

# Sheila Riddell: The education class ceiling



by **SHEILA RIDDELL**

Does free higher education necessarily lead to fairer access to our universities, asks Sheila Riddell

Free undergraduate tuition is one of the areas of social policy where Scotland is distinctively different from the rest of the UK. Indeed, with undergraduate tuition fees set at £9,000 per annum for the majority of courses, England now has the highest level of tuition fees in Europe. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also charge high fees to students from the rest of the UK, but have a range of arrangements for home students. For example, the Welsh government covers any amount above £3,575 for Welsh domiciled students studying in or outwith Wales, whereas Scottish students can only benefit from free tuition if they study in Scotland. Overall, the pattern of loans, grants and bursaries available is extremely complicated.

Free higher education in Scotland is justified on the grounds that charging fees, either up-front or deferred, would deter bright students from poorer backgrounds. It is, therefore, important to examine the evidence on whether the absence of tuition fees in Scotland has led to an increase in higher education participation by students from poorer backgrounds, particularly in the ancient universities (Glasgow, Aberdeen, St Andrews and Edinburgh), which are more selective in their recruitment.


More 16-30-year-olds enter higher education in Scotland compared with England (56.1 per cent compared to 47 per cent in 2011-12). This is because Scotland has a large number of students on HNC and HND programmes in colleges, many of whom are from poorer backgrounds.


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Overall, young people from poorer backgrounds are much less likely to go to university compared with their socially advantaged peers. As shown in the graphic, about 80 per cent of students in the ancient universities come from professional and managerial backgrounds and 19 per cent are from working-class backgrounds. The proportion of students from poorer backgrounds has actually declined slightly – in 2002-3, the proportion was 21 per cent. When we compare the social profiles of the pre-1992 universities in England and Scotland, we find they are very similar.

Students from independent schools are also markedly over-represented in the ancient universities. About 6 per cent of Scottish pupils attend independent secondary schools (a slightly higher proportion in England), yet these students make up about 35 per cent of undergraduates at St Andrews University, 20 per cent at Edinburgh and Aberdeen and about 15 per cent at Glasgow University. These proportions have remained fairly constant over the past four years.

The question then arises as to why free undergraduate tuition has so far failed to alter the social profile of students in Scottish universities. Similarly, we might have expected the introduction of variable tuition fees in England in 2004 to have increased social inequality in universities south of the Border, but this does not appear to have happened either.

There are a number of possible explanations. First, the introduction of variable fees in England provoked anxiety about deterring bright students from poorer backgrounds and, as a result, there was significant investment in widening access initiatives. For example, in 2010-11, England invested £371.5 million in widening access initiatives, compared with £10.4m in Scotland. In addition, in 2004 England established the Office For Fair Access. Ofaa required all universities charging variable fees to submit an access agreement specifying the plans for bursaries and other forms of financial support for students from low income families and details of outreach activity being undertaken. Institutions were also required to submit an annual monitoring return, setting out the progress they had made in raising participation of students from under-represented groups.

As fees are not charged to students living in Scotland, student support has in the past been less generous and institutions have been under less pressure to provide financial assistance to those from poorer backgrounds. The Scottish Government is clearly concerned about this and under its higher education reform programme has introduced what is described as “the best and simplest support package in the UK”. From August 2013, in addition to free tuition, Scottish students with a family income of less than £17,000 per year will receive an annual income of £7,250 through a combination of bursaries and loans.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) now requires universities to submit annual outcome agreements reporting on performance in a number of areas, including widening access, and will soon have powers to penalise institutions deemed to be making insufficient progress in this area. Institutions have been encouraged to recruit more students from less advantaged backgrounds by the provision of additional places earmarked for this group.

It is also interesting to consider why the increase in top-up fees in England has had less of a deterrent effect on students from poorer backgrounds than was predicted by some (although there appears to have been a decrease in part-time and mature students). It may be that young people from across the social spectrum are less debt averse than expected. As long as fees are deferred and repayment only begins when earnings have reached a reasonable level, young people will continue to opt for a university education because of the benefits it confers.

