

The retreat from widening participation? : the National Scholarship Programme and new access agreements in English higher education

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The retreat from Widening Participation? The National Scholarship Programme and new Access Agreements in English higher education

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Abstract

This article critically analyses the impact of reforms to the student financial support system in English higher education. Comparative analysis of financial support mechanisms and patterns of outreach engagement with groups underrepresented in higher education show a marked deterioration in the levels of cash support available and an increasingly focus on the brightest poor students (in the form of merit aid) at the expense of the generality of poorer students since the new support programme came into place. This can be seen as part of a wider policy shift away from generic widening participation to the targeting of specific cohorts to raise the attainment level of intakes or to meet recruitment shortfalls. The findings are located in a context of a (near) trebling of tuition fees, stagnation in overall student numbers and the promotion of market mechanisms, all of which can be seen as a challenge to the notion of social justice through the higher education system.

Keywords

National Scholarship Programme; merit; bursaries; scholarships; market in higher education; access agreements

Introduction

This article critically analyses the impact of reforms to the student financial support system in English higher education through a comparative analysis of institutional access support policies (Access Agreements) over time and between institution types. Analysis of the systems of financial support for poorer students and of patterns of outreach engagement with groups underrepresented in higher education show a marked deterioration in the levels of cash support available and a narrowing of focus among some HE institutions when it comes to recruitment. The findings are located in a context of a (near) trebling of tuition fees, stagnation in overall student numbers and the promotion of market mechanisms in higher education (BIS 2011b), and as such will have relevance for national systems which have similar student support arrangements such as USA, Australia, Canada and some Scandinavian countries (HEFCE 2012,14-19). More widely these findings also bring into question the very meaning of higher education if institutions are allowed to shed their social justice - indeed liberal and democratic - responsibilities to educate 'all those that can benefit' (as Robbins put it fifty years ago) in favour of becoming a mere sorting mechanism that matches the very brightest and the most prestigious.

The findings highlight the importance of benchmarking targets on institutional behaviour, revealing a degree of 'catch-up' among selective pre-1992 institutions and evidence of 'access saturation' among recruiting post-1992 institutions¹. The latter group can be seen as reacting to the new support regime (in the shape of the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) awards) by attempting to move 'up-market' in a policy context where financial support for poorer students is increasingly focused on the brightest students (in the form of merit aid) at the expense of the generality of poorer students. This can be seen as part of a wider shift away from generic widening participation (aspiration raising activities among underrepresented groups) to the targeting of specific cohorts to raise the attainment level of intakes or to meet recruitment shortfalls. While in the event the NSP regime lasted no longer than two academic years before being abolished due to funding cuts (HEFCE 2013), there is no indication that mandatory bursaries for all poorer students will be reinstated and targeting of aid will continue to have a pernicious effect on social justice in higher education.

Policy environment

Since 2006 English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been mandated to make an Access Agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) as a condition of setting tuition fees above the minimum and up to an agreed maximum. Government envisaged and set out to encourage a variable fee distribution between these two points and thus create a market effect in higher education places. Access Agreements declare how institutions will use a proportion of the additional fee income to support access to HE for applicants from under-represented groups. Since 2011 (BIS 2011b) new funding arrangements have been introduced in England² which included a significant rise in maximum tuition fees and a removal of the obligation on institutions to provide means tested financial compensation (bursaries) to all students that qualify by Residual Household Income (RHI). While the new government rhetorically continued to support wider access to higher education - declaring that "Social mobility, fair access and widening participation should be a key strategic objective" (BIS 2010a) - its simultaneous abolition of the Aimhigher programme (introduced by the previous Labour government in 2004 to raise aspirations among underrepresented groups in HE) meant that institutions would henceforth be encouraged to begin "looking at improved targeting of outreach" (BIS 2010a). Instead, HEIs, as part of their new Access Agreements for 2012/13, had to sign-up to the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) which offered significant financial support (in the form of fee waivers or cash bursaries) but to far fewer recipients (BIS 2011a).

