<u>Ten Good Reasons Why University Tuition Fees Are A Bad Idea</u>

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Tuition fees at public universities in England are now, on average, the highest in the world. The reform has already been judged by monitoring authorities to be a bankrupt idea. It is without question a rushed and ill-considered experiment, out of line with the policies of other Western democratic nations. The arguments against this high fees regime are many and various. This blog looks at the new system from different angles in order to show the impact it will have on individuals and on society as a whole, on universities and on the national economy, offering ten good reasons why university tuition fees are a bad idea.

Reason 1: High Tuition Fees Increase Inequality

Public provision for access to higher and further education is now dead. Disadvantaged students must help themselves, whether by choosing to attend less expensive institutions (Further Education College fees remain at £6000) or ones close to the family home in order to minimise living costs: a choice made according to means, not ability. Or else they can take out larger loans, up to £8,200 per year for maintenance alone. The government has had the audacity to suggest that because the superseded maintenance grants had been inadequate to meet living costs the new loans will mean 'more money in your pocket.' But it is borrowed money, and will add an estimated £12,500 to the cost of a university education. The government argue that some or all of the loan may never be repaid. But this outcome would represent a signal failure to achieve social mobility through gaining a degree: a graduate from a disadvantaged background locked into a lifetime of low pay. Higher income families are on the whole able to shield students and graduates from exorbitant levels of debt. For students from poorer families, their individual exposure to debt is greater and potentially more damaging, continuing to disadvantage them as they attempt to establish themselves.

Those defending the fees policy claim that because the fees are not paid at point of access, they won't have a deterrent effect on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. All have equal access to loans, and they will begin repayments only when their income reaches a certain threshold.

Supporters of the policy have been able to point to the fact that the level of applications in the first three years of the new regime has not been reduced substantially. Recruitment has, of course, been encouraged by official assurances that the loan system is 'fair' and 'risk free.' High fees have also raised the stakes; school-leavers have been made to feel that the inflated price-tag attached to a degree is a measure of its enhanced value, and that it represents an essential personal investment.

Behind the headline figures, however, a different picture emerges. The Independent Commission on Fees, established with the introduction of the scheme in 2012, reported in 2013 that working-class boys were being deterred by the rise in fees. Different parts of country are differently affected. A recent government report showed that young people from the most disadvantaged areas are now seven times less likely to participate in higher education than their counterparts in advantaged areas. 'Access providers', universities that were previously polytechnics or FE colleges, have suffered some quite dramatic falls in intake. Numbers of part-time and mature students have plummeted. A huge gap remains in participation between privileged and less privileged sectors of society, and this looks likely to worsen.

One barrier to access apparent in the entry system has been the government's manipulation of numbers entering higher education through the mechanism of A level results. In the first two years of the new regime, universities could expand recruitment of students gaining triple A or AAB results, favouring those with educational and social advantages at school. In 2015 the recruitment cap has been lifted altogether, but this has coincided with the introduction of a new barrier. A survey shows 20% of school-leavers are now reconsidering their plans to go to University after the government announced the scrapping of maintenance grants.

Back in 2011 two teenagers mounted a legal challenge to the coalition government on the basis that ministers had failed in their duty to consider the disproportionate effect of the rise in fees on vulnerable groups. The Supreme Court ruled that there had been sufficient consultation in the Browne Report of 2010, which underpinned the fee rise, and that there 'were various measures which are directed specifically at increasing university access to poorer students'. These spurs to access included means-tested maintenance grants up to maximum £3,387 per year, and a new National Scholarship Programme for students eligible for full maintenance grant, when it was announced that the funding provided for the programme 'will be £50m in financial year 2012-13, £100m in 2013-14 and £150m from 2014-15.' NSP scholarships provided an additional £2,500 for the first year of study.

Now both the maintenance grants and the National Scholarship Programme have been scrapped; £50m has been diverted from the latter to deal with the crisis in postgraduate recruitment. There are also plans to cut the Disabled Students' Allowance and require universities to take over provision, without safeguards or consistency. The Browne Report recommended 'targeted help for low income families'. What remains of this? Is there potential for a new legal challenge?

Sources

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