

Free university is not helping poor, claim academics

Hamish Macdonell

Ministers were urged last night to rethink their approach to higher education after a major new study warned that free tuition has only helped to entrench social inequalities in Scotland.

Three Edinburgh university academics, Sheila Riddell, Elisabet Weedon and Sarah Minty, of the Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity, found no evidence to back up the Scottish government's contention that free tuition helps pupils from the poorest backgrounds get to university.

They suggest that the money would be better spent on schools in deprived areas, helping to bridge the educational divide at that level rather than helping all students at university later.

The report represents a major blow to the Scottish government's approach to higher education, which is based around the concept of free access.

Alex Salmond made free university education a key issue for his administration and erected a monument to the policy at Heriot-Watt University.

Nicola Sturgeon has continued to stand by the policy, insisting that universities in Scotland should not charge Scots tuition fees, although students from the rest of the UK have to pay to study at Scottish institutions.

In the concluding chapter of *Higher Education in Scotland and the UK: Diverging or Converging Systems?*, Professor Riddell argues that the policy has not been analysed properly for its benefits and shortfalls.

She says: "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."

Professor Riddell adds: "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."

She goes on to say: "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."

Liz Smith, MSP, for the Conservatives, said Professor Riddell's findings had to force a change in Scottish government policy. "This is the verdict that must make the SNP rethink its free tuition policy. It's clear it does not bene-

'The most effective way to improve participation is to target resources on schools in deprived areas'

fit the people it was said to help. It forces universities to take more students from outwith Scotland who do pay fees, and leaves them with fewer resources."

A Scottish government spokeswoman defended the policy, arguing that young people from deprived areas were more likely to participate in higher education than they were when the SNP came to power.

"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," she said. "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."



Inequality in Scotland is set in stone by free university tuition

CHRIS GREEN
SCOTLAND EDITOR

Scotland's free university tuition for domestic students has not benefited the poor and has in fact led to existing social inequalities becoming more entrenched, academics have claimed.

The conclusion, which challenges the assumption that the abolition of fees 15 years ago has made the country a fairer place to live, is set out in a new book edited by three education specialists at the University of Edinburgh.

The authors argue that Scotland's universities have been "prioritised" by Holyrood at the expense of schools, where existing inequalities

have become further embedded. Public money currently diverted to universities should be redirected to schools, they say, suggesting that a fairer way to pay for tuition fees would be through a graduate tax.

The SNP has long supported the continuation of free tuition fees and the policy was highlighted by Nicola Sturgeon as one of her party's core beliefs during her speech to its conference in October. "For as long as I am First Minister, there will be no tuition fees in Scotland," she said.

Her predecessor as leader, Alex Salmond, has also described free university tuition as the policy of which he is most proud. Last year, he unveiled a taxpayer-funded

monument at Edinburgh's Heriot-Watt University inscribed with his 2011 promise: "The rocks will melt with the sun before I allow tuition fees to be imposed on Scottish students."

But the book, *Higher Education in Scotland and the UK*, suggests that the glowing words from politicians have disguised the fact that the policy has not actually made the country fairer.

"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," says the concluding chapter by Professor Sheila Riddell, of Edinburgh's Moray House School of Education.

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for funding over schools and colleges has had some unwelcome consequences in terms of reproducing existing social inequalities."

Arguing that the most important factor affecting the success of students from different social classes is their school attainment, she points out that Scottish councils have been forced to cut school budgets while university teaching grants have

enjoyed greater protection. "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 education sector."

She added: "A progressive graduate tax, as well as means-tested student support, might be a more effective way of promoting social equality in higher education."

Responding to the book's claims, the Scottish Government said young people from deprived areas in Scotland were now more likely to take part in higher education by the age of 30 than they were in 2006-07.

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A monument to his pledge at Heriot-Watt university unveiled by Alex Salmond last year **REX**

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Free university tuition in Scotland for domestic students has not made the country a fairer place and has caused social inequalities to become even more entrenched, academics claim. Public money diverted to universities should be redirected to schools, three education experts at the University of Edinburgh assert. **PAGE 8**

EDUCATION

Free university tuition in Scotland 'has failed to halt social inequality'

By Chris Green

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Alex Salmond visited Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh in November last year to unveil a monument inscribed with his commitment to tuition fees REX

i School inspectors may have to assess how well schools tackle the **attainment gap for children in care**, under a proposed amendment to Scotland's Education Bill.