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Widening participation in higher education

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Widening participation in higher education

Abstract:

In this research informed perspective, I discuss some of the barriers students face during progression to higher education. A very important role can be played by higher education institutions and other public bodies. I discuss some of the measures being taken and critically evaluate these to show how these can be improved. In the absence of a centralised admission system and autonomy exercised by HEIs it is not clear yet how these targets will be achieved. HEFCE and OFFA play a very important role but there is scope towards addressing equality and diversity. The paper discusses some of the ways forward.

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3 *“Widening participation means assisting more people from under-represented groups,*
4 *particularly low socio-economic groups, to participate successfully in higher education. “*

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7 *- Schwartz report (2014)*
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10 Higher education (HE) has the potential to break intergenerational poverty and disadvantage
11 by bringing about social mobility. Thereby, transforming the lives of many and the wider
12 society (Vignoles and Murray, 2016). HE directly impacts growth and economic
13 competitiveness. Successive governments have thus invigorated the need to widen
14 participation in HE (HM Government Green paper, 2017). There are four student focussed
15 avenues where Universities can have a direct role to play in terms of widening participation.
16 These are providing information through outreach and partnerships with schools and sixth
17 form centres, increasing access, supporting retention and achieving success in terms of course
18 completion and securing employment. The basis of evolution of this multipartite agenda is
19 the fact that young people from certain backgrounds are often unaware of the various
20 opportunities available to them and how these can help them to succeed and improve their
21 life conditions.
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36 The ambition to widen participation in the United Kingdom is not new. The HE White
37 Paper (2011), ‘Students at the heart of the system’, urged universities to increase social
38 mobility. Five years later, the HE green paper (2016), called for increased access,
39 participation and success in HE for under-represented groups. Widening participation is not a
40 one step process and specific efforts are clearly required throughout the time a student spends
41 in HE: beginning from pre-entry and continuing up to further study or employment (HE green
42 paper, 2016). Targeted support is required for admissions, progression and successful
43 completion of programme at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Universities clearly have
44 a major role to play.
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3 In this brief reflection informed by my ongoing and previous research funded by the
4 Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Higher Education Funding Council of
5 England (HEFCE) and Scottish funding council (SFC-Impact for access fund) I start with a
6 discussion of the barriers to HE participation. I then suggest steps taken by some Universities
7 which could serve as exemplars and be further developed in direct consultation with public
8 bodies such as Universities UK, Equality Challenge Unit, Office for fair access and the social
9 mobility commission. I then summarise the UK scenario in the light of policy documents. It
10 is important to critically evaluate ongoing efforts to inform improvements towards this
11 strategic priority of the UK government.
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23 **Barriers to participation**

