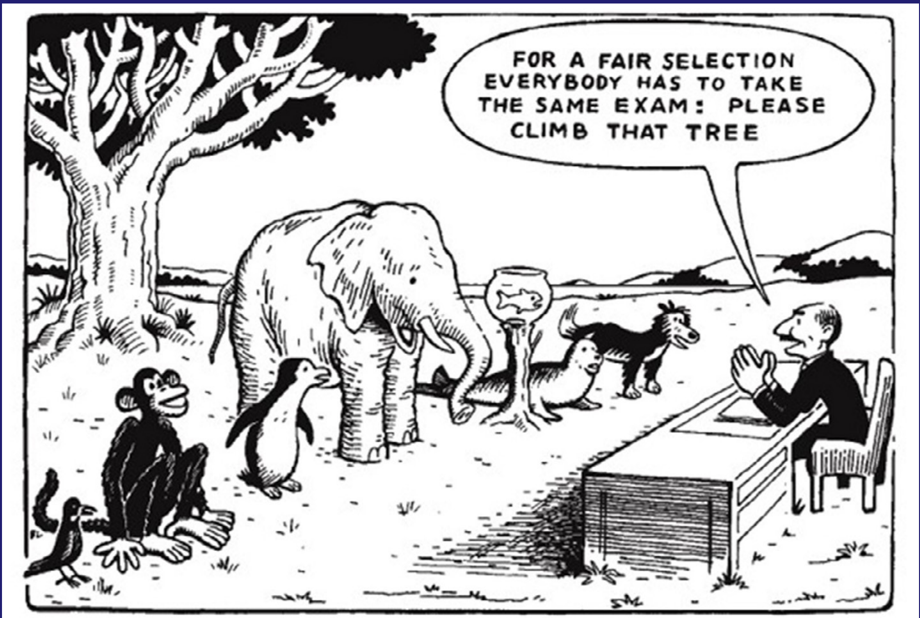
Where next for widening participation and fair access?

New insights from leading thinkers

With a Foreword from Professor Les Ebdon CBE DL



Higher Education Policy Institute

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BRIGHTER FUTURES FOR ALL

HEPI Report 98

Foreword

Professor Les Ebdon CBE DL
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Today, the doors of higher education are open to thousands of people who would have been shut out in the past. Many universities and colleges have made great progress in widening participation and improving fair access.

But considerable challenges remain.

I am the fair access regulator for England, and this report covers the whole of the UK, which of course has different higher education systems in its various parts. But one thing that they all, sadly, have in common is that they do not yet provide true equality of opportunity.

There are still stark gaps between different groups of people at every stage of the student lifecycle, in terms of whether they apply to higher education and where they apply to; whether they are accepted; the likelihood of having to leave their course early; the level of degree that they get; and whether they go on to a rewarding job or postgraduate study.

While we celebrate improvements in access for disadvantaged young people, we must not forget that for older students and those studying part-time, the trend is steeply downward. And we must not allow headline figures about rising applications to distract us from the troubling issues of non-completion rates and different degree and employment outcomes, particularly for students from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

So my answer to the question 'What next?' is this: we need more progress, more quickly.

Incremental change is just not enough. Every year that we do not have truly fair access is a year in which yet more talented people are let down by a system that should lift them up.

This is the challenge that will face the Office for Students next year, when it takes over responsibility for fair access regulation in England.

I believe the Office for Students can be a strong force for positive change, and its chair Sir Michael Barber has already said that fair access and progression will be top priorities. So, as the new organisation's leaders develop its mission, values and policies, they will no doubt find this report very interesting. I hope they will consider the bold approaches to improving access explored in its pages, such as the use of contextual information, and embrace input from all those with a role to play in fair access, throughout higher education and beyond.

There is much that is already working and now is the time for everyone involved in improving access and participation to build on that foundation to achieve further, faster change.

New ideas will be the keys that unlock a real fair access future, so I am delighted that HEPI and Brightside are supporting this by bringing together such an interesting range of perspectives in this publication.

Contents

Introduction: Running to stand still?

Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI

The unnecessary election of 2017 put student finance back on the political agenda. Many people welcomed the chance to debate tuition fee levels, interest rates and repayment thresholds once again. Some of the discussions have been light on evidence but one fact is clear: since the advent of £9,000 tuition fees in England, the proportion of young people from poorer backgrounds entering higher education has continued to rise.

Not everything in the garden is rosy. While the key numbers are generally moving in the right direction, the number of people from the toughest backgrounds making it to higher education remains a small fraction of those from wealthier homes.

Proportionately, students from poorer backgrounds are growing faster than those from more privileged homes but, in terms of raw numbers, better-off students are growing faster. Young people from a lower-income background (in an English state school and on free school meals) were 1.6 per cent more likely to enter higher education in 2016 than 2015, while the entry rate for the much bigger group at state schools not in receipt of free school meals grew by 1.4 per cent. The result, according to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), was a record level of inequality:

> *the difference between lower income and other state school children increased in 2016, both proportionally and in absolute percentage point terms. The percentage point difference in*

2016 was 16.7 percentage points, the highest level recorded.[1]

This explains why HEPI and Brightside have collaborated on this new report bringing together multiple authors to consider where widening participation and fair access should go next.

The first chapter, by Paul Clarke, Head of External Affairs at Brightside, considers the crucial importance of social capital in determining a student's success. Having access to information is useless if you do not know how to interrogate it to discover whatever it is you need to know. So we need better information about higher education and how to get the best out of it, and we need to ensure people are better able to learn any lessons from it.[2] This chapter also includes a second generally overlooked key insight: the benefits of peer-to-peer support are not limited to the recipients but usefully build up the experiences of mentors too.

Vikki Boliver, Stephen Gorard and Nadia Siddiqui at Durham University call for a much more robust implementation of contextualised admissions. They reject the option of ticking boxes and appeasing consciences by adopting half-hearted contextualised admissions policies that involve dropping a grade or two when making offers. Instead, they call for AAA+ offers to be no higher than CCC for disadvantaged students. Crucially, they also call for more support to be provided to the beneficiaries of such policies after admission: they should not be expected to sink or swim or to fare immediately as well as more highly-schooled students. Some people will be aghast at

1 UCAS, *End of Cycle Report 2016*, 2016, p.20 https://www.ucas.com/file/86541/download?token=PQnaAI5f

2 Unite Students and HEPI, *Reality Check*, 2017 http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Reality-Check-Report-Online1.pdf

such seemingly radical proposals. But it is silly to think A-Levels or other school-leaving qualifications are always an accurate indicator of each person's true ability and the purpose of higher education is to unlock future potential rather than to reward past success.

I was involved in supporting contextualised admissions as part of the 2011 higher education white paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*, when I was Special Adviser to David Willetts, the Minister for Universities and Science (2010-14).[3] We were accused of providing excuses for schools that needed to improve. It would be fantastic to have a consistently outstanding set of schools up and down the land. But, even if that were to be achieved (and it has proved elusive to date), it will take time to deliver and do nothing to help those about to leave school and enter the world beyond.

Consider children in care. They have had nothing like enough focus in the widening participation debate so far. Yet the obstacles they face are often enormous. The Buttle UK Quality Mark, referred to in the chapter by Chloë Cockett, Policy and Research Manager at Become, was important in helping students from care backgrounds but it has now finished. So one core challenge is maintaining the momentum that lay behind the scheme, given that only 6 per cent of care leavers reach higher education. Another challenge is to ensure the main features of our university system, including the nationwide UCAS application system, are fair for care leavers

3 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Students at the Heart of the System* https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32409/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf

and respond to their specific needs. That is not rocket science, but it does need initiative, perseverance and commitment to succeed.

In her chapter, Anne-Marie Canning of King's College London shows how a Russell Group university, including one operating in the capital (which brings extra challenges), can make substantial progress in delivering fair access.[4] The make-up of the university sector in the UK, especially in England, is more residential and more hierarchical than in many other countries – I call it a 'boarding school model'.[5] Indeed, the fierce opposition that many academics have expressed against the Government's plans for more secondary school selection is hard to reconcile with their fierce support for selective admissions to higher education.[6] As Anne-Marie shows, this conundrum is tackled by King's in a more imaginative way, through supporting a selective sixth-form school specialising in Mathematics. While the University of Oxford and other research-intensive institutions have unequivocally ruled out sponsoring a school, King's is one of a number – including the University of Birmingham and the University of Cambridge – to show it can work.

Ensuring fair access to our most selective institutions raises a challenge all of its own. At King's, it has often meant recruiting local students who are more likely to live at home. This can bump up against the fact that live-at-home students typically

4 Nick Hillman, 'It's time to give London students more money', *Guardian*, 23 May 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/may/23/london-students-more-money-universities-high-rent

5 Nick Hillman, 'Why do students study so far from home?', *Times Higher Education*, 23 July 2015 https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/why-do-students-study-so-far-from-home

6 Tim Blackman, *The Comprehensive University*, HEPI, 2017

find it harder to integrate, can struggle to find appropriate environments for academic work and have less good academic outcomes on average.[7]

The University of Bristol, a second research-intensive Russell Group university taking widening participation – and working with local schools – seriously, has faced the same challenge. But many of their extra disadvantaged students from the local area have opted to live in student accommodation away from their family home. Given what we know about live-at-home (or commuter) students, this is likely to raise their outcomes.[8] But living away from home may not always be possible, so we also need to do more to raise the retention and attainment of those students who will continue to live apart from their fellow students. The answer could be found in Christchurch, New Zealand, where the need to rebuild university buildings after the devastating earthquake of 2011 gave rise to the concept of a 'sticky campus'.

Ellen Pope, Neil Ladwa and Sarah Hayes provide a perspective on retention from Aston University, which performs particularly well on student retention when set against the benchmarked figures that compare the performance of comparable institutions. This success has not come about without intervention; it is the result of a concerted strategic approach focusing on academic work, pastoral support and the use of new technology to deliver learning analytics. Readers may

7 Liz Thomas and Robert Jones, *Student engagement in the context of commuter students*, 2017 http://tsep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/CommuterEngagement_A4-lowres.pdf

8 Jonathan Neves and Nick Hillman, *HEPI / HEA 2017 Student Academic Experience Survey*, 2017 http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2017-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-Final-Report.pdf

be reminded of the old American saying about success: 'The harder I work, the luckier I get.'

Graeme Atherton's chapter provides a useful reminder that we can always learn from other countries, although it is notable that the countries he identifies as having the best data from which we might learn are other Anglo-Saxon university systems which already have much in common with our own. His chapter also reminds us that we should not always beat ourselves up, despite the slow progress on some key measures and the deep structural challenges. The UK has a fairly good record in terms of debating the issues, collecting the data and shining a spotlight on the problems.

It is not all good though. David Woolley of Nottingham Trent University discusses the lack of really robust evidence for the old Aimhigher initiatives. He is right. When I worked in Whitehall as a political adviser to the Coalition Government that closed down the programme, we did not feel we had sufficient evidence to defend it against the Treasury's austerity axe (and this is, presumably, why its funding had already been slashed by the previous Government). Back in 2010, every Whitehall department was banging the drum for their chosen causes. So the evidence base did not just need to be good; it needed to be better than everyone else's. If the new National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) and other initiatives are to be sustained, we need to think about this from the very start.

One way in which the evidence base has been improved in recent years is through insights from behavioural economics. Susannah Hume and Eliza Selley of the Behavioural Insights Team explain some of the lessons for higher education access.

The path to university – and success at university – can look smooth and short to an advantaged student from a family with experience of higher education. In contrast, it can look obstacle-strewn, long and tortuous – or even entirely blocked – to those with less comfortable backgrounds. To change metaphors, it is the difference between a helicopter taking off straight up and a plane negotiating a long and pothole strewn runway.

Vonnie Sandlan, the former President for the National Union of Students Scotland, usefully reminds us of the different traditions around the UK and, in particular, the mass delivery of higher education by colleges in Scotland. To work successfully in terms of providing clear progression routes, colleges and universities must work closely together and there must be commitment from policymakers. The Scottish Government has adopted some ambitious targets for widening participation and it seems unlikely they will be achieved without colleges continuing to play a major part in delivering higher education to students.

Kirsty Williams, Cabinet Secretary for Education, provides a perspective from Wales that serves as a reminder of the advantages of treating different modes and levels of learning (such as part-time and postgraduate) in similar ways. In recent years, Wales has sometimes looked as though it is mainly responding reactively to England's decisions on higher education. Now, it is forging ahead on its own distinctive path, as laid out by Professor Sir Ian Diamond, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Aberdeen, who perhaps knows more about how the different parts of the UK system fit together than anyone else. The new model of higher fees, but with a maintenance grant available (at least in part) to all, recognises Welsh traditions. It also avoids one of the biggest problems of the English student funding model now that maintenance grants have been entirely removed, as this has meant the poorest entrants graduating with the biggest debts. The innovative and distinctive approach that Wales is taking will be watched closely in all parts of the UK while further undermining the idea of a single UK higher education sector.[9]

Another different vision of the future is provided in the chapter by Peter Horrocks from The Open University. His passionate argument in favour of Personalised Learning Accounts could be an idea whose time has come. It would be wrong to downplay the huge implementation challenges associated with deciding what and whom to fund, but other countries are exploring the idea too and we can be certain that the demand from learners and employers for more flexible lifelong learning options is not going to disappear – especially if employers find it harder to secure the employees they need after Brexit.

