



Time is right to bring back third-level fees and grants

NET RESULTS

KARLIN LILLINGTON

The abolition of third-level fees means it is almost entirely the children of the better-off who literally cash in

A GOOD educational system, producing bright, motivated students, is a critical part of a strong economy. That's pretty obvious.

Today's world demands educated workers for the so-called knowledge jobs that underlie a vibrant – or perhaps more appropriately for the current moment, a recovering – economy. It is universities and other third-level institutions that produce the graduates that fill such jobs.

So therefore, we need as many students going on to **third-level education** as possible, and what better way than by getting rid of third-level fees and throwing open the doors of academe to as wide a student body as possible? And how better to bring in those who, through financial disadvantage, have traditionally missed out on a degree?

Wrong. As outgoing Dublin City University president Ferdinand von Prondzynski stated yet again in an interview with this paper recently – a point repeated at the McGill Summer School by **UCD** president **Hugh Brady** last week – Ireland's decision to drop university fees in 1996 has done absolutely nothing to increase opportunities for disadvantaged students.

What that well-intentioned but misguided – and potentially

catastrophic – decision did was enable middle-class students to get a free ride over a period that has seen sliding standards and enrolment drops in exactly the critical subjects needed by a knowledge economy.

Third-level institutions, stripped of funding, are increasingly skeletal. Compelling evidence is there for anyone to see. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted as far back as 2006 in its Economic Survey of Ireland that abolishing fees had made no difference at all to bringing in disadvantaged social groups to higher education in this country.

UCD economics lecturer Dr Kevin Denny released a paper last May (<http://tinyurl.com/2vd6q22>) that looked at the issue in detail, using a wide range of data including ESRI Leaving Certificate data and university admission statistics.

His conclusion is blunt. While all taxpayers, including those in lower income groups, end up supporting free **third-level education** for “all” students, it is almost entirely the children of the better-off who literally cash in, getting their ticket to a better future and a higher income for free. Meanwhile, disadvantaged students still enter **third-level education** at the same dismally low levels.

Denny writes: “Bearing in mind that most low-income students would typically not have been paying university fees (since most would be in receipt of the higher education grant), one would not expect a reform which largely benefited better-off students to somehow benefit low SES (socio-economic status) students. The

logic of this apparently escaped policy makers at the time.”

In other words, lower-income students always were going to be unaffected by the abolition of fees because if they qualified for university, they would have received a fees grant and, in some cases, also a maintenance grant.

Such an approach hasn't just been a failure in Ireland. The same situation obtains in the UK, where there has been almost no change in enrolment of students from lower social economic backgrounds over an almost 40-year period studied when there were no tuition fees (1960-1998).

London School of Economics economist Nicholas Barr, in a blog post last March (<http://tinyurl.com/38m5au4>), made this point, adding that what actually had enabled more lower SES students to go on to university was a reform of the secondary school subject and exam system.

Free fees, on the other hand, just meant the lesser-off paid for the children of the better off to get their mortarboard and diploma.

Like von Prondzynski, Brady, and Denny, he questioned this logic. “Why should the taxes of the truck driver pay for the degree of the old Etonian?”

Irish universities meanwhile have struggled to maintain – much less develop – programmes and general research in the face of a 40 per cent decline in funding since fees were dropped.

This emaciation process, amazingly, happened right through the boom, following fee-abolition. Research to select science and technology projects via increased State research funding in this area has been boosted, yes, but basic university infrastructure like wet labs and classroom space goes begging and other faculties, without such research possibilities, are even more starved.

This is at a period when the State badly needs to build and develop its universities and develop well-rounded graduates or risk losing economy-boosting inward investment and indigenous company development to states that produce graduates with today's requisite skills.

If – as absolutely should be done – the State wishes to give greater opportunity to more

students, then the evidence points towards reforming the creaky, outdated points and Leaving Certificate systems which (as Kenny amply demonstrates) virtually guarantee that Irish universities remain middle-class playgrounds.

For example, Kenny's evidence shows that a student whose father is a professional rather than a manual worker, gets on average an extra 90 points in the Leaving.

As Kenny notes in a blog post (<http://tinyurl.com/32nb5w6>): "A clear policy implication of this paper is that attempts to tackle inequalities in university access that do not address these performance differences at the Leaving Certificate won't solve the problem."

Free fees are clearly not the answer to that problem, having only ever benefited the better off.

Without doubt, that policy is now a pointless luxury the State and taxpayer can no longer afford. It's time to bring in a fair loan and grant system and return proper funding to third-level before many of our third-level institutions and some once-vaunted arts, humanities, and science departments turn into dead universities walking.

Killington@irishtimes.com



“ Why should the taxes of the truck driver pay for the degree of the old Etonian? ”
– Nicholas Barr, LSE

• • •



“ Dropping university fees has done nothing . . . for disadvantaged students. – Ferdinand von Prondzynski, DCU ”