

SNP's 'free degrees' fail to help poor students

By Simon Johnson
Scottish Political Editor

THE abolition of tuition fees has not encouraged more Scottish children from poor families to go to university, according to an expert report that raised major doubts about whether the flagship SNP policy is good value for taxpayers.

Researchers from Edinburgh University also discovered that there has been a slight increase in deprived youngsters attending English universities despite charges of up to £9,000 per year south of the Border. They said the findings raised concerns that the SNP's pledge to provide taxpayer-funded degrees merely serves to "concentrate resources on those who are already relatively advantaged".

Alex Salmond has claimed the Scottish Government's system means access to higher education is based on the "ability to learn, not the ability to pay".

But the report found that English universities spent more than three times as much as their Scottish peers on financial packages for poor students, thanks to their income from fees.

Education academics from Edinburgh made the assessment in a report on widening access to higher education submitted to the Economic and Social Research Council.

Ferdinand von Prondzynski, the university principal hand-picked by SNP minis-

ters to review higher education, has previously said that abolishing tuition fees mainly benefited the middle classes.

John Lamont, the Scottish Tory chief whip, said the findings confirmed that the main factor in whether a child attends university was aspiration, not finance.

"All the SNP's approach achieves is a hefty bill for the taxpayer," he said.

The report examined the admission records of English and Scottish universities in helping poor students win places as the fees policies at Westminster and Holyrood have diverged markedly.

In 2008 SNP ministers abolished an endowment graduates had to pay after finding a job but the researchers said this "has not led to increased representation of students from more socially deprived backgrounds".

In contrast, they said "there has been a slight increase in the proportion of applications from students from poorer backgrounds" in England.

Although English students are charged up to £9,000 per year, they can take out a loan to cover the cost that they do not start repaying until they get a job with a salary of more than £21,000.

The lack of fees in Scotland has meant that initiatives to widen access have had "lower priority" and less funding than in England, the report found.

English universities devoted £371.5mil-

lion to helping the poor in 2010-11 compared with only £10.4million in Scotland, with the report stating the former figure was "considerably more generous".

The amount of grants available to poorer Scots has fallen and the funding packages offered north of the Border are virtually the same regardless of the student's wealth.

The report said tuition fees were a "particularly important issue" when public spending was being squeezed.

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "The gap is closing between the most and least disadvantaged, however we accept that we need to do more."

"That is why we have taken action to ensure access to university is based on ability to learn, not the ability to pay and why we do not charge our students tuition fees."



End of tuition fees 'failed to boost poorer students'

By **Graham Grant**
Home Affairs Editor

SCRAPPING tuition fees has failed to encourage poorer people to go to Scottish universities, a study has found.

The Scottish Government's abolition of fees 'has not been redistributive in its effect', according to Edinburgh University experts.

Ironically, England has seen 'a slight increase in the proportion of applications from students from poorer backgrounds' since £9,000-a-year tuition fees were introduced.

The researchers published their findings in a submission to the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Future of the UK and Scotland project.

Their report states: 'The Scottish Government has introduced what it describes as "the best and simplest support package in the UK".

'However, the amount of funding available to poorer students in grant aid has diminished and there is very little difference in the overall funding package available to students from more and less socially advantaged backgrounds. In addition, funding packages available to students from poorer backgrounds are considerably more generous elsewhere in the UK.

'Scotland has adopted a universalist approach to higher education funding, treating all students virtually the same, irrespective of family background, but this has not been redistributive in its effect.'

Students from professional and managerial backgrounds are much more likely to study in ancient universities, while socially deprived students are more likely to study in universities established after 1992.

'There has been little change in institutional profiles over time,' the report said. 'The abolition of the graduate endowment in Scotland in 2008 has not led to increased representation of students from

socially deprived backgrounds.

'It is still too early to be sure of the impact of much higher deferred fees in England, but early analysis suggests that there has not been a drop in applications from students from more socially disadvantaged backgrounds.'

ESRC research fellow Professor Sheila Riddell said: 'Universities and the Westminster and Scottish Governments have the stated ambition of widening access. But we continue to see students from more advantaged backgrounds over-represented at the most selective higher education institutions in Scotland and England.'

Scottish Tory chief whip John Lamont said: 'The issue is aspiration above anything else. We want everyone in Scotland to have the opportunity to go to university.

