



Free college tuition has failed to open doors to all

Socioeconomic factors are still key in deciding whether someone attends university or not, writes **Seán Flynn**

WILL THE new €2,500 student contribution fee block the way to college for working-class students?

Advocates of the "free fees" regime argue that the abolition of fees in 1995 transformed third-level education, making it accessible to large swathes of people who had never expected to make it to college.

But a series of expert reports and analysis from the Higher Education Authority does little to support this view.

The most comprehensive analysis of the issue, published earlier this year, is unambiguous in its finding: the abolition of university tuition fees failed to improve the chances of poorer children getting to college.

In a paper published by UCD's **Geary** Institute, Dr Kevin Denny said the key factor to influence college entry was Leaving Cert points. He found that few children from working-class backgrounds secured enough points to gain a place in most university courses.

By contrast, said the UCD economics lecturer, "the chances of a student from a white-collar background achieving low points are quite low".

Dr Denny's research found that children with fathers from the professional class gained an average of 90 CAO points more than those whose fathers are manual workers.

The report echoed the findings of a Higher Education Authority study last year which found that lower socio-economic groups such as manual workers, semi-skilled or unskilled workers, were still hugely under-represented on "blue chip" courses like medicine, pharmacy and law.

Not one student entering university courses in pharmacy or medicine in 2008/2009 came from an unskilled background.

In contrast, almost 50 per cent of medical students and over

one-third of law students come from professional backgrounds.

The authority's report presented a familiar picture.

The children of both higher professionals and lower professionals (such as teachers and nurses) are still over-represented at third level.

Children of farmers are also particularly well represented. But those from poorer backgrounds are still hugely under represented. Authority chief executive Tom Boland has acknowledged that the access problem remains.

"It is a remarkable feature of our higher education system that some of the high-profile professions have not become more diverse in their student intake. The socio-economic profile on these courses has changed very little over the past decade."

There is other evidence to support the view that free fees have made little impact on access. Former Dublin City University president Ferdinand von Prondzynski says the number of students from local areas like Ballymun and Finglas entering the college has increased only marginally in the past decade.

Most of this increase, he says, could be linked to the university's own access programmes rather than to the free fees initiative.

The continuing under-representation of poorer children in college is all the more remarkable given the transformation that has taken place in the higher-education sector since 1995. In most colleges, available places have doubled in that time.

Arguably, the main impact of the free fees regime has been in the fee-paying sector at second level, where numbers have boomed since the mid-1990s. Last year, more than 26,000 pupils were enrolled in the State's private fee-paying schools. Most charge about €5,000 per year, generating an annual income of €100 million for the private education sector.