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Inside Track: There's too little evidence for tuition fee judgment

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Research published by Edinburgh University earlier this week on the social mix of students at UK universities was as fascinating for the response it provoked as for what it told us.

The study by the university's Centre for Educational Sociology looked at participation trends in universities between 1996 and 2010 and concluded that, despite different tuition fee regimes in operation across the UK, the proportions of students from different social backgrounds had remained largely the same – apart from a slightly greater concentration of private school pupils at a handful of the most prestigious institutions in England.

"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," was the view from Professor David Raffe, who led the research.

Despite this cautionary approach there was no shortage of those with an established view willing to use the research to justify their positions. Robin Parker, president of NUS Scotland, said the report disproved the "myth" that tuition fees could encourage poorer students, adding: "It's always been obvious that burdening our poorest students with tens of thousands of pounds of fees wouldn't make anyone more likely to go to college or university, but this report is proof, if proof were needed."

A leader column in another Scottish newspaper argued the report proved the abolition of tuition fees in Scotland had simply "not done what it said on the tin" and concluded that sticking to the policy made no sense.

It is not the intention of this column to agree or disagree with either perspective, but it is a little concerning if such firm conclusions are being drawn from this research alone.

The Edinburgh University study made a direct correlation between the abolition of tuition fees and the expectation that it would lead to greater social mobility, but the policy has always been much wider than this in its intentions, seeking to benefit all who are capable of going to university, regardless of social class, and allowing graduates to begin working life as free from debt as possible.

In addition, a crucial sentence in the report, which went unreported, said researchers had found working class applicants "were less likely to receive an offer" from universities than comparable peers. That opens up the possibility that more working class students have applied to university after all, but institutions have not let them in.

Crucially, the research tells us nothing about the most significant period in tuition fee history – from 2010 to the present day – when maximum tuition fees in England trebled to £9000 a year. Surely it would be advisable to know what impact that increase has had on social mobility, as well as examining other barriers faced by working class students, before reaching any definitive conclusions on the merits or otherwise of fees.

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