remains intact, and Sir Keith told the Commons that he would institute an extensive review of financial support for students next year — which might include a system of loans to replace at least partly the current award of grants.

In what amounts to the biggest government U-turn since Mrs. Thatcher said she was not for turning, Sir Keith told the Commons, "I recognise the concern expressed in this House and elsewhere that the increase in parental contribution that was proposed was too sharp and the notice given too short to enable parents to make such a substantial adjustment in their financial affairs."

Sir Keith said in his statement that the cost of his concessions, brought about by almost 1000 Conservative backbenchers, would be £21 million. Half of this would come from savings from other aspects of the education budget, particularly scientific research, and half would be financed by the Treasury.

One of the two main officials of the Tory rebellion, Mr. Harry Greenway, said he would have performed the whole of the £21 million concession to have come from the Treasury, and accused Sir Keith of "financial nick-picking."

However, he agreed to withdraw his threat to resign as Labour's Shadow Education Secretary, Mr. Glyn Radice, accused Sir Keith of making a "humiliating climbdown" and went on to tell the rebel Conservatives that he would take them seriously when they rebelled over unemployment, the NHS, and other issues of major concern in this country.

Speaking in his capacity as Liberal Party Leader, Edinburgh University Rector, Mr. David Steel, told Sir Keith that he was "missing the point" by trying to find sums of £1 million when the Chancellor of the Exchequer was keeping £1,500 million in reserve for his cuts.

Aidan Young

There appears below a list of the Tory MPs whose concern caused tuition fees to be revoked. These backbenchers have succumbed to pressure once already, and may — though less willingly — do so again. If your MP is among them, write immediately and make clear your support for last week's compromise.

He poured scorn on the idea of student loans because experience in other countries had shown that they were unworkable and led to a high rate of drop-out and defaults on the loans. He also refuted the argument that Sir Keith has been used to use, that Britain has a "very generous system of grants, claiming that he had ignored the differences in incomes between countries: "taken as a proportion of real income, parental contributions are less than in Britain."

Robin Henshaw

Steel strikes hard at Sir Keith

"The battle is by no means over," was the message given by David Steel to students in the main library last Friday afternoon. The basement coffee room was packed out to bear him out, although many may only have been there because it was Friday afternoon. Perhaps more importantly, Steel attracted a crowd of press photographers, bringing with them the hope of some outside publicity for the library work-in and illustrating the importance of having a national figure as Rector (a point perhaps to be borne in mind in the rectoral election next term).

In his speech, Steel put his full support behind the students' case against the grant cuts. He was encouraged by Sir Keith Joseph's partial U-turn last week, saying: "This is the first time that a decision announced by the Government has been reversed as a result of pressure being put on MPs."

Mr. Steel stressed the importance of continuing to write to individual MPs and Ministers, to whom he was a fair and effective form of action than rallies and demonstrations.

Scottish universities would be hit hard, he said, because the level of parental contributions would be such as to make four-year courses much less attractive to students, and consequently many years of students in England Scots would also be disadvantaged because they came from a wider range of income groupings than English students, and would therefore be more affected by the increased contributions.

David Steel claims the Government solution is the grants ones.

"Don't be fooled. We have not won."
Poorest undergraduates for a generation

Undergraduates in the coming academic year are going to be the poorest for a generation. This is the sister reality of Sir Keith Joseph’s statements last week when the harsh truths about the already inadequate maintenance grants are considered.

Angus Erskine, EUSA Education and Welfare Adviser, spoke at length to Student this week about the implications of the cuts on already hard-pressed student population. “Education, in explaining how hard many students will be hit, Mr Erskine pointed out that already half of all parents do not receive the full parental contribution. This means that the average student now has less than £10,000 disposable income per week, because in the value of the money since the present government took office is equal to new disposable income for the average student.

A survey of a quarter of all undergraduates have already asked by the vast majority of students what to do and by the time they leave college or university.

According to Mr Erskine, the not-very-pleasant aspect of the present proposal is the amount of parental contribution. Mr Erskine pointed out that a loans system would be simply unrealizable with the level of wages rates in Britain one of the lowest in western Europe. The combined average salary of a couple of primary teachers is only about £15,000 so what incentive would potential undergraduates have to enter this line of employment if it had perhaps an EPI-£10,000 debt hanging over them.

The standard of higher education in Britain is one of the best in the world. This is continuing to be threatened by the present government, from all angles, and their increased financial pressures on students are bound to affect potential and actual students thinking about continuing education in France, where they have a long-standing loans system, the drop-out rate is a staggering 50%. Thus the real danger which faces Britain if the system is not done reverse next year’s proposed cuts. Angus Erskine, who sponsored student protests has already had an effect in influencing Sir Keith Joseph’s U-turn. For the future of further education in Britain, this pressure must be maintained.

EUSA Senior President John Mannix opens the second front.

Into the New Year....

Last week saw Sir Keith’s climb down over his proposal to impose the parental contribution towards tuition fees. Will it also, perhaps, see the Students’ Association’s climb down over its grants campaign? The answer is quite clearly ‘No’. At the moment we have no hope anything (Sir Keith) not climb down, we simply stopped him climbing a bit higher. We still have no minimum grant and that means that failure to pay parental contribution, by those who are graded for full-cost maintenance, will mean exclusion from university for their child. Even if your fees are paid, you get absolutely no maintenance payment. And you still have no real choice of university education. The argument for a minimum grant is ultimately the same as for full-cost tuition fees.