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25 It is unfair for learning and career trajectories to be pre-decided depending on family,
26 neighbourhood or conditions at birth such as socioeconomic status of parents. Several factors
27 impede HE progression and success of non-traditional students. Some of these are discussed
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35 *Uninformed destinations and choices dictated by life chances* – One of the crucial
36 determinants of HE's success in transforming lives across social groups rests with
37 prospective applicants. They must first apply to and participate in HE (David et al, 2009).
38 This first step is very important to ensure young people with the potential to succeed do not
39 become trapped in low skilled and low paid jobs due to lack of information and support.
40 Those living in postcodes with low HE progression rates for example are often unaware of
41 the benefits a higher degree can offer. This is generally because they haven't seen someone
42 go to University in their neighbourhood. Similarly, first generation HE learners often find it
43 difficult to convince family about the merits HE can offer. University education is generally
44 seen as a high-cost long-term investment with no immediate or certain gains. Similar
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3 concerns apply to children in care, refugees and asylum seekers, mature or returning students
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5 who could potentially benefit from a higher degree.
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8 *Low prior attainment* – An analysis of linked administrative student progression data shows
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10 HE participation gap in England is more concentrated around socio-economic status. Students
11
12 from poorer families have lower attainment at the end of Key Stages 4 and 5 (Chowdry et al,
13
14 2013; Crawford, 2012). Most selective elite universities have pre-decided eligibility criteria
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16 for admissions in the form of prior attainment in GCSEs and A levels. Meritocracy is used by
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18 admission tutors to judge whether a student is a ‘good fit’ for a course. Given their life
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20 circumstances the target WP groups with low prior attainment are often ineligible to take up
21
22 prestigious courses at selective universities. It is very unlikely interventions administered at
23
24 the point of application or entry to university for these students can narrow the HE
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26 participation gap. Thus, even when a minority of these pupil apply to university for an
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28 undergraduate course they make do with the course offered to them - not necessarily their
29
30 first choice. These later surface as course drop-outs. The eligibility criteria for admission to
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32 the Computer science course in Oxford for example is A* in Maths, higher maths and
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34 physics. Certainly, this course is meant for those who have clearly excelled in academics in
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36 school.
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41 *Qualification routes* – Uninformed choices often mean students opt for courses and
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43 qualification routes merely by instinct or to stick to peer group where they are more
44
45 comfortable. They lack the necessary information and do not consider what they would like
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47 to do later in life and how best these courses might help them. One big drawback of this poor
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49 decision-making process is that often their qualifications are not valued by admission tutors.
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51 This is worsened by the low prior attainment discussed above. Such students often are unable
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53 to access HE and amongst other places end up with apprenticeships, low-skilled, low-paid
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3 jobs. BTEC qualifications for example are not as valued as A levels for admissions to
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5 undergraduate courses at Universities.

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8 *Financial considerations* - Another determinant which poses challenges and ultimately
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10 decides whether these students attend university is the cost (Dearden, 2011). The rise in
11
12 tuition fees led to concerns that there will be an even more reduced number of applicants and
13
14 entrants to HE from disadvantaged backgrounds. These financial barriers are not completely
15
16 mitigated by the support available in the form of bursaries. This is because there is always a
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18 larger number of those who can benefit and perhaps with a bit more support. There is a need
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20 to develop better understanding of how universities can help these students better.
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22 23 **The role of HEIs**

