



“Inequality unknown for decades now looms for Britain” Michael Portillo
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From The Times

April 6, 2007

Students would pay more at top universities

Students would be willing to pay up to £6,800 a year to attend top universities, but would not weather large fee increases at less prestigious institutions, a wide-ranging study has found.

The Government has pledged to review the £3,000 annual cap on tuition fees in 2009. But the research by Opinionpanel Research and the Knowledge Partnership also revealed that undergraduates would be prepared to pay more for some courses. The findings follow complaints by vice-chancellors at leading research-led universities that the current fee level is too low and that the cap should be raised to at least £5,000.

According to the survey of 14,000 first-year students, however, the average that they would be prepared to pay in future is £4,800. There was minimal difference between the responses of students from wealthy and poorer households.

Universities could, on the basis of this study, charge an average £5,700 for a medical or veterinary degree, but they could not charge more than £4,300 to those taking education degrees.

Universities are offering £330 million in bursaries and scholarships this year to offset the cost of tuition fees for poorer students but, in spite of high-profile advertising campaigns, the Student Loans Company says that as many as a fifth of eligible students have not claimed them.

David Roberts, managing partner of the Knowledge Partnership, which undertook the study, said that preliminary results show that university bursaries and the ability to work part-time are only important to a fifth of the worst off.

“Based on the data, the students from widening participation backgrounds are not that different in what drives them to choose the course or university,” he said. He said that universities should reconsider offering bursaries and instead direct funds to transition programmes for students, or better advice in further education.

“All the research shows that the dropout rate is in the transition from school to university,” he said. “In the States and Australia, more attention is paid to bringing families into the university and supporting students. And the evidence is that retention problems occur in the first few weeks.”

He said that Oxbridge-style tutorial systems for the first weeks at university may help students to fit in better. While the latest study hints at a likely market in fees, universities appear less likely to vary fees for individual courses.

Mr Roberts said that the complexity of deciding whether the money should go to a department or a central pot would put many universities off.

Equally, he predicted that the cap on fees would be raised in 2009, but the change would not be great as it would coincide with a demographic downturn, resulting in fewer students applying to university.

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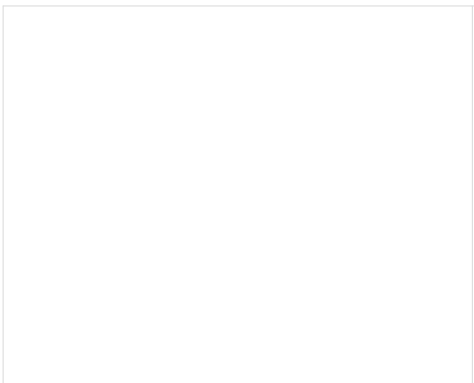
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