

# Robin Parker: Education debate should be on access



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IT WAS to be welcomed to see Professor Sheila Riddell (Perspective, 30 May) highlight many of the injustices that exist in access to education.

Higher education has a crucial role in tackling our social and economic inequalities and our whole education system should be about getting people from all backgrounds to reach their full potential.

However, I disagreed with some of the implied connections made between unfair access and free education. Another well-rehearsed debate on tuition fees misses the point. What we need is to find ways to remove barriers, not resurrect ones we've already tackled.


Research suggests there are three key building blocks to fair access:

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increased financial support for the poorest students; a culture change among universities, with increased local access activity, regulated through national legislation; and thirdly, not having the huge financial barrier of tuition fees.

And as a consequence of NUS Scotland's pressure over the last few years, we are seeing genuine action in all three areas.

Scotland is rightly investing huge sums in our universities, closing any funding gap with England, allowing them to at least match the money English institutions spend on access.

The Scottish Funding Council is spending more than £40 million per year on widening access and retention, with more than £35m a year of places specifically for people from college and deprived backgrounds. There's also crucial legislation on widening access currently going through parliament right now.

So, far from a lack of prioritisation or investment in this area, it seems to me we're outstripping the rest of the UK. All without the need for fees.

We know universities can't do it all on fair access but they can do much more. We should all do more.

With the political and financial focus we have rightly fought for and won, we want to see a change in fair access over the coming years.

The debate here shouldn't be about tuition fees or no fees. How can fees and debt of many thousands of pounds actually encourage people to from poorer backgrounds to go to higher education. The debate should be about how we widen access.

- Robin Parker is president of NUS Scotland.

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