'The way to do that is to go into schools where university entrance is low and attempt to increase the aspiration of the pupils there. All

'The issue is aspiration'

the SNP's approach achieves is a hefty bill for the taxpayer, which in itself hinders Scottish students in the long run.'

A Scottish Government spokesman said: 'The gap is closing between the most and least disadvantaged. However, we accept that we need to do more.

'That is why we have taken action to ensure access to university is based on ability to learn, not the ability to pay – and why we do not charge our students tuition fees.'

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Ending uni fees 'hasn't encouraged the poor'

THE abolition of tuition fees has not encouraged poorer people to go to university, research suggests.

Edinburgh University analysts found little evidence the change has led to more disadvantaged youngsters deciding to go to uni.

But the number of students from poorer backgrounds has seen a slight increase in England since the UK government increased fees to £9,000 a year.

However, fee-free Scotland did avoid the dip in applications from mature students which happened in England.

Fewer than ten per cent of pupils in Scotland and England go to private schools but they make up 40 per cent of pupils at Oxford and Cambridge and 20 per cent of pupils at Edinburgh, Aberdeen, St Andrews and Glasgow universities.

Students from professional backgrounds are more likely to study in ancient universities, while socially deprived students are more likely to study in universities established after

by **KIRSTEEN PATERSON**

1992. Researchers said funding packages for students from deprived backgrounds are considerably less generous in Scotland and the amount of help available in grant aid has diminished.

The report adds that Scotland has adopted a universalist approach to funding, treating all students the same irrespective of family background, but this has not been redistributive in its effect

Prof Sheila Riddell said: 'Universities and the Westminster and Scottish governments have the stated ambition of widening access. Scotland has been slightly behind England in initiatives aimed at widening access in the past, and is now placing more emphasis on this issue.

'But we continue to see students from more advantaged backgrounds over-represented at the most selective higher education institutions in Scotland and England.'



Report casts doubt on student support claims

CLAIMS by the Scottish Government that it offers the “best” and “most generous” package of financial support to students in the UK have been undermined in a new report.

Researchers from Edinburgh University found the amount of grant funding available to poorer students had actually diminished under the SNP as they moved towards repayable loans.

And the report said there was “very little difference” in the overall funding package available to students from more and less socially advantaged backgrounds.

The issue was raised in a submission to the Economic and Social Research Council’s independence referendum research project by Edinburgh University academic Professor Sheila Riddell.

Her report states: “Fund-

ing packages available to students from poorer backgrounds are considerably more generous elsewhere in the UK.

“Scotland has adopted a universalist approach to higher education funding, treating all students virtually the same irrespective of family background, but this has not been redistributive in its effect.”

The report also repeated

the findings of a publication by Edinburgh University academics which said there was little evidence the SNP’s abolition of tuition fees had encouraged more poorer people to go to university.

Less than a tenth of pupils in Scotland and England go to private school, but they make up over a fifth of pupils at Edinburgh, Aberdeen, St Andrews and Glasgow universities.



Universities must take steps to widen access

CHRIS MARSHALL

SCOTLAND'S universities have a "major problem" with unequal participation from different social groups, a new report has found.

The study by academics at Edinburgh University found that 80 per cent of students at the country's "ancient" universities come from professional or managerial backgrounds.

The study, part of ongoing research by the Economic and Social Research Council, follows up an earlier report which found scrapping tuition fees had done little to widen access.

The latest report said that despite growing divergence between England and Scotland, the social make-up of universities on either side of the Border had remained largely the same.

Professor Sheila Riddell, one of the report's authors, said: "Universities and the Westminster and Scottish governments have the stated ambition of widening access. That's the intention. Scotland has been slightly behind England in initiatives aimed at widening access in the past, and it is now placing more emphasis on this issue.

"But we continue to see students from more advantaged backgrounds over-represented at the most selective higher education institutions in Scotland and England."

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "The gap is closing between the most and least disadvantaged, however we accept that we need to do more. That is why we have taken action to ensure access to university is based on ability to learn, not the ability to pay and why we do not charge our students tuition fees.

"We are building on this with the best package of student support in the UK, support that will ensure that the poorest students receive an income of at least £7,250 and all students have access to a loan of £4,500. All of this has been delivered in partnership with the NUS who have been clear from the outset that it is the money we are putting in student pockets that is key.

"In order to make more progress, we have funded extra places this year specifically for students to get young people from deprived backgrounds into university."