Jo Johnson, the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, has been clear in his view that new and 'alternative' providers are part of the answer to improving social mobility.[10] What little evidence exists on the relative student experience at these institutions suggests that, at the top end, students are well served (even though it tells us little about provision at the majority).[11] In their chapter, Debi Hayes and Mark Fuller

9 David Watson, *Only Connect*, HEPI, 2014 http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Only-Connect-WEB-clean.pdf

10 John Fielden and Robin Middlehurst, *Alternative providers of higher education*, HEPI, 2017 http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Hepi_The-alternative-providers-of-higher-education-Report-90-04_01_17-Screen2.pdf

11 Jonathan Neves and Nick Hillman, *HEPI / HEA 2017 Student Academic Experience Survey*, 2017 http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2017-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-Final-Report.pdf

of GSM London remind us that many of the bigger alternative providers have been around for decades and are, in some instances, reaching students that more traditional providers have missed.

Considerable progress has been made in opening up our higher education sector to people from under-represented groups, but:

- it has not been easy to get this far;
- further progress is far from inevitable; and
- the best option is to learn from the sort of experts who have contributed to this collection.

Above all, we also need to remember that any reversal of the decision to remove student number controls would make further progress impossible. It would make entry to university a zero-sum game once more and applicants would yet again be barred from attending universities on the stroke of a bureaucrat's pen.

1. Who you know: The importance of social capital in widening participation

Paul Clarke

According to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, 'capital' is not just an economic concept. He also saw an individual's knowledge and tastes as a form of cultural capital, which is 'institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications'.[1] Bourdieu believed different levels of access to various forms of capital are the root causes of social inequality, something perhaps magnified in higher education.

It makes sense, therefore, that financial support and attainment-raising are the two most common widening participation strategies. Bursaries, scholarships and fee waivers address the financial barriers disadvantaged students face by providing greater economic capital. Tutoring and academic enrichment programmes tackle the primary reason for poorer students' lower rates of progression to high-tariff institutions in particular: that they are less likely to have the right form of cultural capital embodied in the necessary grades.

Bourdieu also formulated the theory of 'field' or the social environment, such as university, in which individuals operate.[2] It is an idea with clear echoes in the talk of 'level playing fields' familiar from discussions of widening participation, and Bourdieu himself talked of 'playing the game'. But Bourdieu

1 Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', John G Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, 1986 https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Bourdieu-Forms-of-Capital.pdf

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 1986 http://www.public.iastate.edu/~carlos/698Q/readings/bourdieu.pdf

intended that 'field' could also allude to 'battlefield'.[3] And it is clear that not every student has the weapons they need for this battlefield.

There have been impressive advances in widening participation, with entry rates from the poorest neighbourhoods increasing by 65 per cent between 2006 and 2015.[4] But recent Higher Education Statistics Agency figures reveal that, with non-continuation rates for disadvantaged students rising faster than for other groups, these students face severe challenges when it comes to succeeding in higher education.[5] A report from the Social Mobility Commission says working-class graduates are both paid less and are less likely to be promoted than privately-schooled graduates during their professional careers.[6] The fact that this study controlled for prior attainment demonstrates that increasing cultural capital in the form of their knowledge and skills is not enough.

Compared to economic and cultural capital, social capital is more difficult to define. Bourdieu described it as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more of less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'.[7] Or, to put it in more common parlance, 'it's not what you know, it's

3 Elliot B. Weininger, 'Pierre Bourdieu on Social Class and Symbolic Violence', pp. 119-171, in *Approaches to Class Analysis*, Erik Olin Wright (ed.), 2005. http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Found-c4rev.pdf

4 UCAS, *End of Cycle Report 2015*, 2015, p.13 https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/eoc-report-2015-v2.pdf

5 https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/releases/2015-16-non-continuation

6 Social Mobility Commission, *The Class Pay Gap and Intergenerational Worklessness*, 2017 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/596945/The_class_pay_gap_and_intergenerational_worklessness.pdf

7 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital*, 1986

who you know'. That social capital is so slippery to nail down makes it more difficult to design and evaluate interventions than for financial support and attainment, which have more easily identifiable and quantifiable inputs and outputs.

Social capital is an important factor shaping an individual's understanding of the world, what Bourdieu called 'habitus' and which can be defined as a framework of skills, knowledge and expectations that guides behaviour. Habitus is heavily influenced by personal experiences from upbringing and schooling from an early age. Broadly speaking, if no one in a young person's family or social circle has been to university, they are less likely to go themselves. In some cases, this is due to a belief that higher education simply 'isn't for the likes of me', that its middle-class image conflicts with a working-class identity. Changing this perception is the principle behind raising aspirations in outreach work targeted at groups such as white working-class boys. It requires sensitive engagement with not just young people but also their parents and the wider community, particularly in more isolated rural and coastal areas where progression to higher education is lowest, and where, according to IntoUniversity, some fear a drain of young people to universities in bigger cities.[8]

However, many young people do aspire to study at university and are encouraged by their parents and others to do so. What they lack is an understanding of the rules – both written and unwritten – that will enable these aspirations to be realised, largely through having no access to the informal advice and

8 IntoUniversity, *Rural Aspiration: Access to Higher Education in rural, coastal and dispersed communities*, 2015 http://intouniversity.org/sites/all/files/userfiles/files/IntoUniversity%20Rural%20Aspiration%20Report%202015.pdf

support available to those from a background where going to university is taken for granted. This means too many young people remove themselves from a system that seems impenetrable, or make choices that lead to entering courses with outcomes that do not reflect their true potential or may bar them from particular institutions or courses in the future.

The ability to make confident and informed decisions is enhanced by greater social capital, yet developing it must begin well before the age of 16. Currently, the most intensive outreach work begins too late.

Social capital should be nurtured throughout university too. While a larger number of young people with degrees could be taken as reflective of widening participation's success, this is not guaranteed, with a recent study from the Institute for Fiscal Studies revealing lower median earnings for male graduates studying certain courses at some universities than for non-graduates.[9] In contrast, the return from social capital – of having the right connections to secure an internship, for example – is becoming higher. Knowing this is in itself a result of social capital: disadvantaged students often assume that studying hard to get a good mark is the key to success because no-one has told them of the other aspects and opportunities of university life they need to consider. Indeed, research by Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Nicola Ingram and Richard Waller suggests disadvantaged students are less likely to engage in extracurricular activities not only because their relative lack of economic capital means they often have to work to fund their

9 Institute for Fiscal Studies, *How English domiciled graduate earnings vary with gender, institution attended, subject and socio-economic background*, 2016 https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/research%20summaries/graduate_earnings.pdf

studies, but also because they are unaware just how much the relationships and knowledge such extracurricular activities develop can be worth.[10] Universities UK also emphasise the links between extracurricular activities, social capital and employability skills.[11]

One-to-one support represents an opportunity to share social capital – for those who have it to support those who do not. So, for example, visits to classes from year 7 onwards by school alumni can demystify higher education by introducing younger people to role models from backgrounds to which they can relate. In later years, mentoring replicates networks by connecting disadvantaged students with people with experience of higher education who can help them understand the 'rules of the game'. People who are the first in their family to go to university or lack the right support at school need someone who can help them decipher university websites and prospectuses, and give them insights from their own experiences. They can also reassure young people that higher education does contain people from similar backgrounds to their own, offering emotional support simply unavailable from scanning a website. The key to engaging with disadvantaged students is not just making them feel that they can get into higher education but that they also belong there. In an Aston University study of peer mentoring, mentees emphasised a sense of belonging as the most valuable benefit of mentoring,

10 Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Nicola Ingram and Richard Waller, 'Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34 (5-6). pp. 723-743, 2013 http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/26463/8/Final%20version%20inc%20abstract.pdf

11 Universities UK, *Student experience: Measuring expectations and outcomes*, 2016 http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2016/student-experience-measuring-expectations-and-outcomes.pdf

and most were more worried about adjusting to university life and making friends than their academic studies.[12]

The benefits of one-to-one support for mentees are obvious as they vastly boost their chances of studying more appropriate courses, and thus their likelihood of finding a rewarding career. Mentors develop the communication, self-confidence and other employability skills essential after graduation. Indeed, many mentees become mentors, sharing their own newfound social capital with the younger cohorts in a virtuous circle. Meanwhile, universities have the potential to benefit from increased access and retention rates for their disadvantaged students. The Sutton Trust highlights forms of one-to-one support as being among the most effective outreach strategies.[13] The Aston study cited evidence that peer mentoring improved retention and enhanced levels of student satisfaction regarding the overall quality of the university experience, resulting in increased commitment to the institution.

In this sense, we ultimately need to see developing young people's social capital as a long-term investment and one which can transform higher education from an engine of social reproduction to the engine of social mobility it is at its best.

12 Jane Andrews and Robin Clark, *Peer Mentoring Works! How Peer Mentoring Enhances Student Success in Higher Education*, 2011 https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/aston_what_works_final_report_1.pdf

13 The Sutton Trust, *Evaluating Access*, 2015 https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Evaluating-Access-Review-Full-Report.pdf

2. A more radical approach to contextualised admissions

Vikki Boliver, Stephen Gorard and Nadia Siddiqui

More than half of all UK universities now draw on contextual data about the socio-economic circumstances of applicants when making undergraduate admission decisions.[1] In doing so, these universities recognise that 'equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential' and that 'it is fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors as well as formal educational achievement, given the variation in learners' opportunities and circumstances'.[2] Contextual data is being used to help decide which applicants to shortlist, invite to interview, or offer places to subject to standard or reduced academic entry requirements, and to confirm offers to applicants who ultimately fail to achieve the grades stipulated in their initial offer of a place.[3]

Of these various uses of contextual data, the one that will do most to widen participation at highly-selective universities is the reduction of academic entry requirements for disadvantaged students. However, only 18 of the 30 most selective universities in Britain reduce entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants, and typically by just one or two grades. The University of Edinburgh is the most

1 Supporting Professionalism in Admissions, *SPA's Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015*, 2015 https://www.spa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Research-CA-survey-report-2015_1.pdf

2 Steven Schwartz, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, 2004, pp.5-6 http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5284/1/finalreport.pdf

3 Joanne Moore, Anna Mountford-Zimdars and Jo Wiggans, *Contextualised admissions: Examining the evidence*, 2013 https://www.spa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Research-CA-Report-2013-full_0.pdf

radical in this regard, setting minimum entry requirements for disadvantaged students at three grades below standard entry requirements for some courses (for example, ABB instead of A*AA for their English Literature degree programme).

If the purpose is truly to widen participation at highly-selective universities by a noticeable amount, then the entry requirements for disadvantaged students need to be reduced by considerably more than one or two grades. Just 1 per cent of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieve AAA or better at A-Level (or its equivalent) by age 18, compared to 20 per cent of all other children educated in English state schools. Only a quarter of FSM-eligible children achieve any A-Level equivalent qualifications at all, compared to half of all children not in receipt of FSM.[4] If we accept that FSM-eligible children face significant economic and social obstacles to high achievement at school, it can be argued that it is not fair to set the bar for access to a top university at AAA+ for FSM and non-FSM children alike. A fairer bar for FSM children might be CCC and above, which 14 per cent of FSM children manage to achieve.

Significantly lowering entry requirements for applicants to highly-selective universities from disadvantaged backgrounds entails a shift away from formal equality of opportunity towards a concern with fair equality of opportunity. It means recognising that A-Level grades are not a measure of ability, and not an entirely objective measure of attainment, but can serve as an indicator of potential when judged with reference to the socio-economic context in which they were achieved.

4 Vikki Boliver, Stephen Gorard and Nadia Siddiqui, *How can we widen participation in higher education? The promise of contextualised admissions*, 2017

Those who oppose substantially reducing entry requirements for disadvantaged students may argue that it would amount to lowering standards, or that it risks less well-qualified students being set up to fail. Both arguments rest on the notion that the standard entry requirements set by highly-selective universities reflect a clear appraisal of what is needed to succeed at degree level. In truth, however, university entry requirements have risen markedly during the past decade across the entire UK higher education sector.[5] This is not because the demands of a university education have increased, nor is it in proportion to inflation of A-Level grades. Instead entry requirements have risen because this has proved an effective way for universities to cope with the administrative burden posed by a rise in the demand for university places.[6] As a result, many universities now ask for A-Level grades which far exceed the minimum required to do well at degree level.

We should recognise, however, that admitting contextually disadvantaged students with grades as low as CCC to otherwise highly academically selective degree programmes does risk setting up these students to fail. This is a risk even if we accept that standard entry requirements to the most academically selective courses are much higher than the minimum needed to do well, and even if we accept that CCC at A-Level indicates similar potential in an FSM student as AAA at A-Level does for students from more advantaged backgrounds.

5 Stephen Gorard, Nadia Siddiqui and Vikki Boliver, *An analysis of contextual and other indicators of HE students for possible use in widening participation*, 2017 http://dro.dur.ac.uk/21015/1/21015.pdf?DDD34+DDD29+hsmz78+d700tmt

6 Commission on Widening Access, *A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access*, 2016 http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00496619.pdf

Having achieved CCC at A-Level may be an exceptionally good performance given the obstacles to educational success that FSM eligible students face, but those obstacles are likely to persist beyond entry to university. Moreover, students with CCC at A-Level embarking on a degree course where the norm is AAA+ are likely to face a much steeper climb when it comes to developing the disciplinary knowledge and academic study skills needed to thrive on their degree programme.

