Variable tuition fees and widening participation: the marketing of English institutions through access agreements

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Variable Tuition Fees and the impact of access agreements on Widening Participation and Fair Access

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Abstract

This paper argues that the introduction of access agreements following the establishment of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has led to changes in the way that higher education institutions (HEIs) position themselves in the marketplace in relation to widening participation. However, the nature of these access agreements has led to obfuscation rather than clarification from the perspective of the consumer. This paper analyses OFFA's 2008 monitoring report and a sample of 20 HEIs' original 2006 and revised or updated access agreements (2008) to draw conclusions about the impact of these agreements on the notions of 'fair access' and widening participation. The authors conclude that institutions use access agreements primarily to promote enrolment to their own programmes rather than to promote HE generally. As a consequence of this marketing focus, previous differences between pre-92 and post-92 institutions in relation to widening participation and fair access are perpetuated leading to both confusion for consumers and an inequitable distribution of bursary and other support mechanisms for the poorest applicants to HE.

Introduction

In 1999 the UK government (via HEFCE) required all HEIs to issue statements outlining what they were doing to widen participation and why. In 2001 HEIs were asked for widening participation strategies that set out plans, targets and activities to be undertaken during 2001-2004. Changes to the funding of higher education announced in the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003), and the introduction of the requirement for access agreements to be negotiated and lodged with OFFA, induced new competition in the form of HEI-specific bursaries and incentives. These changes were designed to ensure that higher tuition fees did not conflict with the Government's aims of promoting widening participation and 'fair access' to HE. Access agreements, compulsory for those wishing to charge above the minimum fee, provided an opportunity for HEIs to differentiate themselves in the market.

Our sample of twenty access agreements amounts to approximately 25% of each of the pre-1992 and post-1992 university categories. HEIs submitting the agreements were weighted to take into account geographical spread, size (large, medium and small by FTE numbers) and with regard to maintaining a balance between institutions based in large urban conurbations and those based in provincial cities. Our initial 2006 analysis showed that pre-1992 institutions tended to offer larger bursaries and more generous additional support, but to fewer potential students, maintaining an emphasis on high entry requirements, albeit from a wider social range (McCaig, 2006). Conversely, post-1992 institutions used additional fee income (AFI) to increase student numbers by offering lower bursaries, but more in the way of curriculum development, additional outreach and transition to HE support to a wider cohort of potential students. Institutions' outreach activity was similarly found to vary considerably by HEI type, with post-92s engaging with a wider range of target age and social groups and in a broader range of activities than pre-92 institutions (McCaig: 2006). This paper will examine the extent to which these conclusions still hold, whilst providing a critique of the government’s strategy to promote ‘fair access’.

Student financing and Fair Access to HE: OFFA and the allocation of variable tuition fee income

The belief that the distribution of students across HEIs may also have equity and efficiency considerations has influenced English policy in recent years. In their initial draft recommendations for good practice in HE, the DfES (2004) equated “fairness” to “equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and background” (para 4.1). However, the OFFA, the body supposedly created to police fair access, has no remit to consider the admissions criteria of individual HEIs. Hence as Watson (2006) points out, Government continues to avoid the issue of how to ration places in over-subscribed HEIs and courses, which would appear to have been the historical motivation to address fair access. Indeed how the government’s objective of achieving ‘fair access’ relates to its widening participation agenda itself remains unclear.

In the Secretary of State’s Letter of Guidance (2004) to OFFA the emphasis is again on under-represented groups, the Director of Fair Access was advised that:

> "The phrase "under-represented in higher education" will need pragmatic and sensible interpretation. It is not meant to be a strict statistical term. I would not, for example, expect an access agreement to cover every under-represented group. *The "under-representation" is meant to refer to groups under-represented in higher education as a whole, rather than at a particular university.*" (para 6.3.3, italics added)

Though earlier the Director was reminded that:

> "…the philosophy behind the creation of OFFA is that institutions that decide to raise their fees above the current standard level should plan how they will safeguard and promote access. In particular, there is an expectation that they will plough some of their extra income back into bursaries and other financial support for students, and outreach work. This is a general expectation for all institutions. *However, I would expect that you would expect the most, in terms of outreach and financial support, from institutions whose records suggest that they have the furthest to go in securing a diverse student body*." (para. 2.1 italics added).