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26 Widening Participation (WP) to higher education is a strategic priority for the UK
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28 government and the higher education sector. It addresses the discrepancies in the take-up of
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30 higher education opportunities between different social groups. One of the several ways in
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32 which HEIs work together towards these aims is by raising aspirations and educational
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34 attainment among prospective students from under-represented groups. This is to prepare
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36 them for higher education. By providing targeted support during the programme of study they
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38 ensure course completion rates are maintained. This helps students to improve their further
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40 postgraduate study options and employment prospects. For mature students or those that
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42 dropped out of education due to circumstances beyond their control it gives them the
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44 opportunity to return to learning throughout their lives.
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49 There are several student background identifiers towards whom these efforts are
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51 targeted as they are more likely to stay away from or drop out of education. These include but
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53 are not limited to under-represented groups such as those from a lower socio-economic status,
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55 low-participation schools and neighbourhoods. Diversity enriches the lives of all -
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3 educationally as well as socially. To achieve this HEIs work in close partnerships with
4 schools and sixth form or FE colleges where fewer students progress to HE. Such students are
5 often the first generation of their families to go to university. These efforts are mediated by
6 enhancing the student experience and engaging with wider community. The other approach is
7 by working through alumni relations (HEFCE policy document, 2017).
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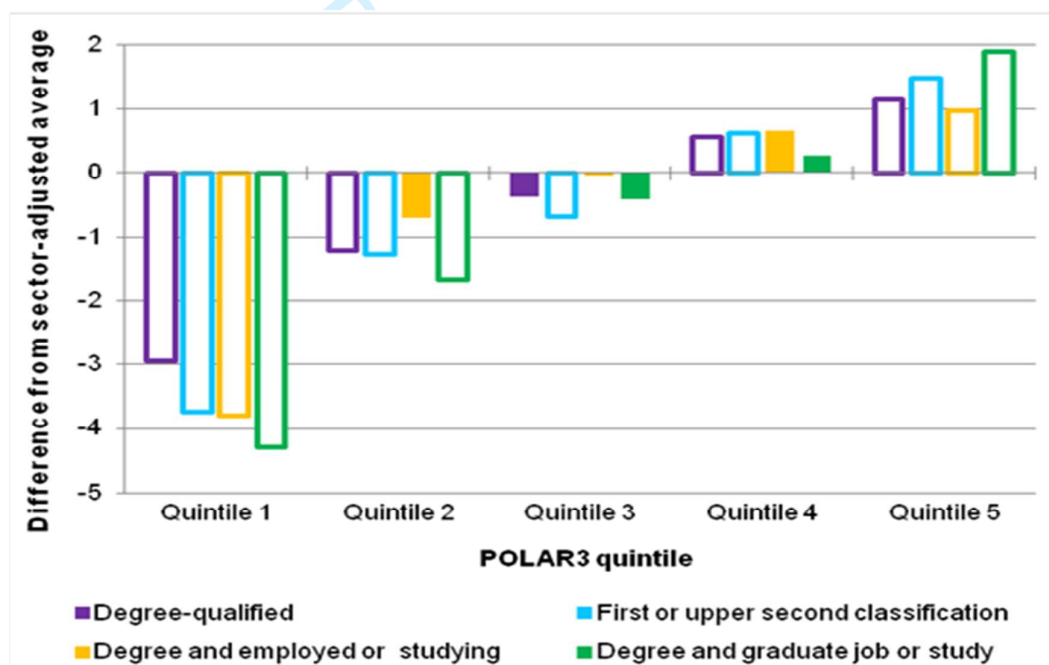
13 14 **The role of HEFCE and OFFA**

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17 To widen participation in HE the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE),
18 works closely with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). As mentioned on their website the
19 main strategic aims being addressed by these joint ventures focus on:
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24 1. building on the progress already made to increase the participation in HE of students
25 from more disadvantaged communities;
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27 2. ensuring that social background does not inhibit access, success and progression
28 within HE and beyond. (Source: HEFCE, 2017).
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33 There are two ways in which HEFCE directly contributes to this agenda. First by allocating
34 'non-mainstream' funds to universities and colleges. Second, by analysis data to develop our
35 understanding of major I problematic issues and concerns around WP and target cohorts.
36 Practitioners and policy makers draw on this evidence to inform policy (For example see
37 young participation for analysis of young participation gaps and trends). A good example of
38 this kind of work is shown in Figure 2 below. The POLAR quintile is a deprivation indicator
39 used in data held by the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA). This graph available in
40 public domain under creative commons licence has been used here from the HEFCE 2013
41 report. The graph shows qualification and progression outcomes across POLAR quintiles for
42 full time first-degree students in HE and beyond. Clearly those marked with higher
43 deprivation lag can be identified from the POLAR quintiles.
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3 Towards this HEFCE and OFFA ensure students are provided with the opportunities
4 to succeed. Universities are encouraged to use a part of the funding they receive from HEFCE
5 and undergraduate fee income to maximise the impact and effectiveness of the considerable
6 investment made by the Government on WP efforts. All this work to increase student access,
7 success and progression takes place under the broader responsibility to promote and protect
8 the collective student interest. This responsibility for HEFCE is outlined in the HE White
9 Paper, 'Students at the heart of the system', and the subsequent BIS technical consultation.
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18 However, a greater role is played by Universities towards achievement of these steps.
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43 **Figure** Qualification and progression outcomes across POLAR quintiles
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46 *Source: 'Higher education and beyond: outcomes from full-time first-degree study', HEFCE, 2013*
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48 **Towards addressing equality and diversity** 49