No doubt elsewhere in this supplement you will be reminded of the rest of the grants situation, i.e. they’re smaller again etc. but for now let’s move to what we’re going to do about it. Well, what we’re not going to do is ‘Sack the Tory Butchers Before They Smash Us’ etc. although we may well vote them out at the next election. It is going to be more difficult this time because those normally backbenchers probably won’t be so ready to push their luck further on grants. Also, there is bound to be some public reaction to a continuing campaign along the lines of ‘What more do those bloody students want?’, but they won’t know if they were well-organised. However, I have spoken to several MPs about what actions we are likely to have the most effect and if that effect is worth the effort and the emphasis we seem to be much as we’ve always said. Personal letters to MPs have got to continue, they have got to come from all students and all parents of students, they have got to come from all over the country, and they have got to keep coming. Only that way can we hope to continue the climb down we have started.

The letters themselves must now be different. Rather than just short angry letters containing personal evidence, they have got to be longer, better informed and containing arguments formed from wider options. We must, for instance, apply ourselves fully to those questions. If you feel that loans are a good idea, and we do, then here are people who definitely do, then you must speak out and say so. Otherwise, our discussion of the issue will ultimately be shallow and unconvincing because it has been formulated without constructive opposition. Everyone is talking about loans at the moment (that’s probably the major victory Sir Keith has scored), we have to know that subject better than anyone else and show that we do it. The Students’ Association Campaign will restart next term at grants collection in the first week. Everyone will be given information sheets including letters summaries. This is firstly to see everyone that the issue is still with us, remind everyone what has to be done and hopefully help everyone do it. SFC National Affairs Committee will meet in the first week to organise the subsequent action. Until then, don’t wait until you’re too busy to discuss it. Find out what you MP is doing as soon as you get home and write straight away.

Have a good Christmas. God bless you.
Solid support for library work-in

Last Friday’s speech by Rector David Steel was perhaps the high
point of a week’s worth of events in which even the sleeping hours of some of the
occupiers was a valid contribu-
tion. Mr Steel’s speech came
early 43 hours into the 52-hour
vigil, and was one of several contributions to the grants debate
which took place in the library
coffee-room.

On Wednesday night students
were addressed by the President
of MUS Scotland, Alan Smart, in
this wake of Sir Keith Joseph’s
announcement of the withdrawal of his plan for tuition fees, and the
awakening of the loans scheme debate, a possibility which was
adamantly rejected by Mr Smart
last week.

The following evening Mr. John
Duffy, branch secretary of the
Association of University Teachers, and an Edinburgh
University lecturer himself,
delivered a broadside upon the
government’s education policy,
bolstering only the six-week
stalemate of the minimum grant, but also denouncing the cuts in education
expenditure. At a while, Mr Duffy
also made specific reference to the
unhappy prospect of student loans, pointing not only to the
curiously declining graduate un-
employment rate, but also to the
lagging rate of graduates who
enter the teaching profession, and

Sleep catches up with the library protesters.

who are also, as the current EUS
action has endeavoured to
illustrate, in an unenviable
financial situation.

The work-in closed with a
discussion of the present sit-
tuation, led by Union President
Robin O’Neill and SRC view-
point Affairs representative Robbie Foy. Despite the doubts which had
surrounded the work-in
advance, it again appears to have
proved a useful tactic, causing
little disruption and remaining
orderly throughout. As on the
previous occasion when a library
work-in took place, some students
were happy merely to use the
opportunity to do some much
needed revision, but neverthe-
less, the sheer numbers of students who packed the reading
rooms and cafeterias after the final bell
each night contributed to an
impressive display of unity and
commitment. The weight of this
late-term protest which took
place after the abandonment of
tuition fees last Wednesday
afternoons may provide a healthy indication of the enthusiasm
which Sir Keith Joseph is still to
suffer.

Rally keeps up Scottish momentum

The initial flurry of publicity is
already dying down—such is the
nature of the media. Certainly,
there were fewer students at last
Wednesday’s central Scottish rally
against the cuts in Edinburgh
that would have been expected even a
week earlier.

Perhaps the previous week’s
London rally had really helped
my hopes too high. As I arrived in the
Grassmarket in time to see the
talking spots of the student activists
ready to spring from the shadows.
By Edinburgh standards, there
were too few but ‘not bad’. But ‘not bad’ isn’t
good enough. Maybe it was too
close to the end of term, too close
to exams, too many other things to
worry about. This isn’t a fight that
can be won by taking it over a
coffee in the library basement.

Yet there was evidence of some
commitment from those present—
representatives of college and
university societies from Paisley
to Aberdeen. There were complaints from each of lack of publicity
from the police this time, which
was well in advance and kept a
merry low profile as the march
wound its way up to the High
Street and down the Mound.

There was a token sit-down on
Princes Street outside the Hu-
manist Hotel. The more
members of the march left this
wasn’t enough and attempted
similar action on the roundabout
outside the Princes, the eventual
destination Rally stewards trying to move people
were greeted with cries of ‘what’s your
middle name? Joseph?’

Numbers had increased to
about 3,000 by now—a good
tale Students filled into the Playhouse,
folding banners haphazardly—‘You’re
a good kid’ said a voice nearby, echoing my own thoughts.

Divisions became apparent in
the audience as the action was
and the BBC camera couldn’t
decide whether to stay or
leave. The NUM speaker, unfortu-
nately not on the O200 level of
word manipulation, split the
left, who were eager to hear
their version of events from everybody else. If this is any indication of future
trends, our cause may be found in
Scotland on the University of
Edinburgh platform.

The comeback of the cinema
was half a century ago, and the

BEYOND 65
BRITAIN’S
BIGGEST
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