

Free university tuition a middle-class benefit, says SNP's 'hand-picked' principal

The abolition of tuition fees has not helped the poorest Scots win a university place and has mainly benefited the middle classes, a principal hand-picked by SNP ministers to review higher education has said.



Mike Russell, Scotland's Education Minister, has insisted 'free' tuition is helping poorer children attend university Photo: PA

By Simon Johnson, Scottish Political Editor

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Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski said Scotland has to “get over this idea” that providing taxpayer-funded tuition encourages youngsters from deprived communities to get a degree.

Instead he argued the “main beneficiaries” are middle-class parents, who no longer have to pay fees for children who would be more likely go to university anyway.

The principal of Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen said new targets for universities to “widen access” to poorer children are a “substitute” for action tackling the real underlying problem.

His intervention is highly embarrassing for Mike Russell, the Scottish Education Minister, who personally chose Prof von Prondzynski to conduct a review of higher education governance.

Mr Russell last week rejected similar claims by Prof Sheila Riddell, of Edinburgh University's School of Education, that scrapping fees had not "markedly altered" the number of working class students in higher education.

Prof Riddell pointed out that the proportion of students from low-income backgrounds has not changes since fees were abolished and the situation is no worse in England, where universities charge up to £9,000 per year.

In an interview with Holyrood magazine, Prof von Prondzynski said: "We need to get over this idea that just because the higher education in Scotland is free, that that somehow supports people from poorer backgrounds – it doesn't.

"I'm not going to argue the case against free higher education, but you have to be aware of the fact that the main beneficiaries of that are the middle classes, not the disadvantaged."

The academic was critical of universities' record of increasing the number of places for poorer students, dismissing their arguments that admitting more may compromise standards.

However, he was equally scathing of the new "widening access targets" introduced by Mr Russell, whereby universities must admit more youngsters from deprived areas or faced having some of their public funding withheld.

"I'm afraid that this will be seen as a substitute for doing the things that actually need to be done," he said.

The professor said universities should instead establish better links with schools, nurseries and even crèches so they can track bright children through the education system.

This would help the youngsters "be prepared early on for a possible career" that includes a university degree, he argued.

The SNP abolished tuition fees for Scottish and EU students shortly after taking power in 2007, with Alex Salmond recently promising the policy would be enshrined in the written constitution of an independent Scotland.

However, Prof Riddell pointed out last week the proportion of students at from working class backgrounds at Scotland's ancient universities has fallen from 21 per cent in 2002/03 to 19 per cent.

The proportion has remained "fairly constant" since fees were abolished and is "very similar" to that for English universities, she said.

St Andrews University last year urged ministers to question whether “there is something wrong throughout the whole equation” instead of continuing to “beat up our leading universities for failing to admit more kids from our most deprived areas.”

A Scottish Government spokesman said: “Not having to pay fees is clearly good news for students, but having the potential and the drive to succeed are what makes the most difference.”

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