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51 Participation of young people in higher education in England in general has increased over
52 the last decade. More specifically, this level of participation still varies across the country and
53 for various social groups. Several factors such as prior attainment, ethnicity, socio-economic
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3 class, drive time from home, Disability status allowance (DSA), POLAR data were
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5 considered in the analytical reports produced by HEFCE. These compared the participation
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7 rates (the percentage of 18 and 19-year-olds that enter higher education) and participation gap
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9 (the difference from the expected young participation level) of young people using census
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11 wards in England. Due to space constraint, a detailed discussion of all these variables cannot
12
13 be done here. Yet the reports show the outcomes are still far from what could be termed
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15 equitable.

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18 *Earlier intervention* – Three main types of interventions are administered towards HE take-
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20 up, progress and success for students. These are meant to a) improve the academic
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22 achievement of poorer students, b) increase their likelihood of applying and succeeding in
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24 entering HE and c) support within and beyond HE. The point of administration of these
25
26 interventions is often debated. Secondary data analysis of official datasets in the form of the
27
28 National Pupil Database for example has shown interventions delivered during KS3 and KS4
29
30 are unsuccessful in raising pupil attainment in science and maths or encouraging them to
31
32 study STEM subjects during KS5 (Banerjee, 2017a, 2017b). A lack of KS5 engagement
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34 means students are ineligible for entry to undergraduate courses. More research is warranted
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36 to show how early in a student's life should these interventions need to come to effectively
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38 raise attitudes and aspirations towards higher education and learning irrespective of their
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40 background.

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45 This of course does not mean that all contribution needs to come from schools or that
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47 universities do not have a role to play. It only means there is a need for better planning about
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49 the required contribution from universities at the point of delivery of these initiatives. School-
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51 university partnerships to raise the achievement of poor children as they progress through the
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53 education system, will take time to be established but is potentially the next step forward.

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3 *Outreach* – Universities engage with prospective students, their families, school teachers and
4 careers advisers in through awareness and aspiration raising initiatives. These activities are
5 aimed at students for increasing as well as widening participation. These are often in the form
6 of summer schools for example those funded by the Sutton trust or internally by Universities’
7 WP fund are aimed at pupil who are the first generation from a family to consider higher
8 education. Some of these programmes are also targeted towards prospective applicants from
9 low socio-economic groups. Family income below a certain threshold either self-declared or
10 estimated by proxy-indicators such as eligibility for free school meals are the filters for
11 identifying such pupils. Schools with lower progression rates are identified and students from
12 these schools or those living in low HE participation neighbourhoods are identified and
13 invited to participate in these schemes. Another set of activities aims to promote lifelong
14 learning these are aimed at mature students from any of the above groups

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Academic achievement is not the only determinant of HE participation and hence sustained efforts towards raising the achievement of poor children and using contextualised admissions systems are just a couple of the several possible solutions. Students need to aspire, have the confidence, and also desirable non-cognitive skills to succeed in HE. These soft skills play an important role in shaping pupils’ decisions, for example the ability to access information available during the application process. There isn’t much literature suggesting a causal link between pupil’s attitudes, and whether they go to university. Outreach activities run by HEIs address exactly this domain - influencing attitudes, aspirations, knowledge of HE to instil in prospective students the value of higher education.

There is a need for more robust evidence on the effectiveness of these types of interventions in influencing HE application and participation. This is important for evidence based policy and practice. OFFA is the independent regulator of fair access to higher education in England. OFFA has recently published new guidance and proposed standards for