The introduction of the NSP thus shifted the emphasis from supporting all who enrol from poorer backgrounds to targeting support at only the most 'deserving' of cases, and leaves considerable room for institutions to target specific cohorts or to incentivise applications to specific programmes of study. This in turn was likely to reverse the impact of a decade of

¹ According to HEFCE benchmarking is: A process through which practices are analysed to provide a standard measurement ('benchmark') of effective performance within an organisation (such as a university). Benchmarks are also used to compare performance with other organisations and other sectors <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/glossary/#letterB>

² Other UK countries have their own arrangements for HE funding which is a devolved responsibility

widening participation policies which have resulted in a closing of the participation gap between the richest and poorest social classes in recent years (HEFCE 2010) because far more students at post-1992 institutions qualified for full state support by family income measures (41.3%) than those at pre-1992 institutions (21.2%) (OFFA 2012).

The potential distortion effect of the NSP had been noted by various policy actors, e.g. the Institute for Fiscal Studies (2012), the National Union of Students (Baker 2011) and the Higher Education Policy Institute, the Association of Colleges and the Sutton Trust in evidence to the House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee 2011 (Stationary Office 2011). For many institutions with large numbers of students from poorer backgrounds the NSP match funding requirement necessitated a refocusing of AFI expenditure, previously spread thinly in the form of thousands of small bursaries, to provide relatively fewer awards of £3,000 which represents a serious diversion of spending from up to 2,500 potential beneficiaries³ and also diverts from outreach activities, which could not be funded by NSP money.

The NSP can be seen as part of a wider set of policies to enable the 'best' higher education institutions to be able to increase opportunities for those bright but poor young people who currently do not enrol in higher education or attend less prestigious institutions, seen as key to social mobility (Sutton Trust 2004; 2012; OFFA 2010, Cable 2012; Milburn Report 2012). These include: the liberalisation of student number controls, allowing institutions to enrol as many applicants as they wish with high entry grades (AAB⁴ and above at GCSE A Level) at the expense of other institutions they might have otherwise attended; the attempt to create competition by tuition fee by allocating a proportion of student places to institutions (including Further Education Colleges and private HE providers) charging lower fees; and the increased emphasis on key information sets to enable student choice, all of which were key components of the higher education White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011b).

In addition to such moves to create a market distribution of institutions that equates price with quality, there have been several policy changes that remove restrictions on institutions. These include the abolition of regional partnership organisations such as Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks (which all HE institutions were obliged to engage with) whose remit was raising aspirations for all rather than direct recruitment to individual institutions; and the introduction of Realising Opportunities programme, a HEFCE-funded scheme whereby 'elite institutions' (including five of the institutions whose access agreements are discussed here) are encouraged to identify bright cohorts with potential for success at any participating research intensive university for early and on-going interventions (Realising Opportunities 2011). The removal of market blockages and the introduction of state-funded incentives such as Realising Opportunities can all be expected to impact on the marketing behaviour of institutions, and OFFA access agreements are the principal public arena in which these are expressed and rationalised (McCaig 2011).

³ The number of recipients of mandatory bursaries at one representative large post-1992 university, noted by one post-1992 director of widening participation, interview with author June 2012.

⁴ Widened to ABB and above from academic year 2013/14

NSP awards were "targeted at bright potential students from poor backgrounds" (BIS 2010a) and consisted of a scholarship package to the value of £3000 for the first year of study only, in the form of a maximum £1000 cash bursary and a combination of fee waivers and discounted services such as accommodation or travel vouchers. While the NSP operated according to national income based criteria set by government, institutions were also able set their own eligibility criteria to help identify those most in need, or - alternatively - those whom the institution would most like to attract. However, because of its graduated roll-out over three academic years (2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14) NSP funding was insufficient to meet the needs of all those who qualified by RHI for the maintenance grant (incomes less than £25,000) (BIS 2011). The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated that only 16,600 students received awards in 2012/13, against approximately 100,000 that received mandatory OFFA bursaries in the previous regime (IFS 2012, p.6). This is in part because some institutions will always have a higher proportion of students from poorer backgrounds than would be covered by the scheme and NSP allocations were initially determined by institution size rather than by student need (this was changed for allocations from 2013/14). Another key aspect of the NSP was that funding for awards had to be match-funded by institutions from additional fee income (AFI) (i.e. fee income over the £6,000 minimum fee) and it is this diversion of funds that could otherwise been spent on larger cohorts of those that qualified by RHI that created the major area of potential distortion.