Later in the Secretary of State's letter, it is revealed that 'securing a diverse student body' is not to be directly addressed, indeed:

> "..institutions that generally attract a narrower range of students may want to put more money into outreach activity to raise aspirations, in addition to bursaries and financial support. I appreciate that much of this work may not result in recruitment directly to the HEI carrying it out, and sometimes has a long lead time. Therefore, I would not expect an

> institution’s efforts on outreach to be necessarily measured by, or reflected in, changes in its own applications.” (para 6.3.1)

Together these instructions seem to have little to do with the promotion of fair access, indeed as noted above OFFA has no remit to consider admissions criteria and its three current core aims (OFFA, 2005, 2007) make no mention of fair access or promoting diverse student bodies within an HEI. A similar omission can be found in the Key Objectives in HEFCE’s updated *2006-11 Strategic Plan* (HEFCE, 2007). This reluctance to even address the concept of fair access and the unwillingness to target the degree of diversity of an HEI’s student body when taken together suggest that OFFA is in effect largely an auditing organisation. As such Adnett and Coates’s (2003) description of a process of cream-skimming and dreg-siphoning of non-traditional students in English HE seemingly remain appropriate. Our analysis in fact finds that institutions regularly choose to measure their progress towards underrepresented groups in relation to their own performance against sector wide benchmarks, rather than emphasising representation 'in higher education as a whole', in effect using access agreements as marketing tools; though there is some evidence that institutions with 'the furthest to go in securing a diverse student body' have amended their behaviour in revised agreements (of which more below).

OFFA agreements have also been found to be poor vehicles for enabling fair access due to their complexity (in the absence of a national bursary scheme, see Callendar, forthcoming). London Economics (2007) concluded in their report for Million Plus:

> “The student finance system for full-time students in the UK is exceptionally complicated. The combination of differential fees, fee loans, maintenance loans, fee grants, maintenance grants, bursaries and the Education Maintenance Allowance make the entire package almost impossible to understand” (page 64).

The new student finance system places the greatest burden in terms of collecting, collating and analysing complex information on those groups who are potentially eligible for bursaries, and these groups are likely to face the greatest difficulty in handling these tasks given their lack of social and cultural capital (Adnett and Tlupova, forthcoming). This can best be seen in the different ways in which pre- and post-92 institutions draw up their access agreements; the first stage of this is to look in detail at how institutions allocated additional fee income.

How did HEI’s allocate their additional fee income in 2006/07

In its first monitoring report (OFFA, 2008), OFFA calculated that as a result of the new tuition fees HEIs had gained an additional revenue of nearly £450 million in 2006/07. HEIs initially estimated that they would spend around 30 per cent of this revenue on student bursaries and additional outreach activities, though OFFA reports that only around £96m was recycled in bursaries and £20m in outreach, in total around £25m less than expected (OFFA, 2008).

Using data for OFFA (2008) and HESA (2008) we can make comparisons between our samples of 10 pre- (all members of the Russell Group) and 10 post-1992 institutions, as illustrated in Table 1. The relatively large standard deviations compared to the means evident in most data columns indicates a large degree of variability within each group of institutions and warns against drawing sweeping comparisons both within and between these groups of institutions.

