

Free year in halls for deprived students

Daniel Sanderson

Teenagers are being offered free university accommodation in the escalation of a higher education "arms race" to attract students from deprived areas.

The University of Aberdeen scheme promises applicants a free year in halls of residence, which usually costs between £3,861 and £5,733.

The offer applies if the students have a postcode officially deemed as among the most deprived 20 per cent in the country. Aberdeen hopes it will lure enough students to allow it to hit strict Scottish government targets which demand that all universities have 10 per cent of new undergraduates from areas classed as disadvantaged by 2021.

However, experts raised concerns about the "crude" eligibility criteria, based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), as tens of thousands of people in poverty do not live in the most deprived postcode areas while others, from middle-class families, do.

Lucy Hunter Blackburn, a researcher at the University of Edinburgh and a former head of higher education at the Scottish government, said she was concerned that poor students from rural areas who would find it difficult to commute to university would be excluded from the offer as they are unlikely to be officially classed as from a deprived area. "The idea that you offer targeted, free accommodation to some students is clearly worth looking at; that principle is very easy to defend. But SIMD is such a crude measure to use," she said.

"This is just like NHS waiting times — imposing arbitrary targets distorts institutional behaviour. It's worrying because we're starting to see an arms race between universities, which are chasing after one group of students who are not defined by their individual disadvantage but by their postcode.

"This could end up with people who are not deprived, even in theory some

whose parents have put them through private school, getting their accommodation for free. But the real injustice here comes for the many people who are hard up but do not live in the correct SIMD postcode so will not qualify for this help." Government statisticians admit as many as two out of three people
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