So radical change is needed not only in how universities select their undergraduates, but also in how they support students to achieve their full potential while at university. Historically, highly-selective universities have almost exclusively served academically high-flying students, and so have had little need to offer learning support to students beyond that which forms part of the formal degree programme. In recent years, however, the Office for Fair Access and the Scottish Funding Council have been pressing universities to develop widening participation strategies which cover the whole student lifecycle, reaching beyond outreach work and admissions policies. This has prompted a gradual but important change in university thinking about the kinds of academic and other support services needed to foster student success. Things are moving in the right direction, but a radical step change in academic support would be needed if highly-selective universities are to succeed in helping disadvantaged students fulfil their potential.

However, it is worth highlighting that all universities, highly-selective ones included, are currently facing a mounting business case to widen participation on a grander scale than has been countenanced to date. Demographic data indicates that the number of 18-year olds has begun to fall and will continue to do so over the next few years. As a result, universities, even highly-selective ones, are increasingly struggling to fill their places, as evidenced by the fact that 64 per cent of all applications to Russell Group universities were greeted with an offer of a place compared to just 53 per cent five years previously.[7] Given that the higher education participation rates of socio-economically advantaged high-achieving students reached saturation point some time ago, the only way for many highly-selective universities to maintain their student numbers will be to lower their entry requirements at least to some extent.

If highly-selective universities are going to need to lower their entry requirements in order to stay afloat, why not use the opportunity to lower them specifically for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who will otherwise remain sorely under-represented at these institutions?

7 Vikki Boliver, 'Ethnic inequalities in admission to elite universities', Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza (eds), *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy*, forthcoming 2018

3. Six times less likely: Care leavers and their paths to higher education

Chloë Cockett

The state has intervened in the lives of children in care and care leavers in the most extreme way, taking them away from their birth families and assuming responsibility for them. We all share a duty to ensure they succeed as adults. Listed as an under-represented group in government guidance to the Director of Fair Access since 2011, care leavers are included in approximately 80 per cent of 2016/17 university access agreements.[1] Yet while care leavers remain a target group according to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) website, it is concerning that strategic guidance for developing 2018/19 Access Agreements does not identify them as a priority group.[2] The guidance only asks institutions to develop existing work with disadvantaged groups, without specifically referring to care leavers (even though care leavers were listed as a priority group in previous years).

In 2003, the Social Exclusion Unit estimated that just 1 per cent of care leavers were in higher education. Fourteen years on, that percentage has increased; around 6 per cent of 19-year old care leavers are in higher education. But this contrasts with a participation rate of 38 per cent among the general population. Parity for care leavers – no less intelligent or deserving of a university-level education than other young people – remains distant.

1 Department for Education, *Keep On Caring*, 2016, p.34 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/535899/Care-Leaver-Strategy.pdf

2 Office for Fair Access website https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/target-groups/; OFFA, *Strategic guidance: developing your 2018-19 access agreement*, 2017, p.6 https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Strategic-guidance-developing-your-2018-19-access-agreement-FINAL.pdf

At every key stage, the academic performance of children in care is worse than their peers. This stems from placement instability, disrupted schooling, the impact of pre-care experiences and a lack of aspiration from carers and professionals. Additionally, care leavers do not always follow a linear educational journey, entering or re-entering education later than their peers. The odds are stacked against them.

Knowing about, aspiring to, and applying to university are often the first barriers to overcome. Care leavers may not feel that higher education is even an option for them. There may be no one encouraging them to consider their capabilities or plan their future, or no one to ask for advice about writing applications. They may not have had the sort of opportunities that bolster personal statements, and attending open days can pose practical or financial difficulties.

Having overcome such barriers, care leavers face additional challenges once in higher education. Many young people struggle with this transition – learning to manage finances, living in different sorts of accommodation, protecting their wellbeing, and studying in new ways. They often have no practical or emotional support from their family. If their loan arrives late, they may have no one to ask for help. Part-time employment may not provide enough for their needs; they may take on several part-time jobs, or even a full-time job, while studying.

When in higher education, care leavers receive financial and other support from their local authority, although it can vary significantly between local authorities. The support package is meant to be agreed in their Pathway Plan, and regularly reviewed.[3] But things change. A student may need to take a year out, or change course. A Pathway Plan review should occur to ensure it reflects their needs, but this can take time, and involve negotiation. A degree of flexibility, understanding and additional support from an institution can help alleviate stress.

Policy has progressed since that 1 per cent figure back in 2003:

- local authorities now collect the destination data of 19- to 21-year old care leavers;
- a Higher Education Bursary has been introduced;
- care leavers can identify themselves to universities at the application stage through UCAS; and
- local authorities now must ensure care leavers are provided with accommodation during vacations.

The Buttle UK Quality Mark – a framework that helped higher and further education institutions develop their support to care leavers – led to the establishment of much good practice. By the time the scheme finished in 2014, 114 universities and 85 further education colleges had been awarded the Quality Mark.[4] Many organisations have since stepped up to fill the gap, providing tools, guides, and networks to support staff

3 A Pathway Plan sets out the support provided by a local authority to a care leaver, and should reflect their individual needs.

4 The Buttle UK Quality Mark was created to identify universities and colleges actively supporting students who have experienced care. For more information see the Buttle UK website http://www.buttleuk.org/areas-of-focus/quality-mark-for-care-leavers

working with this group.[5] However, to be sustainable, targeted support for care leavers must be embedded throughout the higher education sector, not reliant on the personal interests of individuals within institutions and funding bodies.

Care leavers who want to go to university should be enabled to do so. Widening access schemes need to motivate children and young people from care who have the aptitude and potential to benefit from higher education, so that by the age of 18 they feel confident that they deserve to go to university.[6] It is also vital that care leavers are supported to make informed decisions, so that they study the right course at the right place for them.

Some institutions use contextualised admissions and Compact Schemes to help care leavers, which are a welcome intervention, but unintended consequences must be guarded against.[7] Different academic routes provide different skills and knowledge. Students with more vocational qualifications may need additional support to ensure they do not struggle in a more academic environment. We must not set up care leavers to fail.

Flexibility is key, both in the policies and support offered by universities and institutions that support higher education, such as Student Finance England. Relatively simple issues for most young people may be more complicated for care leavers. For example, decisions about university places are increasingly

5 Become has created Propel, a resource for care leavers enabling them to search and compare the support on offer to them at over 94 per cent of all UK higher education institutions http://propel.org.uk

6 Claire Cameron et al, *Educating Children and Young People in Care*, 2015, p.187

7 Compact Schemes aim to support students from groups that are under-represented in higher education to enter and succeed in higher education.

made through Clearing. Care leavers may be unable to make the split-second decisions this often requires, requiring approval from their local authority for changes to their Pathway Plan. And while 365-day accommodation helps local authorities fulfil their duty to provide accommodation for care leavers during vacations, a deserted campus on Christmas Day is a lonely place to be. A one-size-fits-all policy will not work.

We believe a regular data release looking at experiences of care leavers in higher education would be beneficial. For example, how many of the care leavers in higher education at 19 go on to obtain their degree? How many drop out, change subjects, or study for their degree at further education colleges? How many care leavers return to study after the age of 21? Data that could help us answer these questions exist, but are not routinely monitored or made publicly available. Inconsistencies in how institutions define a care leaver even remain prevalent.

Gaining insight into the experiences of care leavers who are not in higher education is also important. Filling in some of these blanks will help clarify whether the support currently on offer is sufficient for the needs of this group, at whatever age they attend university, before and during their studies.

This is a pivotal moment in the development of support for care leavers in higher education. As the Office for Students takes on the functions of the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Fair Access, as the Higher Education and Research Act opens the market to more institutions, as budgets stretch and institutions decide which under-represented groups to focus on, it is essential that the limited gains we have seen in participation rates are not lost –

and that further progress is made. Sustaining and building on this success means more research, to ensure the right support is being provided in the right places. Of course, achieving parity in participation rates cannot be done without a greater focus on improving looked-after children's academic outcomes, from pre-school to higher education. But the higher education sector has a responsibility to inspire looked-after children, make higher education attainable to those who want to pursue it and support them when they undertake it.

4. Finding the keys: Good practices in fair access

Anne-Marie Canning

In 2029, King's College London will celebrate its 200th birthday. Vision 2029 articulates King's College London's strategic vision in the years leading up to our bicentenary. At the heart of this strategy is an ambition for King's to become the Russell Group university with the best record on fair access. For us, widening participation is not a government regulation, it is a core part of our mission and values and essential in ensuring our classrooms are vibrant, the professions are diverse and that we contribute to the common good. We have made decent headway with our ambition already.

Our undergraduate state school intake stands at an all-time high of 77 per cent. Our first-year students are 44 per cent Black and Minority Ethnic (up from 41 per cent the year before). One-quarter (24 per cent) of our students come from homes experiencing financial hardship or urban adversity and over 30 per cent of our students receive means-tested bursary support. One-in-twenty (5 per cent) of our learners come from low-participation neighbourhoods: no mean feat in London where ward-level datasets like the participation of local areas (POLAR) classification mask hyper-local pockets of deprivation and low educational progression. In the most recent Office for Fair Access monitoring round, King's College London hit all its institutional intake benchmarks for 2015/16.

The figures did not always look like this. King's is the Russell Group university with the most rapid growth in state school and low socio-economic students and I am often asked how we have achieved these levels of participation. One of my favourite sayings is: 'old ways won't open new doors' and this has informed our strategy and approach to widening participation at King's. A willingness to try new things combined with high-quality delivery and robust evaluation have been critical to making accelerated progress in opening up our institution.

King's has a strong tradition in addressing educational inequity. Our Extended Medical Degree Programme (EMDP) has now been running since 2010. The EMDP splits stage 1 (year one) of the conventional medical degree across two years (stage 1A and stage 1B), enabling additional academic and pastoral support throughout the early years of the course. Over 50 students benefit from this programme each year, which offers a route into the medical profession for under-represented learners from less-advantaged educational backgrounds. The model has been used to provide a similar degree programme for aspiring dentists.

Crucial to making good progress has been our development of a full lifecycle model of widening participation (see Table 1). Our programmes range from primary-school level interventions through to labour market outcomes and ensure a joined-up talent pipeline.

A contextual admissions system acts as a gateway from outreach to enrolment and has secured what is often a missing connection in many universities. Students from widening participation backgrounds who apply to King's receive additional admissions consideration. Applicants who trigger particular contextual flags are 'locked' in our admissions portal and can only be rejected with the personal authorisation of the Director of Admissions and myself.

Table 1: King's College London: A full lifecycle approach to widening participation				
Stage 1 **Pre-16 outreach**	**Stage 2** **Post-16 outreach**	**Stage 3** **Fair admissions**	**Stage 4** **Positive student experience**	**Stage 5** **Successful graduates**
We will deliver aspiration-raising activities for local students that encourage higher education participation. King's outreach programmes will support informed choice-making through impartial guidance.	We will deliver targeted outreach work with students in London and beyond to improve access to King's College London and other universities. Activities will seek to enhance attainment and preparedness for higher study.	We will ensure that King's College's recruitment, selection and admissions processes are fair, transparent and identify the talent and potential of students from all backgrounds.	We will provide excellent student and education support services that seek to address the on-course needs of students from widening participation backgrounds.	We will deliver tailored support to improve the employability and career outcomes of students from widening participation backgrounds.

This process was identified by the Quality Assurance Agency as a feature of good practice in our most recent institutional review. The system takes the model of Harvard admissions and adapts it for a UK context. A team of trained 'readers' assess any widening participation applications at risk of rejection to identify mitigating circumstances and put in place additional support or alternative offers if appropriate. Students who have participated in high-intensity programmes, for example K+ and Realising Opportunities, are eligible for variable offers – offers are made at both the standard level and at a two-grade lower point. This acts as a powerful safety net for students who have engaged with these multi-intervention, two-year programmes and completed summative academic projects as part of their time on the respective schemes.

Good practice in fair access sometimes exists outside of the higher education sector. The past five years has seen a remarkable rise of third-sector organisations involved in fair access. At King's we were early adopters of partnerships with third-sector organisations – most notably the Brilliant Club and IntoUniversity. If a charity or social enterprise is more effective in adding value, universities should throw their weight behind it through meaningful partnership. Third-sector organisations can be more nimble in responding to the challenges of widening participation. For example, the Brilliant Club's mobilisation of PhD students or IntoUniversity's community education centres have secured reach into social mobility cold spots. Working with charities can be galvanising and drive a faster pace of change within the widening participation ecosystem, as they act as trusted connectors between schools, businesses and universities.