We are particularly interested in whether the Secretary of State's expectations regarding the higher allocation of the additional funding on student bursaries and additional outreach activities amongst institutions with the least diverse student bodies has been realised. Column 6 provides an indicator of the diversity of student bodies in the form of a HESA 2006/7 widening participation indicator: % of students from lower SES families. Overall, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds constitute around half of the population of England and account for just 29% of young, full-time, first-time entrants to higher education (National Audit Office, 2008). There is clearly a significant and persistent difference between this percentage for the pre and post-1992 institutions. Each institution has an individual benchmark representing the expected participation for each group of under-represented entrants given the particular characteristics of the students it recruits (subject of study, age and entry qualifications). The National Audit Office (2008) concludes that post-1992 institutions generally perform at or significantly above their benchmarks whilst the 16 English Russell Group institutions generally perform at or significantly below their benchmarks.

On this basis we would expect that in order to comply with the Secretary of State’s objective the former would have to spend a higher proportion of their additional fee income on bursaries and additional outreach activities. Column 2 of Table 1 suggests that there was no significant difference on average between these two groups of institutions in terms of the % spent on financial support for lower income students. However, note in Table 2, Column 2 the huge difference between the maximum and minimum % spent between institutions within these two groups, even though our pre-1992 institutions are all members of the Russell Group. However, the figures in Table 1 Column 6 suggest that the pre-1992 institutions will have a smaller proportion of their students eligible for financial support on the basis of a given family income. Hence, the finding that they are spending a similar proportion to the post-1992 institutions suggests that they are generally providing: larger bursaries to eligible students, applying less restrictive eligibility conditions or both. Callender (forthcoming) found that in 2006-07 the poorest students at the most prestigious HEIs received financial aid nearly three times greater than their peers at the least prestigious HEIs. The National Audit Office (2008) reached similar conclusions estimating that the average value of the minimum bursary available to a student in 2008 from a household with income below £25,000 was £1,505 in a Russell Group institution and £687 in a post-1992 one. We explore these possibilities for our own sample at the institutional level later in the paper.

Table 1 Comparison of Samples of Pre and Post-1992 Institutions 2006/07

	Additional fee income (£m) (1)	% of (1) spent on financial support for lower income students (2)	Difference between (2) and % predicted to be spent (3)	% of (1) spent on outreach (4)	% of additional fee income (1) spent on (2 + 4) (5)	% of students from lower SES families (6)
Pre-1992 Institutions						
Mean	6.2	19.3	-4.2	5.7	25.0	18.9
SD	2.1	4.5	2.9	4.5	8.2	3.8
Post-1992 Institutions						
Mean	4.4	19.2	-8.4	4.3	23.5	41.6
SD	1.3	4.2	7.6	4.2	6.5	6.8

Source: Own calculations based on OFFA (2008) and HESA (2008)

We also made use of the summary provided in the National Audit Office Report on widening participation (2008) to compare the % of additional fee income actually spent on bursaries in 2006-07 with institution's planned % to be spent in 2008-09.

All the post-1992 institutions in our sample planned to increase the % spent on bursaries, several by very large proportions (over double in one case), with a general tendency towards a lower dispersion. However, four of our 10 pre-1992 planned to reduce the % spent on bursaries and all but one of planned increases were small, overall in this group the diversity of behaviour was not falling. Hence, over time there seems to be a movement away from the behaviour anticipated by the Secretary of State.

From Table 1, Column 3 we can see that the post-1992 institutions in our sample *expected* to spend a higher proportion on financial support than the pre-1992, and again Table 2 ,Column 3 shows the large range of variation in differences between expectations and outcomes within both sectors. The large overall under-spend on bursaries amongst or sample was typical of the sector as a whole. The OFFA (2008) reports that a key concern in the first year of operation of the new system was the inability of HEIs and the Student Loan Company (SLC) to ensure that many eligible students received bursaries. Overall OFFA calculated that English HEIs spent nearly £20 million pounds less than anticipated of their additional fee income on bursaries in the first year of the scheme. Whilst in part this may be due to HEIs systematically over-estimating likely expenditure on bursaries, there are indications that information and procedural failures led to many qualifying students not receiving bursaries. Indeed OFFA reports that the SLC estimates that as many as 12,000 students assessed by their Local Authority as eligible for a full Higher Education Maintenance Grant did not give permission for their assessed household income to be made available to their university or college, effectively preventing themselves from receiving a means-tested bursary.

