

# Free university tuition 'fails to break social inequalities'

## No evidence SNP's flagship policy boosts access to higher education, say academics

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OFFERING Scottish university students free tuition has helped cement social inequalities, experts have warned.

Academics from Edinburgh University said there was no evidence the Scottish Government's flagship policy had increased access to higher education for pupils from the poorest backgrounds.

And they concluded that public investment would be better targeted at raising attainment in schools in deprived areas – with a graduate tax one way of raising additional funds for the university sector.

The conclusions, brought together in a new book entitled *Higher Education In Scotland And The UK*, are a public challenge to the Scottish Government's support for free university tuition.

Former first minister Alex Salmond made free tuition a bedrock of his administration – even going so far as to erect a monument to the policy at Heriot-Watt University, in Edinburgh.

And successive SNP education ministers have argued that free tuition means a university education is “based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay”.

However, in the concluding chapter to the book Professor Sheila Riddell, from Edinburgh University's Moray House School of Education, argues the policy has not been given sufficient scrutiny.

She said: “Despite political rhetoric surrounding free higher education in Scotland, the system has failed to produce more egalitarian outcomes compared with the rest of the UK.

“Universities in Scotland have flourished over the past decade, but the fact that they have been prioritised for funding over schools and colleges has had some unwelcome consequences in terms of reproducing existing social inequalities.”

Mrs Riddell said the most important factor affecting the success of students from different social classes was their attainment at school, but said councils were having to cut school budgets at a time when university teaching grants have been given relative protection.

She added: “There is strong evidence to suggest that if Scotland wishes to improve university participation by students from the poorest backgrounds, the most effective way of doing this is to target resources on schools in the most deprived neighbourhoods. This may call

for a re-examination of funding priorities across the entire education sector.

“A progressive graduate tax, as well as means-tested student support, might be a more effective way of promoting social equality in higher education. However, this would involve greater critical scrutiny of universal free higher education, and this has not been encouraged.”

However, Vonnie Sandlan, president of student body NUS Scotland, said the preservation of free university education was vital.

She said: “While free education isn't an end in itself to achieving fair access, it's one important part of getting there.

“The idea that abolishing free education – a clear recognition of the public and social good provided by higher education – would improve fair access seems bizarre.

“We recognise, however, that free education can't just be about the price tag, and we need to ensure the necessary financial support is available.”

A Scottish Government spokeswoman said young people from deprived areas were now more likely to participate in higher education by the age of 30 than they were in 2006/07.

She added: “Our commitment to free

tuition, the prospect of the lowest average debt and the best graduate prospects in the UK saw a record number of Scots accepted to study at Scottish universities in 2015/16.

“But we recognise there is more to do to engage all children and young people in education and improve literacy. That's why we launched the Scottish Attainment Challenge, backed by the £100 million Attainment Scotland Fund.

“We have been very clear that we want every child to have an equal chance of benefiting from higher education if that is their choice.”

Mr Salmond has previously described the abolition of tuition fees as his administration's “single biggest achievement”, saying the “rocks would melt with the sun” before the policy would be changed.

However, earlier this year, Professor Craig Mahoney, principal of the University of the West of Scotland, suggested the issue of tuition fees should be opened up for discussion as charging students for higher education would provide much-needed income for institutions.

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## True test is to help students from poorest backgrounds

**T**HERE has always been a rather discomfiting sense that the Scottish Government's zealous promotion of free tuition for university students has somewhat stifled debate on the issue.

The rather crass move by former First Minister Alex Salmond to have a monument erected in the policy's honour at Heriot-Watt University was a troubling blurring of the lines between government policy and institutional autonomy.

There was also the somewhat misleading rhetoric that this was in some way part of a grand Scottish tradition of free education when it was not.

None of this, of course, means the policy is wrong. The fact the SNP believes attending university is a fundamental right for all those bright enough to go regardless of background – and has made it a priority to pay for it through the public purse – means students in this country graduate with lower debts than elsewhere in the UK.

But there is a problem. Because most people who go to university are middle class this can be seen as a policy that disproportionately benefits the middle classes.

And, as academics at Edinburgh University have pointed out, the policy is not helping to widen access

to the poorest students, who have recently borne the brunt of cuts to vital grants to support them in their studies.

Professor Sheila Riddell is right to highlight these concerning issues and to suggest that, if Scotland wishes to improve university participation, the most effective way of doing so is to target resources on schools in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

But, while it is clear that any serious attempt to close the attainment gap will require a far greater injection of funds to schools in deprived areas than the current commitment of £25 million a year, what is not known is what the impact would be on poorer Scottish students if a form of hypothecated graduate tax was reintroduced.