In 2014, King's College London and the University of Exeter became the first universities to open free schools specialising in Mathematics. King's College London Mathematics School (KCLMS) aims to improve access to high-quality mathematical education at sixth-form level. Universities can and should be more imaginative in thinking about their role in supporting schools and raising attainment. The prospect of compulsory university sponsorship of schools has not been generally well received in the higher education sector. The University of Oxford's Vice-Chancellor, Louise Richardson, responded by saying: 'We're very good at running a university. But we have no experience of running schools, so I think it would be a distraction'.[1] King's doesn't run KCLMS, but our infrastructure, widening participation resource and academic expertise have enabled headteacher Dan Abramson to develop a remarkably

1 Sean Coughlan, 'Oxford head rejects sponsoring schools' *BBC News*, 22 September 2016 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-37440546

successful school in Lambeth. Every KCLMS student has secured an A or A* in A-Level Mathematics but, perhaps more importantly, the school is in the top 0.5 per cent of value-added scores in the country. This means, for each A-Level a student takes, they secure half a grade more than their Key Stage 4 results predicted they would achieve.

Bringing fresh approaches to stubborn problems can yield promising results. Reading *Nudge* by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein sowed the kernel of an idea that eventually developed into our collaboration with the Behavioural Insights Team (formerly the No.10 Downing Street's so-called Nudge Unit). The project explores whether behavioural economics can be used to shape and improve the experiences and outcomes of widening participation students at King's. This is the first thorough application of behavioural insights in a UK university context. Through randomised control trials we have demonstrable evidence that behavioural science can boost engagement and social belonging for undergraduates from widening participation backgrounds. We have also explored widening participation student experiences of moving into higher education via a pulse-point panel study. By surveying students about their lived experience at key points across the first year we have built a rich picture of student mindsets and emotional journeys. This allows us to develop sympathetic interventions that will be of most help to our non-traditional students at King's.

Behavioural insights could have the power to transform how we deliver fair access, just as they have done in the United States via the Better Make Room campaign, masterminded by Professor Ben Castleman. The campaign brought together behavioural insights and digital technology to provide social support and encouragement for students enrolling at college. Here in the UK, the Department for Education recently published the results of a trial in which high-achieving students received personalised letters about university options. The trial was successful in improving Russell Group applications and enrolments with 222 extra learners studying at these institutions as a result of the intervention.

Embracing innovation also means embracing formative evaluation in order to drive programme development. In the early days of establishing our multi-intervention K+ scheme, we commissioned Professor Becky Francis and Dr Anna Mountford-Zimdars to carry out a study of the initial years of operation. Their findings helped us improve the programme. The widening participation community is in urgent need of an Education Endowment Foundation style infrastructure to enable effective sharing of what works and, perhaps more importantly, what does not work. This would also serve to raise the standard of our evidence base, especially important as we now need to move towards measuring attainment-raising interventions. Building the expertise of widening participation leaders and practitioners will be key to securing better practice across the sector. Widening participation practitioners must have a fluent understanding of the evidence base if they are to be successful in developing high-calibre interventions that tackle fair access challenges. Old ways will not open new doors and we must embrace both innovation and evidence to make faster progress in widening access to our most selective higher education institutions.

5. Bristol Scholars

Judith Squires

The Bristol Scholars scheme is a radical new approach to widening access to universities. The scheme moves away from the traditional focus on grades, and instead looks at the student's potential as assessed by their teachers, taking into account any form of educational disadvantage. The scheme is the first of its kind in the UK, and was launched in December 2016 by the Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening.

Context

Bristol is a city of contrasts. It has affluent neighbourhoods that contain the highest proportion of PhDs in the country, but it also has 42 city areas that are among the most deprived in the UK. The experience of school-level education varies significantly across the city with the proportion of pupils passing their GCSEs ranging from 32 per cent to 90 per cent, and the proportion progressing to university from 5 per cent to 83 per cent. One area has the second lowest proportion of students progressing to university in the country.

The University of Bristol is situated in the city centre, and benefits from a productive and mutually-beneficial relationship with the city. In the past, however, we have recruited relatively few students from the local area. Our new Bristol Scholars scheme was driven both by a desire to make a step change in our widening participation activities and also to make a clear commitment to working closely with the city.

The scheme emerged from discussions in the Learning City group, which brings together City Council leaders and local education providers to develop a co-ordinated approach to education in order to enhance the learning outcomes of local people. The Learning City approach gives us an opportunity to identify key challenges in the city and develop initiatives to address them. Early conversations about ways to raise attainment of all students in the city focused on trying to spot talent and to evaluate students who could really thrive at university based on their potential and trajectory, rather than performance in exams and attainment. This gave rise to the Bristol Scholars programme, allowing local students to gain access not simply by predicted grades, but for their proven demonstration for potential despite personal and educational challenges.

How it works

Through the scheme, headteachers are asked to identify students who they believe have the potential to succeed at the University of Bristol, but whose grades are unlikely, for a range of reasons, to meet our standard entry requirements. This may be, for example, because their education has been interrupted through a period of illness or a family bereavement, or because they meet a range of widening participation criteria such as being first in their family to attend university, receiving Free School Meals or being a young carer. The scheme is open to all of Bristol's 25 schools or colleges with post-16 provision. Each school or college can nominate up to five Year 12 students.

In a move to establish joint working across the city's educational providers, we worked with a group of senior teachers from local schools and colleges to devise the details of the scheme and agree the selection criteria. With advice from teachers, it was agreed from the outset that this is not an unconditional offer scheme; instead, tailored offers will be made up to four grades below our standard offer. All courses are available to Bristol Scholars, including popular professional programmes such as Medicine and Dentistry. The headteacher is asked to submit a statement with the student's application, explaining why the student's potential is not reflected in their predicted grades, along with details of challenges they have overcome.

Students are recruited to the scheme in the spring of Year 12 for entry in September the following year. Engaging with the students for 18-months in the run up to their A-Level exams and enrolment at the University allows them to gain familiarity with the institution, develop close networks as a cohort, receive additional academic tuition and complete all aspects of the outreach programme.

Once on their chosen programme of study, we ensure the students have every chance of success. Academic and pastoral mentoring is provided and we administer support in the form of peer mentors, financial aid and skills sessions to ensure a seamless integration into university life. We aim to develop a cohort effect, where students work and socialise together so they do not feel isolated if, for example, they should continue to live at home. Knowing each other before they start will make the transition that little bit easier.

To facilitate success and growth, the University is working closely with parents, teachers and students at post-16 institutions. Enabling aspiration to a University of Bristol education is key to the scheme's success. This applies to the parents and teachers as much as to the students.

The 2017 pilot cohort

For the initial 2017 pilot, we received applications from 19 of the 25 eligible schools in Bristol. A panel of academic and recruitment professionals reviewed all applications to ensure they met the criteria set:

- 76 per cent of those who have been made offers are the first in their family to progress to higher education;
- 57 per cent are entitled to the post-16 bursary;
- 40 per cent are part of the Free School Meals cohort; and
- 7 per cent are young carers.

Many of the Bristol Scholars meet multiple widening participation criteria. The pilot cohort are a varied, talented and engaging group – ingredients of brilliant students. They will bring a real diversity of experience and perspective to enrich our University.

Offers have been made to students on a wide range of programmes, including Medicine, Veterinary Science, Mathematics, Law, Modern Languages and Engineering. We work closely with academics in schools to ensure that the reduced offer is at the appropriate level and to make certain that the support provided once the students progress on to our programmes is as effective as possible.

Feedback from the first cohort of Bristol Scholars suggests that the majority will opt to move into our residences rather than stay at home. We are encouraging this, where appropriate, given evidence that live-at-home students tend to have worse outcomes nationally.

Lessons learnt

This is an innovative scheme and we will measure progress closely to evaluate its impact. Initial experiences highlight two distinctive features.

Firstly, the decision to include both independent and state schools in the scheme has proved to be controversial. Much of the debate overlooks the fact that school type is not the only measure of disadvantage, and that students attending independent schools can also, for example, suffer an interrupted education, be young carers or meet other widening participation criteria. The debate also failed to recognise we have other initiatives to address the current under-representation of students from state schools in our student population: our new, national two-grade contextual offer for students from low-performing state schools is designed to address this challenge.

Secondly, working closely with schools combined with the local focus of this innovative new scheme proved to be crucial in allowing us to develop a more rounded approach to widening participation. Identifying the students who have the potential to thrive in our educational environment, but whose exam performance does not reflect this potential, requires detailed knowledge of the students. The scheme also requires significant trust between our University and Bristol's schools. It is testament to the strength of this model that schools within the region are already keen to see the scheme extended to include more schools. We will be reviewing this option once we have experienced a full cycle of the scheme. But it is important to keep the scheme local as it requires a close working partnership with schools. The relations of trust and understanding required to identify the right students and to ensure they are supported effectively would be hard to sustain at a national level.

The Bristol Scholars scheme developed organically out of conversations with educational leaders within the city. It works for Bristol, and we hope other universities might adopt a similar model. We recommend universities explore new approaches to widening participation in discussion with their local schools to establish the specific needs of the local area, and then work together to produce innovative solutions that address these specific needs. This represents a second step change in thinking about widening participation that takes us beyond national one-size-fits-all approaches and underlines the value of local partnerships. There has never been a better time for showing that all UK universities are rooted in their local communities.

6. Improving retention

Ellen Pope, Neil Ladwa and Sarah Hayes

The number of poor students who drop out of university before finishing their degree is now at its highest for five years. Despite the vast funds that have been poured into boosting access to higher education, the Office For Fair Access notes, 'while more disadvantaged young people are in higher education than ever before, the numbers of those students leaving before completing their studies has risen for the second year in a row'.[1] These findings are confirmed by the Social Mobility Commission, which says 'despite universities' success in opening their doors to more working-class youngsters than ever before, retention rates and graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students have barely improved over the period'.[2]

At Aston University we believe dropping out represents the worst outcome for any student. Not every student with problems will drop out, but the ones that do so are probably the most troubled and need the most help. While managing down drop-out rates improves both a university's financial and league table positions, at Aston we have particularly focused on the human cost to students via personal setback.

Established as a university in 1966, Aston has over 50 years' experience in making a difference to peoples' lives through higher education, widening participation and a high-quality

1 OFFA, *Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2015-16*, 2017, p.17 https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/OFFA-Monitoring-Outcomes-Report-2015-16-Final.pdf

2 Social Mobility Commission, *Time For Change: An Assessment of Government Policies on Social Mobility 1997-2017*, 2017, p.4 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-policies-between-1997-and-2017-time-for-change

experience for the diverse entrants to its programmes.[3] Aston's success is shown by its position in the top 30 universities for enabling student access, achievement and graduate employment. Learning gain at Aston includes increased knowledge and skills, but also work-readiness via placement opportunities and personal development for all. Challenging work placements mean our students return to their final year ready for future employment. However, though diversity is a strength, it presents particular challenges when seeking to improve retention and success.[4] Students often enter Aston with comparatively low social capital: 42.1 per cent are from the four lowest socio-economic groups, against the sector average of 33 per cent, according to HESA data. Their journey from enrolment to graduation is one that transforms their career prospects, and for many, their life opportunities.

Aston's current strategy began to take shape in 2015, when the University appointed two Achievement Enhancement Advisers with a specific remit for reducing attrition and developing joined-up approaches to retention and progression. We sought a partnership approach, identifying key areas of focus using institutional and school-level data and working in cross-university groups. Collaborative approaches are among the high-impact practices, identified by George Kuh, as essential to link expertise across the institution and improve student

3 Aston University, *Access Agreement 2017-18* https://www.offa.org.uk/agreements/Aston%20University%201718.pdf

4 Liz Thomas and Helen May, *Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education*, Higher Education Academy, 2010 https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/inclusivelearningandteaching_finalreport.pdf

persistence and success.[5] Co-ownership of our widening participation and employability core values, through an on-going dialogue with our students and staff, helps us overcome challenges presented by organisational structure.

Using relevant Aston data, the following areas were identified as key to improving student attrition rates.

1) Students' confidence and ability in numeracy

Reviewing Aston's data around retention and progression revealed that a high proportion of the modules students fail and repeat contain some form of Mathematics or quantitative elements. Working with programme teams and departments, such as the Centre for Learning Innovation & Professional Practice and the Learning Development Centre, actions included redesigning key modules to create more inclusive learning experiences. Mathematics support (both pre- and post-entry) in the Learning Development Centre was enhanced by improving visibility, data and communication. The Centre for Learning Innovation & Professional Practice developed sessions for those teaching Mathematics to facilitate better support. The result is a better understanding of staff and student needs, and an improvement in student success relating to numerically-intensive modules.

5 George Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices*, Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008 https://keycenter.unca.edu/sites/default/files/aacu_high_impact_2008_final.pdf; Sarah Parkes et al, *Academic and professional services in partnership literature review and overview of the results*, Higher Education Academy, 2014 https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/prof_service_partnerships_report_final_200214_updated_1.pdf

2) Using learning analytics to support students

Early identification of students at risk of withdrawal or non-progression is vital, particularly in the first term when there is little to identify an at-risk student prior to the January assessment period. Our HEFCE-funded pilot, which works towards developing a learning-analytics solution and tracking student-learning activity, has been conducted in consultation with students and our Students' Union. It will enable staff to view a dashboard showing learner engagement and attainment and allow early interventions with students at risk of withdrawing or not progressing. An attendance monitoring system and student apps will allow students to track and discuss their engagement levels.

3) Supporting early transition into higher education

At Aston we seek to develop an early sense of belonging.[6] Our Welcome Week provides support for new students and Aston University Students' Union volunteers greet new international students. More work could be done between acceptance and enrolment though, so we recently held two Higher Education Academy supported cross-institutional development days to share ideas across staff and the Student Union.