Inclusion of expenditure on additional outreach activities changes the outcome of the comparison slightly. Pre-1992 institutions reported spending a higher proportion of their additional income on such activities, but here the standard deviation is particularly high relative to the mean and Table 2 Column 4 confirms that there is huge variability in the % on additional income reported to be spent on these activities. We also know from previous studies (e.g. McCaig and Bowers-Brown, 2007) that there is a significant difference in the type of outreach activities favoured by these two groups and the extent to which these activities actually target under-represented groups in higher education.

Table 2 The Degree of Heterogeneity of the Two Samples' Response to Variable Tuition Fees 2006/07

	Additional fee income (£m) (1)	% of (1) spent on financial support for lower income students (2)	Difference between (2) and % predicted to be spent (3)	% of (1) spent on outreach (4)	% of additional fee income (1) spent on (2 + 4) (5)	% of students from lower SES families (6)
Pre-1992 Institutions						
Max	9.5	26.8	-7.8	18.4	41.1	24.7
Min	1.3	14.3	+0.6	0.0	16.9	11.5
Post-1992 Institutions						
Max	6.0	24.9	-25.9	15.4	34.3	51.6
Min	2.0	13.0	+1.4	0.0	16.3	29.4

Source: Own calculations based on OFFA (2008) and HESA (2008)

Adding together expenditure on these two areas and expressing it as a % of additional fee income (Table 1 Column 5) indicates that pre-1992 institutions in our sample did spend a slightly higher proportion on these two areas, but this difference is not statistically different. Again the relatively high standard deviations relative to mean and the variation evident in Table 2 Column 5 suggest that intra-group differences are large compared to inter-group ones.

Comparison between 2006 access agreements and 2008 revised or updated agreements

This section looks at the actual content of access agreements rather than what is presented in the OFFA monitoring report (OFFA: 2008) and therefore some of the figures are not directly comparable. Access agreements can be seen as marketing tools for institutions, an opportunity to present their pricing and student support strategies in a competitive marketplace, and as such they contain information that higher education consumers may wish to take into account when choosing between institutions. In essence they outline what institutions offer in exchange for the right to charge the variable tuition fee introduced from 2006/07[1]. Agreements have two main purposes: firstly they outline what combination of bursaries and other financial support is offered to students to offset the increased tuition fee; secondly, they outline institutional widening participation (WP) or outreach activities and priorities. OFFA guidance notes state that:

[1] Though nominally variable from the previous limit of £1000 up to £3000 from 2006, in practice almost all HEIs decided to charge £3000 including all the sample analysed in this paper.

> Institutions are required to use some of the money raised through tuition fees to provide bursaries or other financial support for students from under-represented groups, or to fund outreach activities to encourage more applications from under-represented groups. An access agreement will provide the details of bursary support and outreach work. (OFFA, 2005)

The amount or proportion of additional fee income to be spent was not prescribed, but as noted above: “institutions whose record suggests that they have further to go in attracting a wider range of applications will be expected to be more ambitious in their access agreement” (OFFA, 2005). The remainder of this paper will explore the extent to which different types of institution (i.e. those that 'have further to go in attracting a wider range of applications' and those that already attract such a range) present information relating to financial support and outreach to their perspective audiences (i.e. the potential HE consumer).

Additional fee income changes between 2006 and 2008

Of our original sample of 20 institutions, 15 had revised their access agreements by 2008 (seven pre-92s and eight post-92s); the other five were updated to account for fee-bursary rises in line with inflationary increases in fees. Not all institutions declared the proportion of AFI theyplanned to spend on bursaries and other financial support in their original 2006 agreements, in fact four of each category declined to present this information in agreements (some of the discrepancy between planned expenditure (Table 1, Column 5) and Table 3 (below) may be down to the number of institutions that chose not to declare this information in agreements).