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3 the evaluation of outreach by universities and colleges as part of their ongoing work to
4 improve the impact of outreach across HE.
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8 Anders and Micklewright (2015) provide some important insights by investigating
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10 young people's expectations about applying to university. They show how these expectations
11
12 change markedly as children grow up and how these are shaped up by socio-economic
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14 background. They ask what role can be played by schools in affecting expectations of
15
16 children about participation in HE. This is important to understand what types of intervention
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18 might be successful. Perhaps one size may not fit all – interventions might need to be
19
20 evidence based tailored for specific target groups to reduce differential outcomes, increase
21
22 HE participation and reduce attrition.
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26 *Increasing access* - The vision of widening participation has changed over time. Back in the
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28 1950s fewer people attended university. Inclusive education then referred improved chances
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30 for students from poor families achieving particularly well in selective grammar schools.
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32 With time as the number of HE applicants grew, the focus shifted towards gendered
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34 participation with more support and encouragement for women to take part in HE. Most
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36 recently increasing access is not just confined to the very able, well qualified from poor
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38 backgrounds or women but all those who could benefit from HE. This includes pupils who
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40 underachieved in school due to their disadvantaged circumstances and, implicitly, their poor-
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42 quality schooling or lack of awareness and support from family in many cases (Gorard,
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44 2017).
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48 To identify such children several pupil background indicators are now considered
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50 such as eligibility for free school meals as an indicator of lower socio-economic status. The
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52 postcode of residence for estimating the income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI)
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54 and participation of local areas (POLAR quintiles). The POLAR classification (HESA) for
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3 example looks at how likely young people are to participate in HE across the UK and shows
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5 how this varies by area. Local areas or ‘wards’ are classified into five groups, based on the
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7 proportion of 18 year olds who enter HE. These groups range from quintile 1: areas with the
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9 lowest young participation (most disadvantaged), up to quintile 5 areas with the highest rates
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11 (most advantaged). See also figure 2 above for a better understanding of why this is an
12
13 important consideration.
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17 Some other indicators which are now used include first generation in HE, disability
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19 and ethnic minority status (DfE, 2016). Several factors are now known to correlate with
20
21 underachievement of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (Banerjee, 2016a). The notion
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23 of WP is based on the understanding if these children had fewer hardships to face they could
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25 have attained higher grades in school and been eligible for admission to HE. Also on grounds
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27 of equity and social justice being denied admissions means the lifelong hardships continue
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29 and are passed on across generations.
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33 *Contextualised admissions* – HE and school impact partnerships for raising the achievement
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35 of children and providing access to Universities before the school to HE transitions happen
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37 will take time to become a sustainable WP method. In the meantime, a more immediate
38
39 solution has come up in the form of contextualised admissions
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43 Contextual data has been widely used to inform undergraduate admissions decision-
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45 making (Gorard et al 2017) in recent years. This means formal educational achievement is
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47 considered in the light of opportunities which were available to and the circumstances in
48
49 which the applicant was educated. This estimate is used by admission tutors while screening
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51 applicants, making reduced offers or for applicants identified as ‘near-misses.’
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53 Contextualised admissions are thus one of the several equitable means of widening
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55 participation. However, in the absence of a centrally developed system universities are
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3 uncertain about the choice of indicators, their reliability and validity for use. The other bigger
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5 challenge is developing justifiable contextual admissions policies. The statistical analysis of
6
7 large datasets has often been undertaken to develop robust, evidence-based recommendations
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9 for good practice regarding the use of contextual data in undergraduate admissions (Crawford
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11 et al,).
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14 Student circumstances are now considered when making admissions offers.
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16 Unfortunately, this process is not yet as transparent as it should be. Universities decide the
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18 contextual indicators they like to use to widen participation depending on what is easily
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20 available to them. Often the policies are not clearly stated on their websites nor is this kind of
21
22 information available to prospective students (See my systematic review on contextualised
23
24 admissions Gorard et al, 2017). This often means information doesn't reach those who would
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26 benefit from them. For example, if this information is put in the public domain or made
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28 available to prospective applicants, schools and adviser's - applicants will find it easier to
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30 decide which universities are likely to offer them a place. This could be helpful for students
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32 as well as admission tutors.
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36 *Beyond admissions* – Conventional efforts are focused on getting poorer students into
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38 universities, or into more selective institutions. Having entered higher education students
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40 from non-traditional backgrounds have high drop-out rates. Study support during programme
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42 is a potential way of extending widening participation activities. Similarly, beyond higher
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44 education, it is also desirable that graduates should enter the labour market and progress
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46 economically irrespective of their social background (Vigoles and Murray, 2016). Graduates
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48 from lower socio-economic backgrounds are known to earn less in the labour market even if
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50 they are equally well qualified as graduates from wealthier backgrounds (Britton et al, 2016).
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52 For universities to be able to level the play field the student support activities need to
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54 continue beyond admissions, into tailored study support until the student transitions to the
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3 labour market. Simple considerations like providing term time accommodation can have
4 significant effects. Similarly identifying and helping these students to establish contact with
5 Role models from the community in HE can be very helpful and inspiring at the same time.
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7 This could be for example in the form peer mentoring, academic mentoring or pastoral
8 support from students or staff who are already in HE and have been successful.
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14 *Encouraging self and third-party evaluations* – As OFFA develops the new evaluation
15 guidelines for outreach programmes in partnership with universities and consortiums, there is
16 a growing need for more research. It is important to understand what works or could work
17 better. For example, do we need to develop better information provision for students? Should
18 there be more nationally coordinated attempts like Aim Higher to undertake a range of
19 activities that can widen participation? Is it better to have a more specific regional scheme
20 instead of a national approach? Rather than competing universities can collaborate and
21 coordinate with each other for improving fair access. Again, most research so far has been
22 limited to evaluating the effectiveness of WP activities. Most of these evaluations were post-
23 delivery. As OFFA suggests evaluations should be built in from the very beginning- planning
24 stage of the intervention. This is essential to produce high quality causal evidence of impact.
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26 As Vignoles and Murray suggest there needs to be a stronger design for the evaluation of
27 impact of these initiatives such as randomised control trials (RCTs) or by estimation of effect
28 sizes and regression modelling as discussed in Banerjee 2016b.
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45 These evaluations could then be extended to assess systems such as that of bursaries. It is
46 important to know who receives these bursaries and whether their allocation is currently
47 equitable. We need to know whether the allocation of bursaries is a fair system and if it is
48 achieving the desired impact.
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54 **The way forward**