4) Improving academic/pastoral support for students

Through talking with staff and students it became evident that Aston's personal tutoring system was deemed valuable but variable in effectiveness.

6 Kelly Allen and Terence Bowles, 'Belonging as a Guiding Principle in the Education of Adolescents', *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology*, 2012, Volume 12, pp.108-119 http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1002251.pdf

We redesigned personal tutor training to include:

- exploration of barriers to learning;
- case studies on students in crisis;
- resource sheets for student referrals;
- exploration of tutor versus student expectations;
- understanding the current personal tutoring policy; and
- using online resources to support tutees.

A new system of super tutors is also now used in schools. The supertutor provides additional support to tutors and leads on interventions for at-risk students.

At a strategic level, our student retention and achievement activities have oversight through a senior management steering group. This runs in collaboration with our learning analytics steering committee, with knowledge shared between them.

Aston students and colleagues have taken part in the Jisc Change Agents' Network and are actively involved in a Birmingham Digital Student Partnership.[7] At the International Federation of National Teaching Fellows (IFNTF) World Summit held in Birmingham in February 2017, colleagues from Aston University and Birmingham City University made a joint presentation. Entitled 'High Impact Practices: a link to measuring learning gain', which featured our experiences of forging collaboration to

7 Jisc Change Agents' Network https://can.jiscinvolve.org/wp/change-leader-award/change-leader-award-alumni/; Birmingham Digital Student Partnership https://www.birminghamdigitalstudent.co.uk/about

support a shared understanding of learning gain.[8] Embedding retention in these sorts of networks has been crucial in enabling Aston to outperform its Higher Education Statistics Agency benchmark: a sector average adjusted for each higher education provider. This was achieved with a larger proportion of students from more deprived backgrounds than other institutions who occupy a top 20 position for graduate prospects.[9]

Ultimately, our successes in student retention are attributed to:

- strong support from senior management;
- strategic partnerships to contribute to learning gain;
- our fundamental university-wide ethos of widening participation, diversity, inclusion and success;
- an integrated curriculum, with teaching that draws on experiences of our students, incorporating teamwork and peer support, flexible placements, vocational courses and work-based learning; and
- a culture of empowerment to continually challenge practice.

Aston University recognises student experience and engagement as everyone's responsibility. This helps to nurture personal accountability and also innovation around retention and inclusivity. We believe the following are important to support on-going student success and achievement.

8 International Federation of National Teaching Fellows World Summit http://www.ifntf.org/worldsummit

9 Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 1998

- **Developing a sense of community:** Building on examples of effective institutional practice promotes a sense of community between undergraduate students and the institution. Our new learning and teaching community web pages will develop shared online resources.

- **Transition:** We will explore the possibilities of curriculum alignment between BTEC courses taught in local colleges and some programmes offered at Aston University, to better prepare students for the transition from further to higher education.[10] We hope to develop virtual tours to support students living at home and those learning at a distance. It is important to challenge assumptions about what our students know, particularly in relation to first generation students.

- **Staff engagement:** The profile of retention and progression at Aston University has risen significantly. However, there are still improvements which can be made in engaging staff across all departments. Sharing effective practice is a priority and will build upon innovations such as our learning analytics system.

Student retention, progression and achievement is a continually-evolving area within higher education. Aston's approach has encompassed and absorbed as many different roles, experiences and environments as possible, providing a greater capacity for flexibility and understanding of student issues and student engagement.

10 Scott Kelly, *Reforming BTECs: Applied General qualifications as a route to higher education*, HEPI, 2017 http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hepi_Reforming-BTECs-Report-94-09_02_17-Web.pdf

7. A global view: What England can learn from the rest of the world

Graeme Atherton

Inequality in access to higher education by social background is a global phenomenon, but the level of attention given to this inequality in England is quite rare. Looking at widening access in a global context allows us to see whether approaches to addressing the challenge in other countries could inform what we do in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Charting Equity in Higher Education: Drawing the Global Access Map, produced in 2016 and supported by Pearson and the University of Newcastle, Australia, aimed to examine the evidence available across the world on participation in higher education by social background.[1] It showed that in 90 per cent of countries across the world access to higher education is unequal and in the remaining 10 per cent evidence regarding higher education participation and social background was not available.

While it is possible to state categorically that widening access to higher education is a genuinely global problem, there are still huge gaps in the quantity and quality of data available. Many countries in the world are collecting data in a patchy, irregular way; and important dimensions of inequality – such as ethnicity and disability – are being ignored. England compares well here – we collect richer data than almost anywhere else aside from the United States and Australia. Comparing our relative performance is harder though.

1 Graeme Atherton, Constantino Dumangane and Geoff Whitty, *Charting Equity in Higher Education*, 2016 https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/corporate/global/pearson-dot-com/files/innovation/Charting-Equity_WEB.pdf

Different measures of socio-economic background are often used across countries. How access is defined depends on the social and political histories of different countries. In some places ethnicity or race is the dominant feature of access debates, whereas in England socio-economic background is almost always deemed more important.

Where comparisons involving England with the other data-rich countries have been undertaken, such work suggests that socio-economic differences in access are more pronounced in England and Canada than Australia and the United States.[2] But the differences are small and prior school attainment is an important factor in all countries.

Where better data exists, more systematic government-funded attempts to widen access can follow. Australia and the United States both have government-funded access initiatives. In Australia, there is the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Programme (HEPPP) which began in 2011. It allocates funding directly to higher education providers to support work to address inequalities across the student lifecycle. There is a focus on regional partnerships delivering a range of outreach and school capacity-building work similar to that in England. There is evidence to show that regional partnerships have had a significant impact on higher education participation for students from lower socio-economic groups.[3]

In the United States, the major government-funded widening

2 John Jerrim and Anna Vignoles, 'University access for disadvantaged children: a comparison across speaking countries', *Higher Education*, 70, pp.903-821, 2015 https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs10734-015-9878-6.pdf

3 http://www.bridges.nsw.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/898504/04302015Bridges_to_Higher_Education_Final_Report.pdf

access programme is not delivered regionally but via the national TRiO programme.[4] It began in the 1960s and now covers a range of initiatives to support over 800,000 low-income students across the student lifecycle, with annual funding in 2016 of $900 million. Participants in the 'Upward Bound' programme within TRiO are three times more likely to graduate in six years than non-participants.[5] Upward Bound programmes are based on six-week summer schools and weekly all-year-round tutoring support sessions. The American and Australian experiences show the value of government-funded investment in widening access work.

There are notable contrasts between England and some other countries in how students from widening access backgrounds are supported across the student lifecycle. In the United States, both through the work of TRiO and of individual universities such as the University of California, Berkeley and their Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), specific support is targeted at widening-access students before and after entry.[6] The TRiO or EOP approach is to see outreach and additional support on entry as part of one programme linked together across the student lifecycle. At Berkeley, first-generation students are encouraged to join EOP and benefit from individualised advice and support on finance and coping with student life as well as additional academic tutoring.

4 TRiO is a set of federally-funded college opportunity programmes that motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in their pursuit of a college degree. TRiO provide academic tutoring, personal counselling, mentoring, financial guidance, and other supports necessary for educational access and retention.

5 Margaret Cahalan and David Goodwin, *Setting the Record Straight: Strong Positive Impacts Found from the National Evaluation of Upward Bound*, 2014 http://www.pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications-Setting_the_Record_Straight_June_2014.pdf

6 http://eop.berkeley.edu/

This approach is not confined to the United States. In Ireland, the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Education Access Route (DEAR) are national schemes that offer low-income and disabled students lower entry offers, financial support and additional support through their undergraduate studies. The majority of higher education providers in Ireland have a set number of places for HEAR or DEAR applicants.[7]

The value and importance of specific support for students from widening access backgrounds when they enter higher education is perhaps clearest in the work at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. The drop-out rate for black students in South Africa is over 50 per cent.[8] This has been halved via pioneering work in the Faculty of Commerce via its Academic Development Programme. They have created a community for black students which builds on their strengths as learners.

Widening access targets are another area where international comparisons are informative. Several countries outside of the data-rich ones discussed above have some form of access targets, including India and China, but it is also useful to look closer to home. Scotland is looking further ahead than England. By 2030, they intend for students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds to represent 20 per cent of higher education entrants.[9]

An international perspective offers pointers for future policy and practice. Continuing investment in the production and

7 http://accesscollege.ie/hear/ and http://accesscollege.ie/dare/

8 June Pym, 'From fixing to possibility: changing a learning model for undergraduate students', *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 27(2), pp. 353–367, 2013 http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.839.1975&rep=rep1&type=pdf

9 Commission on Widening Access, *A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access*, 2016 http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00496619.pdf

analysis of data is essential to retain political support for widening access. In 2009, European countries agreed to set measurable targets for widening participation and to collect data on who entered higher education by social background/ characteristic. By 2014, however, under half were actually collecting data and consequently fewer than 20 per cent had targets.[10]

The second pointer is that investment in collaboration needs to be maintained, but greater intensity in the work pursued may be needed. In the American programmes, the number of hours that low-income students spend preparing for entry to higher education is higher than in England. For example, summer school programmes can last for up to six weeks as opposed to one week in England.

Access across the student lifecycle may be where the most interesting pointers exist. In several countries, there is greater coherence between what happens before and within higher education, and more willingness to focus specific services on students according to their social background. The current approach in England is to promote greater student belonging via more inclusive teaching and learning. This is crucial and informs the philosophy of the innovative work at the universities of Cape Town and Berkeley. However, it shies away from targeted work that addresses the specific challenges that widening access learners face in achieving their potential in higher education. These challenges often come in the form of a greater need for pastoral support, financial advice

10 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014*, 2014 http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/165EN.pdf

and academic assistance, in particular in the early part of undergraduate study.

Finally, more long-term targets, such as those in Scotland, may be beneficial in providing more stability for widening access work in England. England's commitment to, and investment in, widening access to higher education is as serious as in any other part of the world. However, we can still look to other countries to inform our work, in particular where targeting support for undergraduate students from widening access backgrounds and state-funded outreach work are concerned. Significant progress in widening access to higher education in England has been made since the mid-2000s. To enable this progress to continue it is important we look closely at what other countries are doing.

8. Evaluation

David Woolley

The widening participation agenda came to the fore under New Labour and 20 years on, it appears to be gaining prominence. We have a Prime Minister who is committed to social mobility and believes that higher education is a mechanism through which to achieve it. Funding for widening participation is remarkably robust. The higher education sector plans to spend £833 million in steady state under their 2017/18 Access Agreements.[1] The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) is encouraging universities to transfer this spend from student bursaries to activities. OFFA is also celebrating the sector's increasing professionalism, embracing targeted interventions and increasing research and evaluation.

But is this a full and accurate picture? The recent call by OFFA for more attainment-raising activity highlights the continuing prevalence of 'hopeful interventions with unknown effectiveness'.[2] A recent report concluded that most English universities are using widening participation research and evaluation 'to defend their spending, not to improve their outreach activities'.[3] Furthermore, the sector's overwhelming

1 OFFA, *2017-18 access agreements: institutional expenditure and fee levels*, 2016 https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2017-18-access-agreement-decisions.pdf

2 OFFA, *Strategic guidance: developing your 2018-19 access agreement*, 2017 https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Strategic-guidance-developing-your-2018-19-access-agreement-FINAL.pdf; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *The role of aspirations, attitudes and behaviour in closing the educational attainment gap*, 2012, p.1 https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/education-achievement-poverty-summary.pdf

3 Chris Havergal, 'Access research 'defending spending, not improving outreach'', *Times Higher Education*, 11 August 2016 https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/access-research-defending-spending-not-improving-outreach

desire for institutional autonomy is resulting in a weak and fragmented evidence base. A quick look at history shows this is a dangerous position to be in.

The Gorard review of widening participation research in 2006 noted that there was a lack of robust research about what works to widen participation.[4] This publication came during the middle of the Aimhigher programme, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). In 2008, almost certainly as a result, HEFCE requested that the 45 Aimhigher area partnerships collect and record data in a standardised format.[5] Further research was then commissioned into the impact of Aimhigher funded outreach programmes. The subsequent report, published in 2010, found that:

> *due to the relatively small scale of local Aimhigher evaluations and the difficulty of establishing causal links between activities and learner outcomes, quantitative reports provided by partnerships showed an association between learner participation and improved outcomes rather than conclusive evidence of impact*.[6]

But before HEFCE could take further action, Aimhigher was scrapped. This conclusion did not help its cause – and possibly even sealed its fate.

Some evidence did exist. The Higher Education Academy still

4 Stephen Gorard and Emma Smith, *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*, University of York, 2006 http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6204/1/barriers.pdf

5 HEFCE, *Guidance for Aimhigher partnerships*, 2008 http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100202100434/http:/www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_05/

6 National Foundation for Educational Research, *Evaluation of Aimhigher: learner attainment and progression*, 2010, p.6 http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2010/rd1510/rd15_10.pdf

hosts a repository of research, admittedly of varying quality and robustness, produced by Aimhigher area partnerships.[7] So the problem was not solely a lack of evidence. It was more the lack of standardisation and the devolved responsibility had rendered the evidence almost useless, at least in terms of driving the national policy agenda. It was perhaps inevitable that a structure involving 45 Aimhigher area partnerships, producing 45 different evaluation plans and 45 different annual evaluation reports, each with their own methodologies and levels of knowledge and expertise, was not going to provide that magic 'what works' bullet.

