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After a decade and a half of devolution, UK HE policy is still interconnected: Interview with Prof Sheila Riddell

The academic studying devolution's legacy in higher education says either referendum result will bring change

by Paris Gourtsoyannis Nov 20, 2013 No Comments



Few policies define Scottish devolution the way free university tuition does. Fees were the first issue on which the Scottish Parliament went its own way, breaking with Westminster within a few months of being established and setting the tone for future battles such as over free personal care for the elderly. It is both one of the highest profile devolution 'giveaways'; in his recent 'megapoll' of Scottish attitudes to devolution, supporters of every major party cited free tuition as the Scottish Parliament's second 'main achievement', after free prescriptions. It is a rallying cry for the SNP and a cause for ambivalence for Scottish Labour. Heading into next year's referendum, it will therefore be used as a key dividing line between Holyrood and Westminster.

The referendum may also present the policy's biggest challenge. Despite its significance, free tuition has been relatively unburdened with scrutiny since it was enacted in 2008. A research fellowship forming part of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 'Future of the UK and Scotland' programme is trying to rectify that. The University of Edinburgh's Professor Sheila Riddell has been charged with examining Scotland's devolved record on higher education, and is challenging the central justification of Scotland's fee policy – that it helps the poorest members of society get into university. Riddell also questions the inherent stability of a funding system that she says is more reliant on decisions at Westminster than consensus would have you believe.

"The interesting thing about Scottish HE policy," Riddell says, "is actually how interconnected it is with the situation south of the border" – a view that some in the Scottish sector would hotly contest, but that Riddell claims is shared across the sector, if grudgingly. Certainly on HE finance, Holyrood may have its own answers, but it is Westminster that is posing the questions. The trebling of tuition fees forced the Scottish Government to allow differential RUK fees, a fast-growing source of revenue for Scottish institutions. The Scottish Government has also had to respond to stop a funding gap opening up between Scottish universities and their southern counterparts raking in tuition fees. Now some universities are talking about yet more change, either lifting the tuition cap to £16,000 a year, or getting rid of it altogether. Either one would have a dramatic impact on the Scottish sector – whether Scotland was independent or not, argues Riddell.

"Higher education is, on the face of it, an area where there has been huge policy divergence, because most people are probably most aware of the very different positions on undergraduate student funding. But, by the same token, there is a great deal of commonality and similarity in the direction of travel, and I think the growing importance of globalisation and internationalisation is absolutely common across Scotland and England." With students from across the UK and the world steadily becoming a more important source of revenue for Scottish universities, the level of interdependence can only increase. "It may be that the pull of international, globalised courses is counterbalancing the effect of devolution and a separate Scottish higher education agenda."

The branch of the ESRC programme led by Riddell has received significant press coverage and shaped the debate on the research published so far that has confirmed that articulation from colleges, an effective way of widening access, has been concentrated at newer universities rather than the most exclusive ancient institutions; that students from poorer backgrounds with lower grades perform as well as their better-off peers; and crucially, that free tuition has failed to widen access to university. If the evidence is so clear, then why has the debate about funding Scottish higher education stagnated?

"I think intuitively, that appeals to many people," says Riddell about free tuition. "Most people don't have a very clear idea of the social profile of university students. Unless you look very carefully at exactly which social groups are actually benefiting from the policy, it's very difficult to make a comment on it. At the moment, because of inequalities in earlier educational attainment, it's tending to benefit the groups that are already socially quite advantaged."

In the wake of much-reported comments from former Prime Minister John Major about the lack of social mobility and the dominance of the privately educated at the top of UK society, Riddell says: "There are big disproportionalities that we know a lot about in relation to pupils from private schools who go to the most selective English and Scottish universities. These are the students that are obviously benefiting from the no-fees approach."

Much of the support for free tuition will come from social groups who already dominate university admissions, while those who don't feature will be unaware that it hasn't significantly helped them, with public campaigning from the likes of the National Union of Students (NUS) feeding that failure of awareness. "I think it probably is the case that people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have less say over social policy generally. They're less likely to vote, they're less likely to be in university. The NUS is meant to represent constituents in both universities and colleges but I think university influence is probably much stronger than colleges."

Riddell insists that isn't expressing a personal view in favour of tuition fees. On the contrary, she says tuition fee loans "are like a particularly bad PFI scheme", with the current government signing up its successors to decades of losses through write downs and unpaid levies – unless it sells off the student loans book entirely. "I am not arguing necessarily for student fees – I'm simply saying we need to work out how this policy is working at the moment."

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Even as progress on widening access to university on socio-economic grounds has been shown to be piecemeal, some critics have claimed that the focus on economic deprivation is too narrow. Charities like Children in Scotland have argued that widening access for care leavers, the disabled and other under-represented groups should be as important as it is to those in poverty. Riddell's academic background includes research into the educational attainment and university progression of other marginalised groups such as gypsy travellers, students with additional support needs, and the disabled, but she defends the focus on socio-economic background.

"I think that it's right to have a focus on economic deprivation, because if you look at the different types of inequalities that are of interest, you'll find that socio-economic inequality is by far the largest," says Riddell. "I'm not saying that other inequalities are not important, but all inequalities are linked in some way to social class." In fact, the group that Riddell has greatest concerns about isn't a minority at all. "Young white men in Scotland from poorer backgrounds are the group that are doing particularly badly. There is an intersection of gender and social class there. I think we need to do a lot more intersectional analysis where we actually look at the interrelationship of these different things."

Future phases of the ESRC's programme will look at HE futures, drawing on Sir Andrew Cubie's work with Scotland's Futures Forum, and the funding of scientific research in Scotland itself. Whether an independent Scotland would be able to remain a member of the UK Research Councils – of which the ESRC is one – has been in doubt since UK Universities and Science Minister David Willetts told *Holyrood* in January that it "wouldn't be part" of a UK research funding mechanism after independence. The Scottish Government has since argued that there is a precedent for two countries to collaborate on research funding, with a Nordic research council combining resources across Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and Norway, but Riddell questions the relevance of that model in relation to Scotland.

"There is a Nordic research council, but there is a separate Swedish research council and Norwegian research council and Danish research council, and the amount of money that the Nordic research council has to give out is actually quite small," says Riddell. "It would be a unique situation apart from that example" if Scotland were to remain part of a research funding system with the rest of the UK following independence.

Echoing the UK Government's own assessment published last week, Riddell says such an arrangement is technically possible, but would potentially require significant additional investment from the Scottish Government. "There's no reason why it shouldn't happen, but the issue is how much money the Scottish Government would be expected to pay." That scenario could play out even if Scotland votes to remain in the Union, however, because limited devolution of income tax collection powers is already planned under the Scotland Act. "The Scottish Government doesn't part with any cash at the moment, but in a future scenario it clearly would have to." More challenges to the consensus in the Scottish higher education debate evidently lie ahead.

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Paris joined Holyrood in September 2011, and became education correspondent in May 2012. Born in Canada into a Greek family, and raised in Belgium, he came to Scotland in 2005 to study at the University of Edinburgh, where he was involved with award-winning student publication The Journal. Before working at Holyrood, Paris contributed to the Edinburgh Evening News, the Guardian and Guardian Local, and interned at think-tank Demos. His beat takes in all areas of Scotland's education and skills sector, including early years, adult learning, and employability...

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