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Major questions over university access

Letter of the week

by Will Peakin | Oct 07, 2013 | No Comments

Professor Sheila Riddell

Research Fellow, Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

One of the fundamental principles underpinning the Scottish education system is the meritocratic idea that, irrespective of social background, all children should have an equal opportunity to develop their academic potential. Scottish Government representatives are emphatic that 'education in Scotland should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay'.

However, official statistics show that the majority of young people who go to university in Scotland are from middle class backgrounds, and that, in the most selective older universities, about 80 per cent of students are from professional and managerial backgrounds. This mirrors the situation in the rest of the UK – despite the two countries' different funding policies and accompanying approaches to widening access to higher education since Scottish devolution. Unless one subscribes to the view that academic ability is concentrated in the middle classes, major questions arise as to how a system based on meritocratic principles produces highly unequal outcomes.

In line with the European Union's goal of severing the association between social background and higher education participation, and irrespective of the outcome of the referendum, Scotland needs to consider what can be done to erode these inequalities.

Our think tank on widening access to higher education, which is part of the ESRC-funded Future of the UK and Scotland programme, raises a series of questions with regard to the creation of inequality in higher education in Scotland, the rest of the UK and other jurisdictions.

As part of the ESRC's *Future of the UK and Scotland Programme*, the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity is looking at the future of higher education, and will present some of its findings at a seminar this week (8 October). Academics and policy makers from Scotland, England and other parts of Europe will discuss what future differences might emerge in widening participation and fair access in Scotland and the rest of the UK. They will also consider some of the evidence on 'what works' in this area. Further details available at <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/education/rke/centres-groups/creid/projects/he-in-scotland/he-in-scotland>

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Will Peakin

Beginning as a reporter on weekly newspapers in the North-East of England, Will moved to Glasgow and worked as a freelance for a number of UK national newspapers. In 1990 he was appointed News Editor of Scotland on Sunday and in 1995, Scotland Editor of The Sunday Times. In 1999, he and his family moved to the south-west of France where he wrote for The Sunday Times Magazine. Returning to Scotland in 2002, he was Assistant Editor (Features) and Deputy Editor at The Scotsman before joining Holyrood Magazine in 2004. He writes for the magazine's business pages and edits its series of...

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