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3 Debates about fair access to higher education have tended to focus on the need to address the
4 poorer attainment and aspirations of those from traditionally under-represented groups.
5 Recently, however, policy-makers have begun to recognise the need to scrutinise the fairness
6 of university admissions decisions. Currently there is no conclusive evidence as to whether
7 university admissions decisions are fair in the narrow sense of simply reflecting the previous
8 academic achievements of applicants. Are university applicants equally likely to be offered
9 university places if they are equally well-qualified, and to what extent different aspects of
10 prior attainment explain why university applicants from lower social class backgrounds and
11 ethnic minority groups are less likely to be offered university places than their middle class
12 and white peers. We also ask to what extent access to higher education might be made fairer
13 through the use of 'contextual data' to identify students from disadvantaged backgrounds with
14 the potential to do well at university despite not having the grades usually required for
15 admission.

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18 Student access, retention and success during their time at the university can be perceived to
19 be a two-step process. During the first undergraduate courses taken by students and then
20 during postgraduate study. In addition to making contextualised offers, programme support,
21 retention or success in undergraduate courses and beyond are equally important.

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There is a growing need for us to reconsider admissions policies. The asymmetric
distribution of the cohorts in terms of ethnicity/home-international students for example is
something which appears to be strikingly odd. Perhaps a mere coincidence and does not
reflect admission policies at HEIS as students are likely to make choices in UCAS application
forms under peer influence or based on proximity from home. Yet the way admissions are
being contextualised and admission policies being reframed in the light of evaluation led
evidence based policy and practice by most leading and Russell group universities change is
inevitable. Widening participation is one of the strategy areas for 2020. The promise of

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3 economic competitiveness and growth through social mobility puts the onus on higher
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5 education institutions
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