The long-term consequences of high levels of student debt are impossible to predict. A reduction in the earnings threshold for repayment, for example, or a squeeze in the graduate employment market, might have a negative impact on students’ willingness to incur debt at university, with a particularly chilling effect on poorer students.

Major questions arise in relation to what can be done to make access to university fairer. Most Scottish universities now operate contextualised admissions policies, so that the type of school attended is taken into account when an offer of a place is made. Research by Laurence Lasselle and colleagues at St Andrews University shows that examination results alone are an incomplete measure of academic ability and the probability of success at university. Students with three A grades at Higher at schools with below-average levels of performance are likely to do better than students with similar grades from above-average performing schools. Developing more sophisticated contextualised admissions policies is, therefore, a priority.

As noted, all universities in Scotland are now required to submit outcome agreements to the SFC. Among other things, these documents illustrate a range of widening access initiatives, including outreach work, summer schools and buddying programmes. While many initiatives appear promising, so far there is not a robust evidence base on what works in particular contexts. Students from non-traditional backgrounds have higher drop-out rates than others, so there is a need for further investment in support services. Many universities, particularly those charging higher fees to students from the rest of the UK, are offering generous bursaries to students from poorer backgrounds. Again, the impact of such schemes requires further investigation. Going to university clearly has a positive impact on young people’s

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social and economic life changes. University graduates not only earn more on average, but also have more liberal attitudes and outlooks. Universities contribute a great deal not only to the social, cultural and economic life of the nation, but also bring enormous benefits to the individual. University education may be even more important in the future, as economic forecasts suggest the greatest increase in jobs will be in the high-skilled sector.

While the Scottish Government and universities have worked to promote fair access, more needs to be done. Free undergraduate tuition may in future contribute to the creation of a fairer society, but to date has not markedly altered the pattern of recruitment to Scottish universities. Further measures are needed, including greater efforts to reduce social inequalities in school attainment and to support students once they are enrolled in higher education.

According to research consultant John Curtice and Rachel Ormston, a senior research director at ScotCen Social Research, public support for free undergraduate tuition in Scotland has fallen over the past decade, as it has in England. Only 20 per cent of people in Scotland now believe that no students should have to pay tuition fees, compared with 18 per cent in England. It is clearly the case that universal free tuition is of greatest benefit to those who are already socially advantaged.

As part of the debate on constitutional futures, there is a need to re-examine the causes and consequences of social inequality, and to identify concentrations of power and privilege that undermine Scotland's view of itself as a fair and collectivist society. Unequal access to higher education contributes to growing social inequality in Scotland, the rest of the UK and much of the developed world. By the same token, breaking or reducing the link between social class background and participation in higher education is likely to produce a more socially just and cohesive society.

• Sheila Riddell is an ESRC Professorial Fellow based in the School of Education, University of Edinburgh

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Harrbrian

12:02 PM on 30/05/2013

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Perhaps article on this topic should also consider the links between social mobility and economic performance: it seems that those countries that have low social mobility, UK and USA, are more economically reliant on immigrants because they make worse use of their locally born talent pool. The countries of Northern Europe, all of whom are more economically successful than the UK, also have more social mobility and less income inequality. (There is no country on earth with high social mobility and high income inequality, and the UK is the least socially mobile and the most unequal country in Western Europe, bar Portugal).

Furthermore, although admirable, these attempts to make better use of Scotland's talent pool look a bit like trying to do detailed work while looking through the wrong end of a telescope. The latest US research shows that the real game changing cognitive development (verbal and social skills, confidence etc) takes place in a child's earliest years and that if you want to make better use of your population's talents, as well as saving a fortune on welfare and justice systems, it is better to spend as much money as early as possible in every child's life, especially those from disadvantaged homes. Later spending on secondary schools, trying to widen university access, etc is expensive and has minimal effect.

The SNP at least deserve some credit for trying to do the right thing, not just from the point of view of a fairer society, but more importantly for trying to lay the educational foundations of economic success. I hope they also try and get business wide agreement on a North European style apprenticeship system. similar to the agreement between business, unions and Berlin in Germany. Certainly I can't see Westminster even beginning to think in these terms.