In the revised versions two additional pre-92 institutions declared their AFI spend in the revised agreements (eight out of the ten as opposed to six in 2006). Overall the proportion of AFI that pre-92 institutions pledged to spend annually on bursaries and additional financial support decreased slightly from an average 27.5% in 2006 to 27.2% in the revised agreements. Two pre-92 institutions pledged to spend less of the AFI and one to spend more. Among post-92 institutions, once again only six out of ten agreements specified additional spending; of which two pledged to spend more and two to spend less, bringing the average down from 29.3% to 29% in 2008 (Table 3).

Table 3: Percentage of additional fee income (planned expenditure) among sample agreements

Institution	AFI spend % 06	AFI spend % 08	Institution	AFI spend % 06	AFI spend % 08
pre1			post1	33	33
pre2	30	30	post2	25	30
pre3	0	22	post3	30	31
pre4	14	14	post4	27	24
pre5	30	27	post5	36	31
pre6			post6		
pre7	33	33	post7		
pre8		33	post8	25	25
pre9	30	30	post9		
pre10	28	28.5	post10		
Average	**27.5%**	**27.2**	**Average**	**29.3%**	**29%**

Bursary changes between 2006 and 2008

Only a minority of pre-92 institutions changed their level and range of bursaries in their revised or updated access agreements; three increased the upper end of their bursary range by what could be termed inflationary rises

(£25, £35 and £60 per annum) reflecting the fee increase (from £3000 in 2006 to on average £3070 from 2008), while two reduced the upper end maximum, one by £60 and one by £1100 per annum (Table 4a). There was more evidence of bursary level elasticity among post-92 institutions with three increasing the upper end maximum (one by £715) and three others making substantial reductions (-£200, -£300, -£1650), (Table4b).

Overall minimum and maximum bursaries on offer to all students that are eligible for the means tested bursary schemes are significantly lower from 2008, by on average £104 among pre-92s and by on average £187 among our sample of post-92 institutions, than had been offered in the original 2006 agreements (Tables 4a, 4b).

Table 4a: Bursary range among sample agreements, pre-92s

Institution type	Min 06	Max 06	Min 08	Max 08	+/- 06-08
Pre1	300	800	300	800	0
Pre2	700	3000	700	3000	0
Pre3	500	1000	500	1000	0
Pre4	400	650	400	650	0
Pre5	250	1000	255	1025	25
Pre6	1000	1300	620	1240	-60
Pre7	0	2500	0	2500	0
Pre8	1000	2300	1330	2335	35
Pre9	300	2600	310	1500	-1100
Pre10	700	1100	300	1160	60
Average	**515**	**1625**	**471.5**	**1521**	**Total -104**

Table 4b: Bursary range among sample agreements, post-92s

Institution type	Min 06	Max 06	Min 08	Max 08	+/- 06-08
post1	50	300	70	320	20
post2	500	1000	520	1050	50
post3	200	800	200	800	0
post4	500	1000	500	500	0
post5	400	1000	400	800	-200
post6	300	300	300	1015	715
post7	500	500	500	500	0
post8	300	300	300	300	0
post9	500	1300	500	1000	-300
post10	1300	2150	300	500	-1650
Average	**455**	**865**	**3590**	**678.5**	**Total -187**

