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Abolition of graduate endowment has failed to widen access



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Tuesday 11 June 2013

THE scrapping of a fee paid by Scottish graduates on completion of their studies has not led to an increase in participation from poorer students, research shows.

One of the first actions of the SNP Government when it came to power in 2007 was to scrap the £2289 graduate endowment fee.

Fiona Hyslop, the then Education Secretary, said the move would help tackle student debt, which she described as a real deterrent to some young people.

However, academics from Edinburgh University said that, by 2010, policies on fees in Scotland "did not result, as might have been expected, in a greater widening of access".

The report also highlights a lack of progress on widening access at English universities, where fees of £3000 were being charged at the time – although that has now increased to £9000.

Researchers said even the lower level of fees had reinforced established admission patterns, with proportions of students from different social backgrounds remaining static. In fact, they found evidence privately educated students had increased their concentration in older universities such as Oxford and Cambridge.

Professor David Raffé, from the university's Centre for Educational Sociology, said: "Our findings provide little comfort either for the market-led philosophy, which is driving higher education in England, or for the claim that free tuition in Scotland promotes wider access for working-class students."

Robin Parker, president of NUS Scotland, said the report proved the "myth" tuition fees could encourage poorer students, but Universities Scotland said access had improved since 2006. "There are 2000 more students from the most deprived areas of Scotland studying in our universities now compared to seven years ago," said a spokeswoman.

A Scottish Government spokeswoman said more would be done over the next few years, adding: "We are currently legislating to deliver statutory force to agreements with Scotland's universities to widen access."

Meanwhile, Edinburgh Napier became the first university in Scotland to publish its outcome agreement for 2013/14 – the document that sets targets for institutions in return for public funding.

The university has agreed to maximise applications from Scottish school-leavers, widen access and boost the number of women studying science.

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