

OFFA Access Agreements, bursaries and 'fair access' to higher education - opening up a new front in the WP wars?

MCCAIG, C. <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4364-5119>>

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OFFA Access Agreements, bursaries and 'Fair Access' to higher education- opening up a new front in the WP wars?

Colin McCaig, Sheffield Hallam University

Abstract

There is a growing body of evidence to support the notion that that English higher education institutions (HEIs) are using the new bursary schemes outlined in Access Agreements (lodged with the regulatory Office for Fair Access, OFFA), designed to widen participation by helping students from poor backgrounds to access higher education, primarily to promote enrolment to their own programmes rather than to promote HE generally. As a consequence of this use of access agreements to sharpen institutions' marketing focus, pre-92 and post-92 institutions perpetuate the differences between HEI types in relation to widening participation and fair access leading to both confusion for consumers and inequitable distribution of support to the detriment of marginal applicants to HE. This is in tune with a general perception that, as the preamble to the 2009 Higher Education Summit in February noted: "The Higher Education sector is becoming increasingly stratified and funding changes increasingly mean that no institution can deliver to all students. All institutions must choose their future and unique University Selling Points".

Introduction

The growing recognition that institutions have particular missions and operate in different niche markets is reflected in the findings from several recent studies, for example on a sample of OFFA access agreements (McCaig, 2006, McCaig & Adnett: 2009) and by Callendar (2009, forthcoming) all of which share the same analysis: that Russell Group institutions (and pre-92 institutions in general) offer larger bursaries to poorer students than post-92 institutions; and are more likely to offer non-means tested scholarships. Our own analysis of revised agreements (revised in 2008 from the 2006 original agreements) found that the average size of bursaries

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was actually marginally down by 2008, but that additional financial support, (in the form of targeted and usually non-means tested scholarships) had risen across the institution types, suggesting a shift in emphasis from offering universal bursaries to all qualified applicants to establishing qualification criteria based on a variety of factors specific to the institutions own marketing and recruitment focus (McCaig & Adnett, 2009). These typically include scholarships and special bursaries on the basis of: merit or excellence; applications to shortage subjects; applicants from partner institutions; on the basis of age, (i.e. mature students); having responsibility for dependents; being in financial hardship; or demonstrating potential. Research shows that there has been a shift towards merit or excellence and applicants to shortage subjects among our sample of ten Russell Group institutions (McCaig & Adnett, 2009), and that overall their access agreements now offer more additional support categories than post-92 institutions (which continue to concentrate additional support on the basis of age, dependents and hardship). There are similar trends evident in outreach activities that institutions engage in to attract applicants to higher education; pre-92s institutions appear to be more focused on applications to their own courses than raising awareness generally. However, the extent to which this positioning by institutions is noted by applicants themselves is unknown; research suggests that the overall picture is of confusion among applicants and a lack of clear evidence that they are selecting HEIs to attend on the basis of bursary and scholarship levels, Adnett and Tlupova (2008) Callender and Jackson (2008) and Davies et al. (2008).

This paper takes the debate forward by beginning to critically analyse the impact on institutions (rather than applicants) by exploring the ways by which access agreements and admissions policies are developed and how they come to reflect the marketing positionality of the institution. The paper presents an analysis of bursary and additional support regimes and types of outreach activities that reveals a tendency for pre-92 and post-92 institutions to engage in quite different forms of widening participation activity. This suggests the concept of widening participation as a distinct arena in which institutions use bursary, outreach and admissions policies to engage in market positioning.

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Marketing theory suggests that market efficiency presupposes full information being available to consumers (Gibbs and Knapp: 2002). However, research suggests the bursary/support regime outlined in access agreements is so complex that consumers are not able to base their application decisions on the level of bursaries and other financial support available in the 'marketplace' (Adnett and Tlupova: 2007, Davies et al: 2008, Callendar: 2009a, 2009b). Other research confirms that even where bursaries are shown to be beneficial to widening participation students, they play a minor part in actual decision-making processes (Harrison, Baxter and Hatt: 2007), though experience from systems that have a longer experience of bursaries (such as the USA) suggests this may not always be the case (Heller, 2008).

In a higher education marketplace where full information is not clearly available, consumers and learning brokers will look for alternative indicators, such as prestige, which in effect act as a substitute for information about quality in the minds of consumers and media commentators, such as can be found in published institutional league tables and rankings (Brown and Scott, 2009). Prestige is, by its very nature, restricted to a few institutions, but many more can make use of other qualities such as a reputation for meeting the needs of a diverse student body, serving the needs of local employers, or by focussing on opportunities for locally based under-represented groups, in effect marketing the institution in WP or social justice terms in the way that some businesses attempt to market themselves as more ethical or 'greener' than the competition.