Additional financial support changes between 2006 and 2008

The discrepancy between the findings from Tables 1 and 2 (above) that suggest an increase in AFI expenditure on bursaries, and Table 4a and b (above) which shows that on average bursary support for most applicants has fallen in institutions' revised or updated agreements, can be partially explained by Tables 5a and 5b (below). They reveal that additional financial support to *some* students, in the form of targeted bursaries and scholarships as declared in access agreements, has increased between the original 2006 and revised 2008 agreements. Among pre-92 agreements, two institutions offer substantially larger additional support than before, and another two subsequently offered less. The average additional support on offer to pre-92s in our sample grew by just under £60, but that masks the two increases of £2500 and £3000 and two reductions of £500 and £1450 (five remained unchanged, Table 5a). The picture for post-92s in our sample again shows more diversity, with three increasing support, one by £2000 spread over the three years (£666 per annum) and the other by £2510; these two examples help increase the average maximum on offer by over £500 per annum (Table

5b). However it should be noted that seven institutions did not increase their additional bursary or scholarship support. It should also be noted that the maximum amounts available as additional support could include in some cases support for more than reason; for example, a student from a low participation neighbourhood enrolling on a designated shortage subject programme may be entitled to additional support for both reasons, and possibly more if she/he is from another underrepresented group targeted by the institution (e.g. BME, disabled etc) (Table 6).

Table 5a: Additional spending (targeted discretionary bursaries and scholarships) by pre-92 institutions

Institution type	Add max 06	Add max 08	Change add max 06-08
pre-1	1200	1200	0
pre2	2000	2000	0
pre3	1000	1000	0
pre4	1550	1000	-500
pre5	1000	1025	25
pre6	1000	1000	0
pre7	0	2500	2500
pre8	1500	1500	0
pre9	0	3000	3000
pre10	2500	1050	-1450
Average	**1468.75**	**1527.50**	**Total 58.75**

Table 5b: Additional spending (targeted discretionary bursaries and scholarships) by pre-92 institutions

Institution type	Add max 06	Add max 08	Change add max 06-08
post1	700	730	30
post2	1000	1000	0
post3	0	0	0
post4	0	666*	666*
post5	0	0	0
post6	500	3010	2510
post7	333*	333*	0
post8	0	0	0
post9	0	0	0
post10	0	0	0
Average	**633**	**1147.80**	**Total 514.80**

* denotes where an additional bursary or scholarship is a one-off payment to represent support the course of a three-year degree programme, so 333 represents £1000 to cover 3 years, 666 represents £2000 to cover 3 years

Analysis of the 2008 agreements shows that pre-92 institutions are still far more likely to offer additional financial support in the form of targeted bursaries and scholarships; indeed only two of our 2006 pre-92 sample offered no additional support and both of those now offering substantial targeted support. By contrast only one additional post-92 institution has decided to offer targeted support in this way, although as we have noted the amounts on offer are increased from 2008 onwards. However, there is evidence here to suggest that post-92s have shifted some of their standard bursary support to funding additional financial support in the manner of pre-92 institutions in their 2006 agreements; pre-92s in our sample also seem to have shifted their behaviour perhaps in response to market factors, with two substantial increases and two substantial decreases in additional financial support.

Categories of additional support

In access agreements additional financial support is expressed in a variety of forms that do not lend themselves to easy comparison. This is partly because often they come in the form of unspecified numbers of scholarships or special bursary arrangements targeted at specific groups (see above). Additional scholarships were usually offered contingent on merit or excellence, applications to shortage subjects or were reserved for students coming from partner institutions. There were also discretionary offers of support, usually on the basis of age, (i.e. mature students) having dependents, being in financial hardship or demonstrating potential. Support was also extended to students on non-first degree qualifications, e.g. Postgraduate Certificates in Education (PGCEs), Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and Foundation degrees (Fds).

Table 6 shows the distribution of additional support categories as presented in the original 2006 agreements with the additional 2008 categories in parentheses.

In the original 2006 agreements five institutions offered no additional support, one from a pre-1992 institution and four from post-1992s; in 2008 the remaining pre-92 had added a category of additional support, as had one of the post-92s. In 2008 agreements there was some enhancement of categories supported by pre-92 institutions: two more offered additional financial support for those enrolling in shortage subjects; two more offered additional financial support based on merit or excellence; two more offered support for those in circumstances of financial hardship; one more offered support for mature students. One pre-92 abolished its scholarship scheme for those with high potential to concentrate instead on low income families. The only one change to the categories of support offered by post-92 institutions was one institution offering support for care leavers (Table 6).

