

The sight of Sinn Fein, DUP, Alliance and Women's Coalition members of the Assembly joining forces to support recommendations on student financial support that are inherently anti-equality and anti-targeting social need was very disappointing. That is precisely what those members did when they voted for the recommendations put forward by the Assembly Committee on Higher and Further Education last week.

First, they voted for a recommendation that would restrict the abolition of fee payments only to those university students attending university in Northern Ireland. The four thousand students who depart every year to study outside of Northern Ireland would be excluded, as the committee itself admits. How such a recommendation could possibly be non-discriminatory beggars belief.

Secondly, the same Assembly members in voting for the total abolition of fees in present circumstances were really saying that a massive subsidy of at least £35m should be given to students from higher income families. This is because the only students now paying the full fee of £1050 are from such families. They total 30 per cent of all our students. Of the rest 50 per cent pay *no* fees at all and 20 per cent pay only a portion.

In other words, Sinn Fein and DUP representatives from high deprivation constituencies like West, North and East Belfast, Mid-Ulster and parts of Derry, were voting to transfer £35m to students from high income families. This would surely stand targeting social need on its head. It is not a measure that would do anything to increase participation in higher or further education by people from low income backgrounds. Nor do I believe it a measure to be greeted with any enthusiasm by deprived communities in those constituencies. Quite the reverse it would be rightly condemned.

Furthermore, when those Assembly members combined to also support recommendations which were almost silent on the needs of students in further education and those studying part-time, their vote in favour of the committee's report was even more disappointing.

Equality and Targeting Social Need are fundamental requirements of the Good Friday Agreement. The DUP members could be excused ignorance of these requirements but hardly Sinn Fein, Alliance and Women's Coalition members, all of whom claim to support the agreement.

Given the warning from the committee's own advisors that its recommendations on fee abolition could violate equality and targeting social

need requirements, the failure to heed that warning is difficult to understand. The advisors wrote "Such a policy might well be seen as discriminatory and certainly not New-TSN compatible. It could well be challenged under the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment's Equality scheme. The crucial issue is that only applying the scheme in Northern Ireland under current circumstances would be unfair. It should be noted that even if offered only to NI students it would also be available to EU students studying in NI."

Should this recommendation be adopted we would have a very curious situation. A Northern Ireland administration would have to support students from other EU states while being unable to offer similar support to many thousands of our local students. I would expect considerable unease throughout NI if such a situation were to exist.

I fully recognise that abolishing tuition fees would be widely welcomed and that many believe it to be a right. However, it is important to realise why it is not possible to abolish tuition fees in present circumstances.

First, comparisons with Scotland where up-front tuition fees are no longer required are misleading. The Scottish arrangements are effectively a deferred payment system not complete abolition. Secondly, the large number of students studying outside NI who would be excluded from abolition would create the unjust discriminatory situation referred to earlier. Thirdly, the resources to cover abolition are simply not available on the scale required. Finding the £35m required would mean taking from existing programmes. Assembly members arguing for fee abolition should identify the programmes to be cut back to find those funds - funds that would go directly to the better off in our society. Will they ask that funds to support literacy programmes and lifelong learning be cut back? Should I raid funds to assist the unemployed? Or should I cut back on support for training programmes?

Since tuition fees were introduced by the British government it would require a decision by the Department for Education and Employment in London to abolish

fees for England and Wales before the same could happen here. Whether people support abolition or not, that is not likely to happen as has been made clear to me by the authorities in London

Making such an impossible demand on a local minister displays no sense of responsibility or any genuine concern to practically address student needs. It simply amounts to playing party political games.

Despite these serious reservations I have acknowledged that there is a wealth of useful material in the committee's report and since receiving it I have been taking full account of it in formulating my Department's proposals. My broad objectives in seeking to improve student financial support are:-

- targeting Social Need and the pursuit of greater equality as central to my strategy;**
- promoting lifelong learning through increasing participation in both Higher and Further Education;**
- targeting resources to those less well off to widen access to those from among the under-represented groups;**
- giving as much a sense of financial security to all our HE and FE students as resources allow.**

I believe these are widely shared objectives and I hope to be in a position to make my proposals public in the near future. Then it will be time for the real debate to begin.

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