Marketing theory would anticipate such competitive strategies as institutions seek to establish or consolidate their position. For the 'right image' it is important for institutions to be firmly located in a 'choice set' such as selective research orientated institutions or as accessible-to-all WP institutions (Gibbs and Knapp: 2002). Location within one or another choice set theoretically makes it easier for consumers to make application or acceptance decisions. Therefore, at less prestigious institutions we might expect policymakers to re-engineer processes such as admissions and outreach or WP policies and seek the continuous development of its student transition and support environment if they want to relocate to the 'open access choice set'. Other institutions might identify which of its programmes are in 'mature' markets (e.g. history, physics) and which are 'growth' markets (e.g. social policy, health and social care) and adjust their offers accordingly (Gibbs and Knapp: 2002).

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A selective institution's access agreement may emphasise excellence and high entry standards, but still offer merit-based scholarships to encourage entry to shortage subject areas, e.g. engineering, as indeed was anticipated by the DfES baseline study in advance of the introduction of OFFA and access agreements (Temple, Farrant and Shattock: 2005).

Widening participation policy and the development of market differentiation

HEFCE historically tolerated, and more recently actively encouraged, greater diversification and positionality among English HEIs as part of an increasing acceptance that not all universities can or should try to offer the same range of higher education programmes or expect to provide the same kind of teaching and learning environment (HEFCE: 2000). Robertson has traced this understanding back to the breakdown of what he termed the 'old bargain' between universities and the state during the 1990s (by which institutions were funded and left largely alone to pursue their own aims) and its replacement by a 'new bargain' of reduced funding per student and of institutions having to face increasingly outwards to the public in a policy environment increasingly concerned about national economic needs and the meeting of national education and training targets (Robertson: 1997).

Writing before the introduction of tuition fees, variable fees and bursaries, Robertson foresaw the increasing importance of social justice in a learning market that, with the help of the Labour government's promotion of widening participation (e.g. the use of HEFCE WP funding premia and the introduction of the Excellence Challenge and Aimhigher programmes), obliged institutions to think, perhaps for the first time, about WP and its relationship to their 'unique selling point' in the HE marketplace.

In 1999 the UK government (via the Funding Councils) 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 English HE announced in the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* DfES (2003) introduced the requirement for access agreements to be negotiated and lodged with OFFA, in which institutions have to outline the combination of bursaries and outreach in return for the right to charge variable tuition fees (from 2006).

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The link between institutional diversity and widening participation was made explicit in Strategic Aim J of the HEFCE Strategic Plan 2000-05, which set out the intention to:

Maintain and encourage the development of a wide variety of institutions, with a diversity of missions that build upon their local, regional, national and international strengths and are responsive to change, within a financially healthy sector. (HEFCE: 2000).

This diversity was intended to create "a higher education sector with the capacity to meet the varying needs and aspirations of those it serves: students, employers, purchasers of HE services, and the wider community". Not only was this to "secure the best fit with the needs and wishes of stakeholders, both current and future" but it should also "itself help to shape and raise aspirations and expectations" (HEFCE: 2000, para 12).

These aims for the higher education sector presuppose marketing behaviour among institutions manifested by offering differentiation on several levels:

A diverse HE service should be able to provide choices of curriculum offer; choices as to the mode, pace and place of delivery; choices regarding the physical and intellectual environment available; and choices between a range of different institutional forms and missions (HEFCE: 2000, para 14).

Access agreements and market positionality

The introduction of variable tuition fees and the requirement for institutions to put in place access agreements lodged with OFFA created an opportunity for institutions to portray WP and outreach work as key elements of their institutional mission. In such an environment OFFA access agreements can be seen as marketing tools for institutions, an opportunity to present student support strategies in a competitive environment (Temple, Farrant and Shattock: 2005, para 4.6). OFFA guidance notes state that:

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

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applications from under-represented groups. An access agreement will provide the details of bursary support and outreach work (OFFA: 2004)

The amount or proportion of additional fee income to be spent was not prescribed, but: "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 (2004). This reflected the letter from the then Secretary of State (Charles Clarke, MP) who also suggested that widening participation was an overt policy goal:

I 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. (DfES, 2004 para 2.1).