So how does this lesson compare with today? The 45 area partnerships have become 198 individual higher education providers now responsible for evaluating the impact of their widening participation interventions. Is this not merely an extension of the failed Aimhigher evaluation model and therefore likely to end in the same result? Almost certainly so. This failure is unlikely to result in the Government giving up the quest for evidence and for social mobility. Recent Ministers have not been afraid of telling the sector how to achieve its policy aims and our failure to take this particular aim of the Government seriously may result in further directive and burdensome instruction.

However, there is cause for optimism. Collaborative partnerships, including the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) and the East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership (EMWPREP), have been collecting and recording standardised data on outreach and participants

7 https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/workstreams-research/themes/retention-and-success/widening-access-programmes-archive

going as far back as 2005. Some universities are now reaping the benefits and are able to track participants' Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 attainment (both in terms of absolute performance and value-added progress made), and progression to higher education.

At Nottingham Trent University (NTU) we have been tracking the participants of our outreach programmes since 2008 and have records for over 18,500 unique participants. We are able to demonstrate that not only are participants more likely to achieve good GCSE grades than non-participants, but we can also show an association between participation in outreach programmes and better value-added scores. Effectively NTU's participants achieve an average of four higher grades across their best eight GCSEs than expected when compared with their schools' value-added scores.

It is difficult to isolate the effect of specific outreach programmes against the counter-factual (i.e. establishing what would have happened to participants if they had not taken part in the outreach programme) and some commentators argue that randomised controlled trials are required to establish causation. This may be true but would prove controversial. Many would balk at denying some young people from disadvantaged backgrounds potentially life-changing interventions just to measure their efficacy.

Therein lies a problem. We are attempting to build a national evidence base by implementing local strategies. Expecting to draw national conclusions from 198 evaluation plans and reports with different methodologies and expertise is futile.

Tentative steps have been taken to improve the evaluation of outreach. OFFA have recently published guidance and proposed standards for the evaluation of outreach by universities and colleges.

Furthermore, the recently launched National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) is being evaluated at a national level. Obviously evaluating the impact of 29 consortia in a uniform manner is better than evaluating 198 institutions using separate methodologies, but NCOP also requires consortia to do their own significant evaluation with no requirement for commonality. This seems a duplication and perhaps a concession to the sector's desire for autonomy. These are steps in the right direction, but only small steps – we need more drastic measures.

Rather than monitoring the evaluations of every university, partnership or NCOP consortia, even using a common evaluation methodology, a national research and evaluation unit should be established. This unit could take direct responsibility for the evaluation of each individual provider's outreach work using a common methodology. It would be the body responsible for proving the impact so craved by policymakers. Furthermore, it could also inform the local evaluations that universities should be obliged to complete. Individual universities will then spend less resource on merely ticking the evaluation box, and more on actually improving the quality of their outreach.

So, although widening participation appears to be in rude health, is it actually like Aimhigher before the fall? To help ensure it is not, the Office for Students should make the establishment of a national evidence unit one of its first priorities. It need not take much of the £833 million to do so.

9. A behavioural approach to widening participation

Susannah Hume and Eliza Selley

Recent governments have put their weight behind a variety of policies to improve access to higher education for school-leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds. The removal of student number controls, increased availability of bursaries and support, and targeted information campaigns mean these students are now more likely to enter higher education in England than ever before.[1] These initiatives have all been based, to some extent, on the expected utility theory of microeconomics, which predicts that when faced with a decision, individuals will select the option they expect to yield them the most benefit (or utility), given their preferences and constraints. Policymakers have aimed to alter the constraints under which young people are operating, to shift incentives so that higher education comes out as the best choice, and to address information gaps that may cause individuals to calculate the utility of their options incorrectly. These policies have been effective in raising university participation among disadvantaged young people.

However, participation among these groups is still lower than desirable. In 2016, 19.5 per cent of young students from the most disadvantaged areas in England entered higher education compared to 46.3 per cent in the most advantaged areas.[2] There is evidence to suggest that these students are also less

1 UCAS, *End of Cycle Report 2016*, 2016 https://www.ucas.com/file/86541/download?token=PQnaAI5f

2 Where POLAR3 is used as an area-based measure of disadvantage; UCAS, *End of Cycle Report* 2016, 2016 https://www.ucas.com/file/86541/download?token=PQnaAI5f

likely to apply to highly-selective universities than their more privileged counterparts, despite the fact that these institutions may offer better funding and support.[3] While targeting students with more information about higher education can improve awareness, this approach only works properly if we believe all students will be able to access, interpret and act upon information effectively.[4] There is clearly still a gap in participation that needs addressing.

The Behavioural Insights Team has pioneered a way of thinking differently about persistent policy challenges such as widening participation. Behavioural insights draws on economics, psychology, sociology and neuroscience to inform policies and approaches that can help people make better choices for themselves. This approach can shed light on a wide range of apparently irrational behaviours from poor saving habits to unhealthy lifestyles.[5] It can also be applied to widening participation.

The concept of dual-system thinking underpins many behavioural insights. This theory, posited most famously by Daniel Kahneman, suggests that humans have two ways of approaching a decision: the intuitive and effortless (System 1), and the logical and effortful (System 2). Much public policy is premised on the assumption that people approach decisions primarily with System 2, but Kahneman argues that System

3 Jake Anders, 'The link between household income, university applications and university attendance', *Fiscal Studies*, 33(2), 2012, pp.185-210; Gill Wyness, 'Deserving Poor: Are Higher Education Bursaries Going to the Right Students?', *Education Sciences*, 6(1), 5, 2016

4 Martin McGuigan et al, 'Student Awareness of Costs and Benefits of Educational Decisions: Effects of an Information Campaign', *Centre for the Economics of Education*, 2012

5 Richard Thaler and Shlomo Benartzi, 'Save more tomorrow™: Using Behavioral Economics to Increase Employee Saving', *Journal of Political Economy*, 112(S1), 2004, pp.164-187; Thomas Rice, 'The Behavioral Economics of Health and Health Care', *Annual Review of Public Health*, 34, 2013, pp.431-447

1 plays a much larger role in decision-making than people – and policymakers – have generally realised. By understanding when and how System 1 operates, we can start to design widening participation initiatives that work with the grain of human cognition.

System 1 uses rules of thumb, or heuristics, to simplify complex decisions, often providing helpful shortcuts, but sometimes resulting in sub-optimal choices.[6] For example, the availability heuristic means that we tend to judge the likelihood of an event by how easily we can recall examples of it.[7] This could mean that a young person who does not know anyone who has gone to university may underestimate their own chances of getting in, and therefore not even apply.

Another key behavioural phenomenon is known as present bias. We have a tendency to focus disproportionately on the present, and to act differently depending on whether the costs and benefits at stake are in the present or the future.[8] This means we may fail to undertake an action with a large future benefit (like applying to university) because of a very small immediate cost (like filling out an application form). These heuristics, and others, discussed above can help explain why young people may disregard higher education in favour of alternatives that yield less benefit for them over the long run.

6 Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, 1975, pp.141-162

7 Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, 'Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability', *Cognitive Psychology*, 5(2), 1973, pp.207-232

8 Shane Frederick et al, 'Time Discounting and Time Preference: A Critical Review', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 40(2), 2002, pp.351-401

Behavioural insights can also help identify small factors that have big impacts on behaviour and to develop and test solutions. For example, studies have shown that removing very small frictions in important processes can have surprisingly large effects on behaviour.[9] To help policymakers apply behavioural insights, we developed a framework that contains four basic principles: if you want to encourage a behaviour, make it 'Easy', 'Attractive', 'Social' and 'Timely' (EAST).[10] The examples below illustrate the power of this approach.

Randomised controlled trials are considered the gold standard of evaluation, where feasible and ethical. We have run two large-scale randomised controlled trials to test ways of raising university aspirations. In the first, a relatable role model gave a talk explaining the experiential benefits of higher education.[11] The talk was memorable and engaging – in other words, we made it 'attractive' – and using a role model from the same region made it 'social', so students could relate to the speaker's route into higher education. The talk significantly increased the proportion of students stating they were interested in applying to university and were likely to attend. Conversely, providing financial information cards designed to improve students' understanding of the costs and benefits of higher education reduced the proportion of students who were interested in university. This finding suggests activities which 'speak to the heart' may be more effective than some forms of information that 'speak to the head'. This is just one of a range of strategies for making university more attractive which we plan to explore over coming years.

9 Behavioural Insights Team, *EAST: Four simple ways to apply behavioural insights*, 2014, p.13
10 Behavioural Insights Team, *EAST: Four simple ways to apply behavioural insights*, 2014
11 Behavioural Insights Team, *Behavioural Insights and the Somerset Challenge*, 2015

We also worked with the Cabinet Office and the Department for Education to run randomised controlled trials with over 11,000 students in 300 schools with lower than expected progression to university. A randomly-selected subgroup of A-Level students with good GCSE grades were sent letters written by university students from a similar background. As with the previous trial, we focused on making the letters attractive and social through personalisation, and by highlighting that someone like them was accepted into a selective university. Students who received a letter at home and at school were significantly more likely to apply to and enter a Russell Group university than other students. We estimate that 222 additional young people attended a Russell Group university as a result of this trial, at a cost of £45.05 per additional student.[12] These studies demonstrate that light-touch, low-cost interventions using relatable messengers can be effective and efficient ways of raising aspirations.

There are also a number of studies in the US that focus on how to get low-income, high-achieving students to apply to the most selective universities. In one randomised controlled trial, thousands of students were provided with a semi-personalised package of information on the college application process and a $6 application fee-waiver.[13] These students were significantly more likely to apply to, and be accepted at, selective colleges. Another strand of research from the US has focused on how to tackle the failure of college-bound students to appear at the start of term. A randomised controlled trial has shown that

12 Michael Sanders, Raj Chande and Eliza Selley, *Encouraging People into University*, Department for Education, 2017

13 Caroline Hoxby and Sarah Turner, 'Expanding College Opportunities for High-Achieving, Low Income Students', *Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research* , Working Paper 12-014, 2013

students who receive personalised text messages prompting them to complete enrolment tasks over the summer are significantly more likely to enrol at college.[14] Over the last year, we have been working with King's College London to test how a similar approach can be used to improve retention and outcomes for widening participation students once they arrive at university. This research demonstrates how 'timely' low-cost interventions which make it 'easy' for students to apply, arrive and succeed at university can effectively improve access and retention.

Opening up higher education as a market requires students to act rationally, to seek out and weigh up their options effectively. However, behavioural insights suggest there are certain predictable contexts where this is less likely and which may operate to prevent disadvantaged young people from getting to university. Work by ourselves and others has shown that there are many points where understanding the context in which higher education decisions are being made and seeking to make such progression easy, attractive, social and timely can help close the participation gap. Just providing information is not enough.

14 Benjamin Castleman and Lindsay Page, 'Summer nudging: Can personalized text messages and peer mentor outreach increase college going among low-income high school graduates?', *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 115, 2015, pp.144-160

10. Scotland the Brave?

Vonnie Sandlan

> *I want us to determine now that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities.*

With these words on 26 November 2014, Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, acknowledged Scotland's historically unenviable record on access to university for those from the poorest communities. This social injustice had been highlighted over many years by the National Union of Students in Scotland. The First Minister convened the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA), chaired by renowned educationalist Dame Ruth Silver.

The Commission's remit was extensive:

- to produce an evidence-based report which synthesised existing evidence on barriers, which included robust targets which would drive further and faster progress on widening access;

- to identify work in this area which had measurable impact and which was scaleable; and

- to identify the data required to monitor progress.[1]

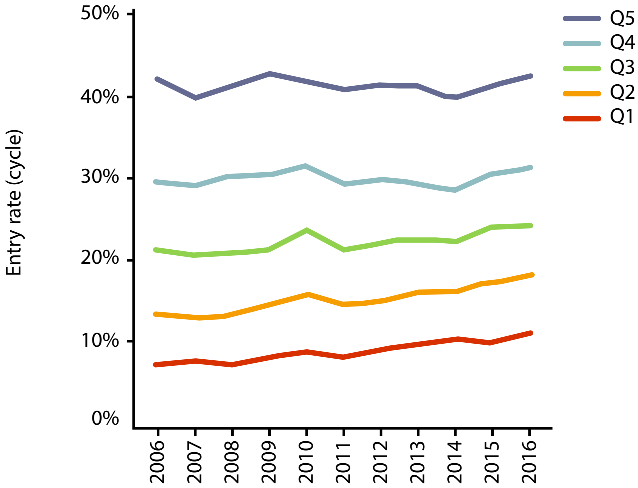
Data, it turns out, are the weakest link, and much of the meaningful information available has to be drawn from multiple

1 Scottish Government, *Commission on Widening Access Remit*, 2014 http://www.commissiononwideningaccess.co.uk/remit

sector organisations. In order to define widening access and to ensure any actions to make access to education more equitable and fairer have impact, CoWA made robust recommendations about tracking learners from early years and about how data is collected, shared, analysed and published. The Commission's final report is clear, concise and worth reading.