KingDuncIII

10:22 AM on 30/05/2013

Rate: (1) (1)

Universally free university tuition is a nonsense when it is coupled with a drive to get more people into higher education. The only result is a massive burden on the public purse. Even in the days of student grants, the number of people from poor backgrounds who went to university was markedly lower than those from privileged backgrounds. In Scotland it has also had the effect of driving academics south where they can work in better-funded departments.

The solution is to introduce a sliding scale of tuition, run by the universities themselves rather than the Scottish Government, which would be similar to those run by private schools. The majority of students should pay full fees with a percentage of this money paid into bursaries or scholarships which only people from poor background can apply for.

At the same time, there needs to be an expansion in technical colleges or similar sorts of institutions, with a drive to ending the snobbery associated with this form of education. Many people who go to university would be better served by this kind of study.

There also needs to be an end to the drive to push students into university by teachers. I enjoyed university but many people I know didn't and lament going because it hasn't benefited their careers. People shouldn't be made to feel they have to go to get a good job, often they would be better served by just getting a job at 18 or 19. Unfortunately, too few teachers go into the profession with experience outside the classroom and, as a result, hand out appalling career advice (speaking from experience here).

1 reply



Graham

10:14 AM on 30/05/2013

Rate: (0) (3)

Jambo 25

Is it your view that there is a formula for ending inequality of any kind? An awful lot of people appear to believe that there is - that by voting yes in the referendum, deeply complex problems can and will be solved quickly. If you don't believe me, may I suggest you go to Yes Scotland meetings involving Blair Jenkins (CEO) and Dennis Canavan (chair). I heard them attributing to Westminster blame for the major health inequalities in Glasgow. Vote Yes, they urged, and hey presto!

There aren't easy answers, there aren't formulas.

But there are examples of projects which appear to have had a substantial and beneficial impact on aspects of inequality. One which comes to mind is the Bromley by Bow in Tower Hamlets, London. Tower Hamlets has the highest rate of child poverty in London (43%), much higher than most areas of Scotland. The highest

has the highest rate of child poverty in London (42%), much higher than most areas of Scotland. The highest rate in Scotland is Glasgow (33%).

<http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/why-end-child-poverty/poverty-in-your-area>

The Bromley by Bow Centre is making a major, positive, impact. Its approach is a holistic and co-operative one. They aim to support people across a range of projects and services in 4 main ways:

1. Supporting people to overcome chronic illness and unhealthy lifestyles;
  2. Enabling people to learn new skills;
  3. Supporting people to become less grant dependent and to find work;
  4. Providing people with the tools to create an enterprising community.
- <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/bromley-by-bow-centre>

The Centre is the third largest provider of adult education and training in Tower Hamlets.

<http://www.bbbc.org.uk/pages/learning.html>

Pass rates for exams in Tower Hamlets exceed those for England as a whole - and are improving.

[http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/news\\_\\_events/news/january-1/gcse\\_passes\\_in\\_tower\\_hamlets\\_a.aspx](http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/news__events/news/january-1/gcse_passes_in_tower_hamlets_a.aspx)

There are places where major improvements are being achieved and sustained - for a whole variety of reasons - from which we can learn (if we seriously want to). There isn't a magic formula - even winning an independence referendum.

2 replies



Jambo 25

9:24 AM on 30/05/2013

Rate: (3) (1)

OK Graham, tell us your formula for ending educational inequality.

2 replies



Graham

5:00 AM on 30/05/2013

Rate: (1) (8)

"Yes Scotland" chair Dennis Canavan regularly tells audiences that free university tuition is one of the Scottish policies of which he is most proud, that it is one of the most compelling reasons for supporting independence for Scotland.

But universal free tuition is of greatest benefit to those who are already socially advantaged, as Sheila Riddell compellingly demonstrates here. The people who are paying for this policy are people from more deprived communities in Scotland, the people affected most by cuts in college budgets.

<http://www.studentnewspaper.org/24-6-million-to-be-cut-from-college-budget-despite-email-campaign/>

Yes Scotland may be proud of policies entrenching privilege. That is their right. But many of us want to see a very different kind of Scotland from the one they favour. People like me want to see inequality - in education and on many other fronts - reduced, not embedded.

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