Overall, pre-1992s seemed to be more generous in the range of categories supported, closing the gap with post-92s in relation to additional financial support for mature students in 2008 and widening the gap in relation to support for those enrolling in shortage subjects, merit based and financial hardship. The patterns identified in the 2006 analysis remain, however: pre-92s are more likely to offer additional support for shortage subjects, those demonstrating 'potential', those on PGCE courses and for those with financial hardship; post-92s are more likely to offer support for students enrolling from local schools and colleges linked by formal progression arrangements, and those undertaking HNDs or Fds (Table 6).

Table 6: Additional support categories, 2006 and 2008 agreements

Additional support	Category	Pre-1992 2006 (2008)	Post-1992 2006 (2008)	Total 2006 (2008)
Scholarships	Shortage subjects	3 (2)	2	5 (2)
	Excellence/merit based	3 (1)	1	3 (1)
	Partnership/local colleges	3	3	6
	Progression linked		2	2
Discretionary support	Mature students	1 (1)	2	3 (1)
	Those with dependents	1		1
	Care leavers		(1)	(1)
	Financial hardship	2 (2)	1	3 (2)
	Those with potential	2 (-1)	1	2
Non-degree students	PGCE	1		1
	HND/Fd		2	2
Total		**15**	**13**	**28**

Source: McCaig: 2006

Outreach priority changes between 2006 and 2008

This section looks at changes to the types of additional outreach activity carried out by institutions between the original 2006 access agreements and the revised 2008 agreements. Caution is required when comparing these documents, however, as the revised agreements were often much shorter than the original. There is, though, some indication of additional planned activity that reflects the stated intention of some institutions to shift some of there AFI spending from bursaries to outreach (see the discussion above surrounding Table 1). The evidence for shifting priorities is most easily identified where milestone or benchmarking appendices were included as part of agreements (though sometimes such information is supplied in the general text), where some data on additional spending or additional recipients of outreach activity is laid out and costed over the ensuing five year period.

There are several themes that emerge from a close reading of this material. Firstly, pre-92 institutions' access agreements contain more overall information about changed priorities and are more open about changes in income and expenditure. Pre-92s are more likely to concentrate on issues relating to the individual potential applicant to higher education (mentoring, summer schools, tariff points achieved), and especially those with financial circumstances that might discourage entry to HE (first generation to HE, those from low participation neighbourhoods or lower socio-economic classes and concentrated upon the high achievers amongst those from groups associated with low entry rates, i.e. those who would enter HE but be more likely to choose a lower-ranked HEI in the absence of such interventions). Post-92 institutions were more likely to highlight curriculum development and progression arrangements between the institution and the local colleges and schools (such as compact schemes) and also to enhance vocational employment routes in conjunction with Local Learning Networks (LLNs).

One of each of the pre- and post-92 agreements emphasised additional support and outreach work with looked after children (LAC) in the care system, while two pre-92 and one post-92 agreements highlighted shifting priorities towards lower age groups (Y4 and Y5 in the case of the pre-92s, 14-19 instead of 16-19 for one post-92). One pre-92 highlighted the amount of additional funding it would spend on outreach activity overall, while one post-92 agreement declared reducing previously unrealistic targets.

Although pre-92s provided slightly more information and presented more new avenues of outreach to explore, the overall pattern of outreach activity seems to be largely unchanged from that observed in the initial analysis of the 2006 agreements. In relation to age groups and underrepresented social groups engaged with, the 2006 analysis found that pre-1992 institutions were more likely than post-92s to cite primary school pupils aged 5-11 as a group (we have noted as shift to lower age groups among post-92s in 2008). Post-92s engaged with a wider range of age groups and a wider range of social groups and these institutions were far more likely to be engaged with learners with disabilities.

