

Only a weak relationship between fee levels and participation rates in the core age group for tertiary study exists. Other factors are much more important in encouraging enrolments. Among the 24 countries whose data are shown in Figure 1, all but two of those whose participation rate is below 30 per cent have low or no fees. Seven of the 24 have zero fees; of those seven, only two (Greece and Slovenia) have relatively high participation rates.

That should be no surprise. It has long been known that there is little relationship between young people's participation rates in higher education and the level of fees – especially when students can easily access income-contingent loans. Relevant evidence includes:

When fees in English universities trebled in 2012, enrolments of young full-time students held up

A study of the relationship between fee levels and participation rates in New Zealand higher education showed that as fees rose, so did the participation rate. This may sound counter-intuitive, but it is still true.

We also know that factors other than cost are the main influences on participation rates.

Research in New Zealand shows that performance at school dwarfs all other influences on the decision to participate in higher education. Once we control for school performance, other factors play a part: people whose parents have higher qualifications are more likely to enter tertiary education; those who grow up in more deprived neighbourhoods are less likely to enrol (even once other factors are taken into account); and people who use mental health services are less likely to advance to higher levels of education. But family finances turn out not to matter.

Those findings are echoed in Canada where research has found that participation in post-secondary education is more influenced by cultural factors and the level of parents' education than it is by finances. (F. R. Smith, THE 28.11.19)