Access agreements were not avowed to intentionally strengthen the market in higher education: the Secretary of State, "hoped that price should not affect student choice of whether to go to university, where to study or what course to take" (Callendar: 2009a). However, given the way that institutions chose to apply the requirement to offer bursary support to students, with a large and growing proportion of non-needs based bursaries offered by usually selecting institutions on top of the basic mandatory £310 bursary, the market process was strengthened, albeit as an unintended consequence for some observers (Callendar: 2009a, 2009b).

Access agreements are just one marketing tool available to institutions; changes to admissions policy since the Schwartz Report of 2004, (see Adnett, McCaig, Bowers-Brown and Slack forthcoming; Supporting Professionalism in Admissions: 2008) and its own WP policy development can also be seen as part of institutions' concerted efforts to portray a social justice, WP focus. Previous research on WP activities and priorities has demonstrated systematic variation by institution type (HEFCE: 2006; McCaig, Stevens and Bowers-Brown: 2007).

Institutional autonomy has also been the subject of research in relation to admissions and reforms to 14-19 education, more specifically the proposed changes to GCE A-levels and the introduction of the Extended Project and Advanced Diplomas (1994 Group, 2008). Amongst other issues, this research looked at the impact the reforms may have on undergraduate admissions among the members of

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the 1994 Group. The differential influence of recruiting/selecting programmes was evident in the conclusions that the A* grade at A-level will allow research intensive institutions to select with more discrimination among applicants (i.e. primarily of interest to 'selecting' courses), whilst the nascent Advanced Diplomas are often to be in subject areas where there are currently low numbers of well-qualified applicants to undergraduate courses (i.e. primarily of interest to recruiting courses), Adnett et al, (2009).

Schwartz and the role of admissions policy

The recommendations of the Schwartz Review were published in "*Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice*" (Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, 2004). English HEIs were advised that their admissions systems should: be transparent; select students who are able to complete their courses based upon achievements and potential; use assessment methods which are reliable and valid; minimise barriers to applicants; be professional; and be underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.

Recent research carried out by the authors into the impact of the Schwartz Report into fair admissions to higher education (SPA, 2008a, 2008b) shows that more selective institutions can appear to widen participation by taking contextual information into account when selecting applicants, thus differentiating among those who are qualified by selecting candidates from lower participation neighbourhoods or from underrepresented groups if they wish to. However, the same research also reveals that many selective institutions use a narrow definition of 'qualified' by only publishing entry requirements in terms of A levels which deters those who have the same UCAS points achieved via non-A level routes (even when in fact they will accept applicants with equivalent qualifications). Such institutions widen participation in the sense that they take applicants from a wider social pool, but only if they have the requisite A level grades. Given the high participation rate amongst those qualified to enter higher education (i.e. those that have sufficient A level grades), individual institution's admissions policies and therefore efforts to differentiate between qualified candidates are crucial in delivering the diverse student bodies espoused by government (DfES, 2006).

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By contrast, post-1992 institutions see WP as a mechanism for expanding the demand base of applicants in order to meet their recruitment needs and to this end will often develop alternative vocational curricula and offer more transitional support to those that meet a much wider range of entry requirements. Usually, due to the urban location of the institution and the vocational slant of HE programmes on offer, post-92s have less actual need to widen the social pool; for example they usually recruit from poorer local neighbourhoods and often have large numbers of ethnic minority applicants, as is the case at the University of East London (UEL):

If you look at our student body it is certainly one of the most diverse in the UK, you name the criteria and we will almost always be outside the sector norm for it: over 60% of our students are from BME groups; we have a gender split in line with the rest of the sector; overall UEL students are older and more part time, they are poorer, from lower socio-economic groups and arrive with lower cultural capital... (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, UEL).

(SPA, 2008b: 33)

Pre- and post-92 institutions clearly use a different interpretation of WP and therefore two distinct ways in which institutions can claim to be 'WP friendly'. The remainder of this paper will explore two key concepts: transparency (i.e. how open admissions policies are); and additional financial support and outreach offered (i.e. which underrepresented groups institutions' choose to target) to present a critical analysis of how institution types use WP policies to shape their own enrolments.

Transparency in admissions

Survey responses (as part of the impact of Schwartz review) indicate that there is little stated difference in the qualifications that institutions accept, however there are significant variations in the extent that these accepted qualifications are publicised. Respondents from predominantly selecting institutions were more likely to celebrate benefits from being able to identify attainment more easily (thus allowing them to avoid the risk of enrolling students that they believed were more likely to fail the course), while those from recruiting institutions were more likely to respond that improved transparency would widen the demand base of applicants (SPA, 2008a). The results of the survey suggest a continuing need for improved communication

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regarding the wide range of qualifications that institutions accept, in accordance with the Schwartz Report recommendations.