Analysis of the type of activities highlighted in agreements indicated that there was a wider range of activities offered by post-92s in their original 2006 access agreements, reflecting a broader conception of widening participation for these institutions. For example, while pre-92s are more likely to offer taster events, mentoring, residential schools and outreach activities with schools, post-1992 institutions were more likely to offer pre-entry information advice and guidance (IAG), events for parents and carers, sector related HE taster events and promoting vocational routes to HE.

Our analysis of the 2008 revised agreements reinforces the conclusions drawn from the earlier analysis: post-92 institutions are still more likely to engage in a range of activities that none of the sample pre-92s are engaged in: the mapping of apprenticeship routes to HE, collaborative curriculum development, mapping of vocational/non-traditional routes to HE and offering non-residential schools. Widening participation for these post-92s then can be characterized as concerned with encouraging a wider uptake of HE in vocational subject areas and meeting the needs of employers; while for pre-92s WP can be characterized as about identifying, encouraging and selecting talented individuals suitable for high academic achievement.

In both cases the main focus of activities and underrepresented groups targeted seems to be involvement with specific institutions rather than general HE aspiration raising. This institutional marketing focus is also apparent in the sophisticated maneuvering of bursary pricing among institutions in the absence of a national bursary scheme that would have obviated the confusion for consumers highlighted by this and other analyses.

Conclusion

Overall the introduction of OFFA access agreements and their subsequent revisions seems to have reinforced the notion that there are two distinct types of institutions with their own perspectives on widening participation and fair access to HE. In access agreements pre-1992 institutions tend to offer larger bursaries but to fewer potential

students, and engage with fewer disadvantaged groups in a more restricted way. Pre-92 institutions thus use WP funding to help cement their reputation as selective institutions with high entry standards, but willing to take high-achieving students from poor and underrepresented groups. They are generally reluctant to subsume their institutional interests in large unwieldy and locally focused partnerships, preferring to maintain progression relationships with schools and colleges that supply excellently prepared applicants, and they work in conjunction with non-statutory bodies concerned with identifying excellence among the underrepresented, such as the National Association of Gifted and Talented Youth and the Sutton Trust. They are primarily selectors, able to choose from the cream of applicants with the most respected academic entry qualifications. In marketing terms, pre-1992 institutions use widening participation to soften their reputation as austere, elitist institutions closed off to the needs and desires of the majority. Access agreements allow such institutions to appeal to the meritocratic instinct: they sell the message that, if you are good enough you can get in here, whatever your background.

Meanwhile the post-1992 institutions use WP funding to increase student numbers which they do by offering courses, programmes and awards that are attractive to a wider cohort of potential students, especially those that had not previously been attracted to HE. They offer lower bursaries and less additional financial support, but to a wider group of potential applicants. Outreach is similarly plural and more likely to involve collaborative work with state funded partnerships such as Aimhigher, Education Action Zones and Connexions. The emphasis here is necessarily about raising awareness and fighting cultural resistance to accruing debt to fund higher education participation, rather than spending on direct recruitment to the institution.

However, as these institutions recruit mainly from their locality, they benefit from any raised awareness in the partnership area. In marketing terms, widening participation allows such institutions benefit from an image that they are socially aware providers of educational opportunity for all social types, closely tied to the needs of the local/regional economy in a non-threatening student friendly environment.

Given the way that access agreements are presented as marketing tools outlining the cost (in terms of bursary support) and the benefits (in terms of additional support and outreach), it is hard not to conclude that institutions use access agreements primarily to promote enrolment to their own programmes rather than to promote HE generally and that, as a consequence of this marketing focus, pre-92 and post-92 institutions perpetuate the differences between the types in relation to widening participation and fair access leading to both confusion for consumers and inequitable distribution of bursary and other support mechanisms for the poorest applicants to HE.

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