

AGENDA

Look beyond fees in the university access debate

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ACROSS the world, the level of tuition fees charged by universities is one of the most hotly debated public policy issues. Student demonstrations against increases in tuition fee policies have resulted in changes to government policy in Germany and Quebec, and a growing movement in the United States is promoting “free college” for young people. In the recent UK General Election, the Labour Party’s pledge to abolish tuition fees in England was one of its most successful policies in attracting the youth vote.

Higher education funding is clearly a restless area of public policy, where politicians attempt to accommodate the competing interests of students, parents and universities. Even among these constituencies, different groups may have different priorities. It is often assumed that countries with low tuition fees are also likely to do well in terms of access and equity.

However, some academics argue that there is no simple link between fees, equity and access. Their arguments are supported by OECD analysis, which shows that some countries with high tuition fees, such as Australia and New Zealand, have high participation rates, but so do some countries with no tuition fees, such as Denmark and Slovenia.

England has the highest tuition fees of any EU country, but is close to the median in terms of participation rates. Austria, a median country with respect to the level of tuition fees, ranks at the bottom in terms of entry rates, close to Italy. There are marked differences in policies on tuition fees and maintenance grants across the UK, which makes comparisons extremely interesting. The outcomes of this natural experiment suggest that the assumption that no-fees systems are the most socially inclusive are misplaced.

In the UK, Scotland has a lower university entry rate by young students compared with the three other jurisdictions and the lowest

participation rate by young students from the poorest backgrounds.

Scotland, of course, makes much greater use of college provision than the other jurisdictions, but those doing HNCs and HNDs are disproportionately from the most deprived areas. Colleges in Scotland have done most of the “heavy lifting” in widening access to higher education, but the fact that those from the least advantaged backgrounds are over-represented in colleges and under-represented in universities is problematic.

Many predicted that the trebling of

student fees in 2012 in England would have a very negative effect on participation by those from the poorest backgrounds. However, this has not been the case. Enrolments have continued to rise, although UCAS data shows that in 2016/17, there was a six per cent drop in the number of applicants in England, due to a marked reduction in applications by older students and those applying for nursing degrees as a result of the abolition of the nursing bursary. There was a smaller drop of two per cent in applications by Scottish students. Across the UK, socio-economic gaps in educational participation have stabilised or slightly declined, and there has been an increase in institutional resources per student, particularly in England.

One of the lessons to be learnt from UK comparisons is that we should not just look at tuition fees, but also at repayment systems and maintenance grants. Scotland has focused on universal free tuition and targeted support, in the form of cash or loan, now plays only a marginal part. Wales has targeted maintenance grants on those from poorer backgrounds, reflecting the principle of “progressive universalism”. The impact of these different priorities is not yet clear.

A seminar on higher education, funding and access is taking place at



Edinburgh University today.

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