Senior managers' responses indicated that there are significant differences in the development of the principles and processes of admissions practice between institutions that have mainly selecting courses and those that have mainly recruiting courses. One area where this is evident is in the use of contextual information. Whilst respondents indicated that in most cases personal contextual information does not inform decision-making, almost half of institutions consider long-term illness and family problems in some circumstances. More generally, whilst two-thirds of respondents from Russell Group (i.e. selective) institutions used other sources of information, such as predicted and previous academic achievement, and unit grade data, in addition to application forms to inform decision-making, only a fifth of respondents from Million + (post-92 institutions) indicated that they did so. Specifically, institutions that have mainly selecting courses more frequently use contextual information to differentiate between highly qualified applicants who meet or exceed the entry requirements for high demand courses. Contextual factors such as the overall performance of an applicant's school or evidence of a disadvantaged background are considered in order to widen participation to underrepresented groups.

In contrast, institutions that have mainly recruiting courses are more likely to use contextual information to identify applicants that will need additional support to succeed after enrolment (SPA, 2008a; Adnett et al, forthcoming).

Case study material from the same research illustrates the point:

They [applicants] get all of the information during the application cycle including what they are able to access and what they can ask for, and obviously they have that period during the application process to contact the central Registry team or our Student Support Services team. The support teams are also accessible for those that attend open days (Head of Student Support Services, post-92 institution). (SPA, 2008b: 30)

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[W]e make decisions on a support-blind basis because of equity and then offer places and give the support needed once they are accepted; we gather data in relation to our benchmark performance, on educational background, socio-economic background, we have all that but we don't use that as part of our assessment of applications because there isn't any need in a sense. (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, post-92 institution). (SPA, 2008b: 33)

This emphasis on transparency among pre-92 institutions has paradoxically led to institutions becoming more risk averse, placing greater emphasis on actual rather than potential educational attainment (SPA, 2008a). Of those senior managers responsible for admissions agreeing that it was important to have students from varied backgrounds, only 15% believed that universities and colleges should choose students partly in order to achieve a social mix, a large and significant fall from the 48% who expressed this opinion during the Schwartz review consultation in 2004. Respondents from selective institutions were the most likely to state that universities and colleges should choose students in order to achieve such a mix.

Additional financial support and outreach

The evidence here comes from content analysis of OFFA access agreements carried out by the authors. Our sample of twenty English HEIs amounts to approximately 25 per cent of post-1992 university categories (a category of 42 in 2006) and a sample of Russell Group universities balanced so that the sample contained ten from each category (McCaig & Adnett, 2009). HEIs submitting agreements were weighted to take into account geographical spread and location of institutions (those in large urban conurbations and those in smaller provincial cities). The purposive sample of pre-1992 universities comprised the ten largest Russell Group institutions by student numbers; among post-1992 institutions, size was determined by high incidence of students from low participation neighbourhoods.

In the Secretary of State's Letter of Guidance (2004) to OFFA the emphasis was firmly on under-represented groups, and 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,

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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:

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).

Acknowledging that much outreach work would not necessarily result directly in additional recruitment by institutions and would have a long lead time before any effect could be observed, the Director noted that “..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”:

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)

It may be thought naïve that, in the increasingly market-driven system which the government has created, individual HEIs would utilise their additional fee income in an altruistic manner and target system-wide objectives rather than their own self-interest. Indeed our analysis 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' (McCaig & Adnett, 2009).

Additional financial support changes between 2006 and 2008

The comparative analysis of original (2006) and revised (2008) access agreements (McCaig & Adnett, 2009) shows that on average bursary support for most applicants has fallen slightly but that additional financial support available to a sub-sample of applicants (in the form of targeted *discretionary* bursaries and scholarships) has increased since 2006. Among pre-92 agreements, two institutions offer substantially

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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 1). 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 2). However 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 one 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 3).