Figure 1 is taken from the most recent UCAS *End of Cycle Report* and starkly demonstrates the entry rates to university of 18-year olds, by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).[2]

Figure 1: Scottish 18-year olds, entry rates by SIMD groups (Q5 = least deprived)



Source: UCAS, *2016 End of Cycle Report*, 2016

2 UCAS, *End of Cycle Report 2016*, 2016, p.104 https://www.ucas.com/file/86541/download?token=PQnaAI5f

This analysis was published after both CoWA's interim report and their final report entitled *A Blueprint for Fairness*, and it is easy to see where the causes for concern came from.[3] UCAS figures show that, in 2016, university applicants from the 20 per cent least deprived areas of Scotland were four times more likely to secure a university place than those from the 20 per cent most deprived areas. This is, of course, a sector average: the statistics are stark when refined to look only at the most selective universities.

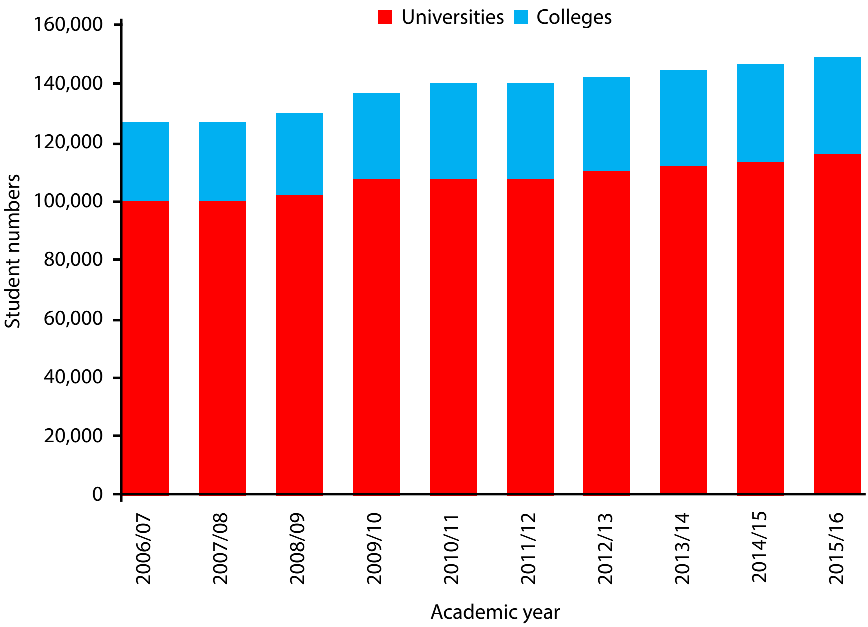
Although there has been a significant shift in entry to university from the most deprived areas in Scotland in the last 10 years, these figures still pale in comparison to the university entry rates of those from the least deprived areas, as Figure 1 so clearly demonstrates. The statistics do not lie, but do they tell the whole story?

UCAS data cover applicants for university entry, but Scotland has a strong tradition of higher education delivery in colleges – a tradition not replicated to the same extent in the rest of the UK. This alters the true higher education participation landscape, not only in the number of students undertaking higher education study, but also in terms of the students' backgrounds. In order to see the reality of higher education participation in Scotland, and indeed over the period in which widening access initiatives have been active, it is imperative to look at other data sources that include college participation.

3 Scottish Government, *Commission on Widening Access Interim Report,* 2015 http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0048/00489004.pdf; Scottish Government, *A Blueprint for Fairness – The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access,* 2016 http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00496619.pdf

Figure 2 uses data from the Student Awards Agency Scotland and shows which students claim student support by the type of institution that they study in.[4]

Figure 2: Total higher education students claiming support in Scotland by institution type



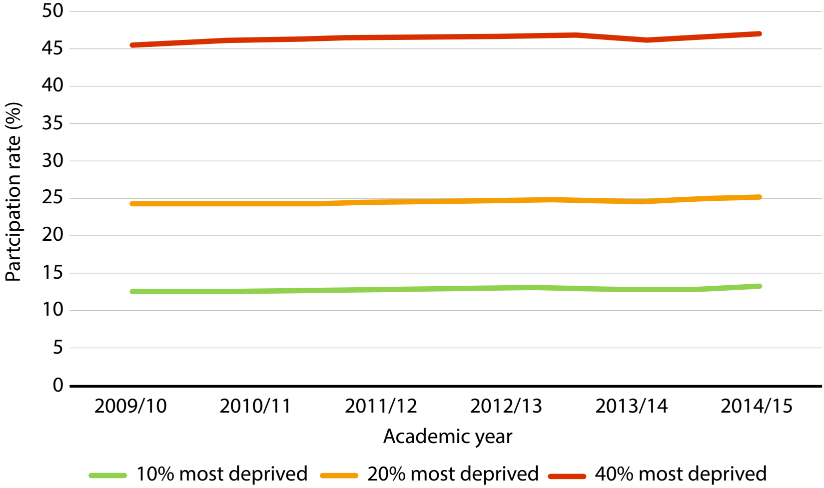
Source: Student Awards Agency Scotland, *Higher Education Student Support in Scotland 2015/16*

When just over 22 per cent of all higher education students for the academic year 2015/16 were enrolled in a college, it is clear that in Scotland's world-class education system, colleges are truly 'the little engine who could'. To break that

4 Students Awards Agency Scotland, *Higher Education Student Support in Scotland 2015-16*, 2016 http://www.saas.gov.uk/_forms/statistics_1516.pdf

data down further we can turn to the analysis from the Scottish Funding Council in Figure 3 which demonstrates that, when it comes to getting students from deprived backgrounds into higher education, colleges have been progressing Scotland's widening access ambition for years. Students from the 10 per cent, 20 per cent and 40 per cent most deprived areas have been consistently over-represented in colleges.[5]

Figure 3: Proportion of higher education students in colleges by SIMD groups



Source: Scottish Funding Council, *Learning for All: Measures of Success*, 2016

These charts together paint a memorable picture of class division in Scottish higher education, with colleges seemingly better equipped to serve students from the poorest areas.

5 Scottish Funding Council, *Learning for All: Measures of Success*, 2016 http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Statistical_publications_SFCST062016_LearningforAll/SFCST062016_Learning_for_All.pdf

Although the proportion of students from the 40 per cent most deprived areas studying in post-1992 universities compares favourably to the ancient universities, it remains the college sector that most effectively brings higher education into the heart of communities in areas of multiple deprivation.

There are a myriad of explanations for why colleges do comparatively well on access. Curriculum for Excellence, underpinned by School-College partnerships, allows school pupils to undertake short or medium courses in college as part of their school curriculum.[6] This early introduction to learning in a college campus, demystifying the environment, cannot be underestimated in encouraging a sense of belonging. In a similar vein, college roots extend into the communities they are in, and so are well placed to provide those opportunities for mature learners, including those who are the furthest from both education and the labour market. Their learning journey may begin at further education level before moving into higher education. Partnership and outreach are key features of college activity and there are examples of good practice already being replicated by some universities.

An example of this good practice extending from college to university is a unique, yet relatively unknown, feature of Scottish higher education: articulation. This is the process by which a student who has successfully completed their higher education course in college progresses on to the next level of study at university. Using the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) to underpin articulation, students with a Higher National Certificate (HNC) are empowered to move

6 Scottish Government, *School and College Partnerships,* 2017 http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/17135/school-college-pships

directly into the second year at a partner university, and those with a Higher National Diploma (HND) can move into the third year.[7] This approach suits the learner whose time frame to complete their degree is streamlined, while also delivering value to the public purse.

Currently, the majority of articulation pathways in Scotland are carried by the five post-92 universities that have, historically, sought to recruit students rather than being more selective. But the true national potential for widening access through articulation will only be realised when it is the norm for all institutions.

Widening access is, as Dame Ruth asserted often during the Commission's meetings, a whole system problem that requires a whole system approach. The recommendations from the *Blueprint for Fairness* report have been accepted by the Scottish Government and welcomed by the education sector, and Professor Sir Peter Scott is now in post as Scotland's first Independent Fair Access Commissioner.

It seems clear that in order to develop the Scottish approach to fair access and to achieve the ambitions for fair access to higher education, it is the college sector in Scotland that will be the linchpin for success to rest upon. It is the same college sector that can demonstrate good practice from which our universities could afford to learn a thing or two.

7 Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, *The Framework,* 2017 http://scqf.org.uk/the-framework/

11. Equity and Excellence: The Welsh tradition and contemporary challenge

Kirsty Williams AM

The mission to widen participation in higher education must be a collective effort. It should involve schools and universities, just as it is a task shared by government and families.

In Wales, it is also a matter of marrying equity with excellence, and of engaging with our traditions in order to break predestined privileges and deliver better access to the professions, to academia and to individual and national prosperity.

The tradition that we now term widening access is a seam that runs through our national and international endeavour in democratising knowledge:

- from the Pennsylvanian-Welsh Baptists that inspired the first American college to accept students regardless of their religious affiliation;[1]
- to the pence of the poor that founded our first universities;[2] and
- through the work of Elizabeth Phillips Hughes in pioneering women's education at Cambridge and then back home in Wales.[3]

1 Walter Bronson, *The History of Brown University*, 1961 (later edition), p.29
2 Gareth Elwyn Jones, *A History of Education in Wales*, 2003, p.87
3 Jane Aaron and Ursula Masson (eds), *The Very Salt of Life: Welsh Women's Political Writings from Chartism to Suffrage*, 2007, p.110

I take inspiration from those pioneers as we now deliver a reformed, progressive and sustainable finance and support system for Welsh students and universities. But we must only glance at that rear-view mirror as we move forward apace with our reforms.

On becoming Education Secretary, I inherited a student finance system that had become unsustainable and unaffordable.

But perhaps more pressingly, was a focus on paying off a portion of tuition fees actually supporting students in the best way? Was it furthering our ambitions to widen access, to enhance outcomes for graduates and to encourage part-time and postgraduate study?

In opposition, my party, the Welsh Liberal Democrats, was consistent in the belief that day-to-day living costs were the biggest barrier to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As Education Secretary, this view has been echoed by the Diamond Review.[4] It was unequivocal in telling me that it was maintenance costs, not fee level and support, that was the biggest issue in widening access and delivering a simple, fair and progressive system.

That report, recommending a shift to living costs support rather than fee support, also satisfied my principles for progressive and sustainable student support. Those principles are that:

- we maintain the principle of universalism within a progressive system;

4 Welsh Government, *The Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements in Wales: Final Report (The Diamond Review)*, 2016

- we have a 'whole system' approach;
- investment is shared between Government and those who directly benefit;
- we enhance accessibility, tackling barriers such as living costs; and
- student support is portable across the UK.

Therefore, from 2018/19 Welsh students – full- and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students – will benefit from a system that makes available equivalent maintenance support across these modes and levels of study.

I know that, delivered alone, this will not drive forward a fundamental shift in social mobility through widening access to higher education. It is therefore imperative that universities, schools and colleges work together closely and are flexible and innovative in these approaches.

In Wales, investment to support such collaboration and intervention is already helping to reduce the attainment gap at GCSE, which will in turn support access to, and success in, higher education.

In addition, providing opportunities for undergraduate students in disciplines such as Physics and Modern Foreign Languages to spend time in local schools, mentoring and inspiring pupils in those subjects to go onto further study are essential to these objectives. It provides invaluable experience for the students, represents great civic engagement for universities, and supports enhanced educational experiences across our system.

As has been appropriated by other UK administrations in their own reforms, and indeed referenced in the Diamond Review, the famous Robbins principle that access to university should be based on ability alone, not the ability to afford it, is also at the heart of our reforms. But I am also keen to recall the other thrusts of the Robbins Report. Firstly, the judgement that a higher education 'system as a whole must be judged deficient unless it provides adequately for all'.[5]

I believe that in being the first in the UK, indeed perhaps the first in Europe, to deliver parity, fairness and consistency in maintenance support across modes and levels really does move us to a system that provides for all. Of course, a commitment to widen access is what motivates my politics and is how I will judge the success of these reforms.

But that commitment, and that measure of success, cannot be confined to just one type of student. In particular I would congratulate National Union of Students Wales for their work in making the case for part-time and postgraduate students, not just the traditional middle-class 18-year olds.[6]

It is clear to me that progression into postgraduate study is one of the contemporary challenges of widening access. It is only by addressing this and improving access, for example to the professions, that we will re-energise our original mission in a new technological and economic age.

5 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-63 (The Robbins Report)*, 1963

6 NUS Wales, *Pound in Your Pocket*, *Wales,* 2014

Even back in the 1960s, Robbins was prescient about needing a 'rapid increase' in postgraduate numbers. He said that 'the pace of social change and the complexity of modern social and economic organisation all demand an increasing number'. As we head into a future shaped by innovation and high-tech industry this could not be more pertinent.

Looking at the data from Wales it is clear that our reforms - delivering living costs support - must deliver on opening up postgraduate study across the nation.

So, while there is one postgraduate from Cardiff or Ceredigion for every two full-time undergraduates from those same areas, it is only one-per-four in a Valleys area such as Merthyr Tydfil or Torfaen.

