University Top-up Fees: Paying for froth or flavour?

The government’s plans for top-up fees of up to £3,000 a year for university students have dominated the discussion of Labour’s legislative plans for the parliamentary sessions of 2004. Whatever one’s views on charges in general, we thought it advisable to consider the reasons for and against the proposal, particularly from the viewpoint of black and minority ethnic students. The following chart is a summary by Onar Khan and Rob Berkeley of some of the relevant reasons both generally and from a race angle. Hardly a comprehensive list, but it gives an indication of the issues at stake, both for the education system and for BME students and their parents.

**General Issues on top-up fees**

**Pros**
- Expansion of university education will be good for Britain, both socially and economically.
- Those who don’t go to university will no longer pay towards providing a service they are unlikely to use (thus removing a subsidy paid by the poorer members of society to the middle and upper classes).
- Increased income for universities will ensure their overall quality and maintain their international competitiveness.
- Fees will give universities greater control and independence in determining their finances, making them less reliant on government.
- Variable fees will ensure that the costs applied to students have some relationship to the advantages they accrue from their particular course and university; the reason for such variation is that certain degrees afford greater advantages, particularly material, for some graduates.
- If variable fees are implemented, there will probably be increased numbers of students studying Business, Law, Medicine, Pharmacology and various professional and vocational degrees. This may improve the health of the British economy.
- There will no longer be any upfront fees. For those from lower-income families grants may be available.
- Universities will be encouraged to offer bursaries for students from lower-income families.

**Cons**
- Fear of debt will dissuade working-class students even from applying to university.
- Variable fees will dissuade students from pursuing courses not obviously linked to higher-salaried careers.
- Decrease in enrolments for certain courses that lack obvious economic prospects will reduce the number of faculty members employed to teach them, and might even see the closure of departments such as Anthropology, Art History, African and Asian Studies, Drama, Education, Foreign Languages, History, Literature, Music, Philosophy, Sociology, etc. Even where such courses continue, a renewed emphasis may be placed on their ability to train students to be successful in the economy thus altering the rationale for such courses and requiring the transformation of graduate training to a costly and long-term undertaking.
- Top-up fees may undermine the idea of education ‘for its own sake’, foregrounding the vocational worth of the degree at the expense of the learning experience.
- Graduates may be less likely to seek or accept employment in the public or voluntary sectors, as future earnings prospects cannot match those offered in the more lucrative zones of the private sector.
- There is a danger of a ‘two-tier’ university system becoming entrenched with employers and potential students judging courses (and the quality of graduates) on their price. Russell Group and other ‘older’ universities start with a market advantage, newer universities may struggle to establish themselves in this market. The outcomes may be under-funded courses and lack of resources leading to lower quality teaching and learning – a vicious circle.
- More vicious given that it is the newer universities that have tended to be at the forefront of efforts to widen participation among social groups that traditionally have had little access to Higher Education.

**Issues on top-up fees that may adversely affect minority ethnic candidates**

**Pros**
- Inssofar as certain parts of the BME population are less likely to attend university they will not be paying for a public good that advantages the better-off.
- Expansion of university education will offer new opportunities for BME students.
- Inasmuch as BME students are currently more likely to enrol in professional and vocational courses the cost of their course will better reflect the advantages they stand to gain.
- Many students from BME communities will not have to pay anything given that they are more likely to come from lower-income families. Many will also be eligible for grants and/or bursaries.

**Cons**
- Evidence suggests that even given the same course at the same university BME students get less advantage career-wise from their degree than their white counterparts. If this is true, then it may be unfair to expect them to pay according to the ‘average’ benefit provided by a particular university course.
- Reluctantly, if the rationale for variable fees is that certain degrees provide greater (material) advantages than others, then it would seem to follow that if certain groups of students (whether BME or working-class) get fewer advantages compared to their colleagues, then they should pay lower fees.
- While the relative over-representation of BME students in professional and vocational courses might signal their lower costs, it is possible that the ‘average’ (material) advantages provided by such courses could drive up fees.
- Variation in fees may lead to an entrenchment of hierarchies in HE. The universities that are most likely to be at the wrong end of these hierarchies are also those with the highest proportions of students from Black and minority ethnic communities.

With newspaper reports that Tony Blair has put his authority on the line over winning the vote on tuition fees, the stakes could not be higher. Any policy that will have such a huge effect on public services will inevitably have an impact on those from minority ethnic communities. In the debate so far about the rights and wrongs of fees, there has been little discussion of what the reform might mean for students from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. What we have done here is simply attempt to tease out what some of the main issues might be, to feed into such a discussion, and offer suggestions for further reading to help you deliberate on this crucial reform.

Attitudes to debt, School leavers and further education students’ attitudes to debt and their impact on participation in higher education – Executive Summary. A report for UK and HERC by Professor Claire Callender of South Bank University. February 2003


White Paper: The Future of Higher Education. (Cm 57/03)

Race Impact Assessment [www.dtesgov.uk]