Table 1: Targeted Discretionary Bursaries and Scholarships in pre-92 institutions

Institution	Add max 06	Add max 08	Change add max 06-08
pre-1	1200	1200	0
pre-2	2000	2000	0
pre-3	1000	1000	0
pre-4	1550	1000	-500
pre-5	1000	1025	25
pre-6	1000	1000	0
pre-7	0	2500	2500
pre-8	1500	1500	0
pre-9	0	3000	3000
pre-10	2500	1050	-1450
Average	1468.8	1527.5	Total 58.8

Table2: Targeted Discretionary Bursaries and Scholarships in post-92 institutions

Institution	Add max 06	Add max 08	Change add max 06-08
post-1	700	730	30
post-2	1000	1000	0
post-3	0	0	0
post-4	0	666*	666*
post-5	0	0	0
post-6	500	3010	2510
post-7	333*	333*	0
post-8	0	0	0
post-9	0	0	0
post-10	0	0	0
Average	633	1147.8	Total 514.8

* 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

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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 were subsequently offering substantial targeted support by 2008. By contrast only one additional post-92 institution 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), those with responsibility for dependents, those being in financial hardship or those demonstrating potential to succeed in HE. 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 3 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 pre-1992 institution and four post-1992s; in 2008 the remaining pre-92 had added a category of additional support, as had one of the post-92s. In the 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

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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 change to the categories of support offered by post-92 institutions was one institution offering support for care leavers (Table 3).

Overall, pre-1992s appeared to be more plural 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 Foundation degrees (Table 3).

Table 3: 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	4 (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	3 (-1)
	Non-degree students			
	PGCE	1		1
	HND/Fd		2	2
Total		16 (5)	14 (1)	30 (6)

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 their additional support spending from bursaries to outreach.

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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. These may come from those who are first generation of their family to go onto HE, those from low participation neighbourhoods or lower socio-economic classes; pre-92s also concentrated their efforts on 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 post-92 institution in the absence of such interventions by pre-92s. 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).

Two HEIs' agreements emphasised additional support and outreach work with looked after children (LAC) in the care system (one pre-and one post-92), 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 institution declared that it would be '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 a 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.

This is supported by findings from other research, (e.g. McCaig, Stevens and Bowers-Brown,2007) which suggests that there are clear differences in the nature of engagement with underrepresented groups by these two institution categories. Data from the Educational Providers Survey (part of the National Evaluation of Aimhigher) in 2006 reveals that not only do post-92 institutions engage with a wider range of social groups (e.g. work-based learners, parents/carers, looked-after children), they are also more likely to engage with most of the groups that pre-92 institutions also engage with (the exception being people from lower social classes) see Table 4.

Table 4. Underrepresented social group engagement by HEI type

Groups	Pre-92	Post-92	All
Minority ethnic groups	7	8	15
People from lower social classes	6	5	11
Learners with disabilities	3	7	10
Low participation neighbourhood	5	5	10
Those in areas of urban deprivation	1	4	5
Vocational work-related learners	1	3	4
Work-based learners	0	3	3
Asylum seekers/refugees	1	1	2
Parents/carers	0	1	1
Looked-after children	0	1	1
Total	24	38	62

Returning to our analysis of the type of activities highlighted in access 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.

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Widening participation for these post-92s then can be characterised 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 characterised 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 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 (see Callender, forthcoming; Chester & Bekhradnia, 2008).

Conclusion

Overall the introduction of OFFA access agreements, recent changes to admissions policies and outreach priorities seem to have reinforced the notion that there are two distinct types of institutions working towards their own conceptions of widening participation. 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 'selecting' institutions with high entry standards, but willing to take high-achieving students from poor and underrepresented groups. Partnership outreach work is more often 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. Such institutions 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 as 'recruiting institutions' use WP funding to increase student numbers which they do by offering courses, programmes and

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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 and Lifelong Learning Networks designed to foster vocational progression routes. 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 immediate locality, they clearly benefit from any raised awareness of the benefits of higher education. In marketing terms, widening participation allows such institutions to present themselves as socially aware providers of opportunity for all social types in a supportive student-friendly environment, and responsive to the needs of the local/regional economy.

Given the way that access agreements are presented as marketing tools outlining the cost (level of bursary support) and the benefits (in terms of additional support and outreach), it is hard not to conclude that institutions use them 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 leading to both confusion for consumers and inequitable distribution of bursary and other support mechanisms for the poorest applicants to HE. The latter follows since high attainment students from low income backgrounds now can access higher financial incentives to select a Russell Group university, especially if they choose a 'shortage' subject. As a consequence marginal entrants from low income backgrounds receive lower financial support than they would in a similarly financed national bursary system. Widening participation thus becomes a new front in the wider marketing battleground, with competing notions of fairness and justice to be put into play alongside competing notions of quality, excellence and relevance across the sector. Within this arena of the market, all institutions have to have a 'position' on WP; in the case of pre-92 institutions this is a meritocratic position, for post-92s an access-and-inclusion position.

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