Of course, those areas already lag behind the proportion of 18-year olds that enter higher education, so it is a double deficit. In the late Roy Jenkins's home patch of Abersychan in Torfaen, the youth higher education participation rate is only one-in-five. And yet, in my constituency, only 15 miles up the valley in south Powys we see participation rates of 45 per cent and over.[7]

In those former coalfield and steel communities, it is often local colleges and universities, and The Open University, which have been best at the heavy lifting in widening access. They are rooted in the education traditions I mention above, but have also been innovative in their outreach and social missions.

7 HEFCE POLAR Data, *Map of young participation areas* http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/POLAR/Map,of,young,participation,areas/

I believe that our new student support system gives all universities the opportunity and imperative to work with schools and potential students to raise their sights on widening access to postgraduate study.

This is essential in order to address the lost potential and talent of current, and future, generations. By not making postgraduate study attainable for all students, who knows how many innovations, ideas and inspirational leaders we have lost along the way. Not forgetting the financial benefits that have failed to spread because of the existing inequality in access to postgraduate study.

Our universities owed their first steps to an education revolution of civic, economic and academic ambition. It was a collective effort, and what Raymond Williams would recognise as part of a project for an engaged and participating democracy.[8] In delivering a fair, consistent and progressive student support system, we have the opportunity to ensure we capture and maximise the potential of all our citizens, from all corners of the nation.

8 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 1961, p.179

12. Personal Learning Accounts - extending access and promoting lifelong learning

Peter Horrocks

For decades, successive governments have struggled to create the economic conditions that would allow the UK to close its chronic productivity gap.

Theresa May is the latest to try to buck the trend. She commissioned a new industrial strategy in which the UK Government would use all the levers at its disposal to stimulate growth. She envisions a Britain that 'works for everyone', a society rooted in fairness and opportunity irrespective of class or background.

These are admirable objectives, which chime with the founding mission of The Open University (OU): increasing opportunity and social mobility through offering higher education to all, regardless of previous qualifications. It is an approach that has served us well through nearly five decades and we are proud to have helped more than two million students achieve their dreams and – just as importantly – improve their chances in life and work.

It is widely acknowledged that higher productivity is linked to higher skills. Employers bemoan skills shortages across the economy to justify the need to hire foreign workers. If the price of exiting the European Union is lower migration, those shortages will become all the more acute.

A cynic might say that if a magic wand could solve the UK's productivity problems, it would have been waved long ago. But perhaps the solution is not beyond our reach if the UK Government works with employers in a sustained and integrated way, removing barriers to investment, growth and the development of a skilled workforce. Alongside that, the higher education sector needs to change to allow it to respond with a more agile, flexible curriculum aligned with the country's needs.

Complex and rigid funding mechanisms for higher education and skills training in England would need a fundamental rethink to build in flexibility and a recognition of the changing face of work.

To be clear, I am not advocating a wholesale switch to vocational training at the expense of the wider academic excellence which underpins our university system's global reputation. But I do believe there is a moral imperative to investigate innovative solutions that prepare our students for life in a rapidly evolving world.

Successive studies predict that technology has brought us to the brink of an era of change as far reaching as the impact of machines on the labour market in the first industrial revolution. Artificial intelligence is already allowing machines to learn and processors to operate at a capacity far greater than the human brain.

In the firing line are white and blue collar jobs alike – in administration, law, accountancy, medicine, wholesale, retail, haulage, public transport and food preparation. Estimates of the number of roles at risk vary from 30 to 50 per cent, but indisputably over the next two or three decades automation will eradicate millions of jobs.

History suggests that new jobs will emerge to replace the old, but that is no consolation if we do not have a workforce that is adaptable to change and employers who see skills training as integral to career progression. To keep themselves employable, workers of the future may need to retrain or otherwise improve their skills several times over their careers. Educational institutions, as well as governments in all four nations of the UK, are going to need to adapt.

The Open University has, of course, offered lifelong learning for the past five decades – that is not to score points, it is just what it was set up to do. But only now, as the reality of a potential skills crisis looms, are people starting to realise that it is a concept they will have to embrace wholeheartedly to keep the wheels of our economy turning.

Yet, for all the positive noises emerging from Whitehall, a series of government-imposed barriers to helping people to earn while they learn remain in place. It remains policy, for example, to halve by 2020 direct funding to universities for widening participation in England, which for years has underpinned the drive to open higher education to disadvantaged groups.

Funding changes under different UK governments since 2007 have led directly to a 50 per cent fall in England in the number of part-time learners entering higher education over the past few years. The proportion of part-time students in England is now significantly lower than in the other parts of the UK, which have not had the same funding changes. The OU now has around 554 students per million in England but the figures are much higher in Northern Ireland (764), Wales (861) and Scotland (1,211).

It is unrealistic to demand a return to the previous system but relatively small changes to the availability of loans could be transformative. If adult students could borrow for each module they study, they could progress while not feeling under pressure to commit to the several years needed for a full degree.

A more transformative step would be to develop a system of lifetime Personalised Learning Accounts to offer financial support to employees wanting skills training to suit their needs. This would drive a real culture change in lifelong learning and help open up education and deliver the Government's agenda.

The existing system of loans and grants for both further and higher education in England is complex and inflexible. Finance is usually linked to the type of course and institutions and levels of support vary according to the mode of study.

A Personalised Learning Account would combine all potential sources of income – loans, grants, personal savings, employer or trade union contributions – into a single account. Individuals could use the account to pick and choose courses at one or more institutions at appropriate points in their careers. It would allow, for example, a smooth progression between further and higher education, particularly in technical skills, and create better opportunities for people to return to training when their careers and their employers most need it.

Personalised Learning Accounts could be used for both fees and maintenance support, although the two areas of finance would need to be kept separate. Funds could not be switched from fees to maintenance, although there is no reason why they should not move in the opposite direction. If the account was in debit at the end of training, loans would be repaid as they are now.

A government could choose to encourage its citizens for their own benefit to save into a Personalised Learning Account by offering to match funding. It could also use Personalised Learning Accounts to channel exceptional funding, perhaps to retrain people hit by the closure of a large local employer or to address skills shortages in certain regions.

Robust systems would be needed to prevent abuse. Many of the difficulties encountered by previous programmes to fund lifelong learning could be avoided by using Personalised Learning Accounts only for courses at registered colleges, universities or apprenticeship providers.

But funding reform alone cannot solve the country's skills shortages and widen access. To be fully effective, it would need to be part of a package of reforms to qualifications and institutions, and in support of better career information, advice and guidance.

Changes of this nature need the active co-operation of employers. It is a big commitment to allow a middle manager or rising star months off to study but, if new skills can be shown to be useful to the companies or organisations themselves, that commitment might be forthcoming.

As the higher education market in England is opened to greater competition, the case for allowing students to build up learning credits and carry them between providers becomes stronger. That in turn creates the need for a streamlining of information available. Above all, we require a UK-wide agreement to provide a single portal in each nation for information, advice and guidance, from basic skills to further and higher education. This would allow adult learners to compare all the options in a single place, mapping against skill shortages in their areas, thereby reducing confusion and helping them work out which of the many available pathways is best for them.

The UK Government's industrial strategy gives us an opportunity to think radically. To build a country which works for everyone we must make sure that we offer education and training that works for everyone.

Part-time and distance learning is a common way for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education – most new entrants are between 31 and 60, the age group that arguably most needs help in adapting its skills for the future. The UK Government rightly points to the importance of full-time study for 18-year olds at further and higher education level, the need to expand apprenticeships and the desirability of flexible lifelong learning. The OU would like to see equal ministerial commitment to all three.

Every politician, employer and educator agrees that skills are the key to building productivity. Everyone in the workforce deserves the chance to improve their employability – and with it their life chances – through lifelong learning. With partnerships, goodwill, planning and co-operation, we can see a clear route to achieving both aims. Now is the moment to seize the opportunity.

13. What's the alternative? Building students' self-awareness in untraditional settings

Debi Hayes and Mark Fuller

One of the Government's stated aims in the current round of higher education reforms is to 'make it easier to set up high-quality new universities to give students more choice'.[1] For the most part, the focus of policy – and debate – has been on potential new entrants to the higher education sector. Those of us alternative providers that have been around for some time could be forgiven for feeling neglected. However, the attention given to potential new providers does create an opportunity to ask some questions about the diversity of provision needed to ensure a greater diversity of students.

Despite being over 40-years old, GSM London's experience puts us in a strong position to offer new ideas. We are committed to extending opportunities to a distinctive population otherwise under-served by traditional higher education institutions. Over 55 per cent of our undergraduate student body is over the age of 30 and around 90 per cent are drawn from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. In the vast majority of cases, our students arrive following significant time away from formal education, or having had unsatisfactory experiences in the recent past.

Student characteristics

Our experience of working with widening participation students at scale has allowed us to identify some common characteristics.

1 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 'New universities to deliver choice and opportunity for students', Press release, 16 May 2016 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-universities-to-deliver-choice-and-opportunity-for-students

1. Widening participation students tend to be unfamiliar with what others might regard as the basic processes and language of higher education.

2. Many have direct experience of dealing with prejudice, stereotyping or other forms of discrimination. Assets like resilience and the ability to survive difficult situations and manoeuvre multiple realities are also in high abundance – although often made manifest through bravado and a reluctance to fit easily into institutional structures.

3. Our students are often tentative and uncertain about entering higher education, a fear factor that in some cases keeps them from sharing with their families and personal networks the fact that they are studying.

Our students tend to be predominantly driven by a desire to improve their own employment prospects – as is probably the case with the vast majority of students at all types of institutions. However, many also point towards a wish to develop their own confidence and to become stronger role models in their families and communities.

In aggregate then, we find ourselves working with a body of students who may lack self-esteem and confidence but are goal-orientated and focused on self-improvement. This means that one of our primary challenges is to validate our students' sense of self-worth and build their self-confidence.

A distinctive approach

In recognition of this, we are developing a distinctive approach that seeks to acknowledge and build on the personal characteristics and life experiences of our students, rather than to focus on the factors in which they may otherwise be seen to be deficient. We strive to ensure that our input at all points of the student journey is built around the student's own attributes, rather than a prescriptive perception of ways in which they need to comply or develop. This strengths-led approach to education is a departure from the traditional deficit-reduction model of higher education.

Student recruitment

It begins with our approach to student recruitment. While a small number of students come to us through UCAS, we recognise the demographic groups most under-served by higher education are more likely to be reached outside of the formal process. We therefore operate a sophisticated direct marketing operation that integrates outreach with face-to-face and digital information, advice and guidance. Through a variety of means, we develop a presence within the communities of our target students and engage with them on their terms about higher education in general and what we can offer in particular.

Innovations in teaching and learning

Meaningful widening participation is about much more than encouraging under-represented groups into higher education. A learning experience unaligned with the sensibilities and experiences of the student cohort can serve only to exacerbate a lack of self-worth. This is why we have put just as much effort into innovating around our pedagogy as we have around our recruitment techniques. In short, we have worked closely with our validating partner, Plymouth University, to combine academic rigour with a more bespoke approach to teaching, learning and assessment.

We have carried out a radical overhaul of our curriculum so that our course portfolio, the ways in which material is taught, and the means by which work is assessed are geared towards the personal learning styles of our students. In practice this means there is much more active learning in classrooms and a concerted effort to move away from 'chalk and talk'. Employability and industry engagement is also embedded into modules. For example, visits to working industry facilities are increasingly taking the place of lectures and seminars. Perhaps most importantly, assessments that measure students' learning in traditional academic terms are being replaced by techniques that capture how students are able to apply their knowledge and understanding on their own terms. So, where appropriate, we are introducing opportunities for students to submit, for example, blogs and video presentations rather than to sit exams or write essays.

We are also developing plans for students to develop and run crowd-funding programmes in place of dissertations. The intention in all of these innovations is to allow students to earn degrees – and to demonstrate what they have learned – in ways that resonate with their own life-experiences and reflect the attributes that they bring with them. Indeed, these personal attributes are often the type of soft skills that employers look for.

Retention challenge

Even with this distinct approach, student retention is a challenge. Our observation is that the factors that influence students' propensity to drop out are not fully reflected in established benchmarking categories. For instance, relatively low parental income and state school attendance are not necessarily indications that significant interventions are needed. Likewise, the participation of local areas (POLAR) classifications can mask the diversity of circumstance found within geographic locations – particularly in London.

In light of this, we have started a project to profile our students using a much more granular level of risk indicators. Informed by student profiling models that have long been used in the United States, these indicators incorporate well recognised factors, such as ethnicity, postcode and familial background, alongside a set of life experience indicators, including the presence of dependants and hours spent in paid employment. Initially intended to provide greater awareness about individual students for personal tutors and advisers, there is potential for wider application as a tailored analytics framework. Augmented with on-course risk scores generated by patterns of engagement (for example, attendance, timely submissions of work and library use) this model has the potential to enable personalised interventions that support student continuation.

Our experience suggests that people from under-represented groups are more likely to find benefit in an experience that reinforces the value of their own personal attributes.

Simply compelling a greater range of people into systems that comply with long-established ideas of what higher education looks and feels like is likely to be met with indifference at best and outright alienation at worse. The debate about how best to expand opportunities should be less about the value of alternative providers and more about the need for alternative provision.

Brightside is a charity, established in 2003, which provides the young people that need it most with knowledge, support and connections so that they can make confident and informed decisions that enable them to fulfil their potential. Brightside currently works with over 60 organisations including universities, charities and leading businesses to mentor over 10,000 young people a year.

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