In order to identify the impact of the NSP and other aspects of the market this paper sets out to answer two key questions: did the NSP distort institutional spending priorities and thus harm widening participation?; and what patterns of changing spending priorities emerge from a comparison between the contents of 2006 and 2012 access agreements? It proceeds by focussing on changes to two main sets of information contained in access agreements: the nature and level of financial support arrangements over time and by institution type; and the focus of engagement with age groups and underrepresented social groups over time and among different institution types.

Sample institutions and agreements

The sample of access agreements used in this paper was originally drawn in 2006 and consists of 10 large pre-1992 institutions (all members of the Russell Group) and 10 large post-1992 institutions. The main sampling criteria were institution size (by student numbers); and geographic distribution; and was partly informed by previous research (e.g. the National Evaluation of Aimhigher, HEFCE 2006) that indicated contrasting widening participation policy behaviours by pre and post-1992 institutions. The 10 pre-1992s in the sample represent around half of the English Russell Group universities. The post-1992 in the sample includes institutions from two other mission groups (six are members of Million+ and two of the University Alliance) with another two non-aligned as of November 2012. A small purposive sample of those responsible for drafting access agreements in both pre- and post-1992 institutions (drawn from institutions not in the access agreement sample) was used to identify subjects for a series of semi-structured interviews (carried out in 2012). Eight interviews carried out in five institutions (four post-1992, one pre-1992) to explore themes including: rationales for changes to financial and outreach support priorities; perceptions of the impact

of the new student support system; perceptions of the impact of student number controls and other reforms.

OFFA guidance requires that institutions stipulate the proportion of additional fee income to be spent on access outreach and financial support. The pre-1992 sample average overall spend on access for 2012/13 was 30.2% of additional fee income (AFI) (up from an average of 27.5% in 2006) and cover a range 25-37%; the post-1992 sample average overall spend is 27.2% AFI (down from average of 29.3% in 2006) and cover a range between 15-39%. Despite the fact that 41.3 per cent of students at post-1992 universities in 2010-11 qualified for full state support but only 21.2 per cent of those at pre-1992 Russell Group institutions, allocations for the National Scholarship Programme were very similar: 172 for pre-1992s (with a sample range of 37 to 273 places) and 173 for post-1992s (range 65-300). The average tuition fee set by the pre-1992 sample was £8.91k, and for post-1992s £7.77k. Three of the post-1992 sample institutions took the opportunity offered by HEFCE in November 2011 to reduce average fees to below £7.5k in order to bid for additional student numbers.

The paper builds on previous analyses of Access Agreements by the author and others (McCaig 2008; McCaig and Adnett 2008; 2009; Callender and Jackson 2008) that show how the level of financial support and access and outreach priorities vary by different types of English HEI. This analysis revealed a wide divergence of mission between selective pre-1992 (hereafter pre92) institutions concerned with maintaining excellence and those concerned with widening access to under-represented groups (post92s). It found that pre92s were more likely to target support on the basis of merit and offer larger financial support to a smaller number of students, while recruiting or post92 institutions were more likely to engage with a wider range of social groups, and offer smaller financial support packages to a larger number of beneficiaries.

This current paper is based on a full thematic content analysis of the sample of 20 Access Agreements for 2012/13 and a comparative content analysis of 2012/13 and original 2006/07 agreements, augmented with a small number of interviews those responsible for access agreement development. The findings presented here show the extent to which both pre- and post92 institutions in their 2012 access agreements are adapting to the new landscape in which widening participation to all is seen as less important than targeting support only at the meritorious and those that may help fill recruitment shortfalls.

Financial Support in the new regime

Analysis of AFI spending variation across HEI type and across time shows that pre92s continue to offer the most generous support to poorer students and that the NSP did distort priorities for post92s to the extent that many thousands of poorer students were worse off than under the previous regime. There is also evidence that some post92s are moving away from generic support for all poorer students and towards the targeting through aid for merit or to those that enrolled on shortage subjects through their student support packages; in

other words beginning to act more like pre92s. This section looks at financial support in detail, firstly by looking at the distribution and form of NSP awards and then by changing patterns of additional financial support (AFS).

The NSP award of £3000 could take the form of fee waivers, a capped bursary of £1,000 and discounted services (accommodation, materials, travel vouchers etc) in any combination, but all had to be delivered in the first year of study. The match funded portion can be used more flexibly, either by doubling the allocation, doubling the award or by using the money flexibly to support any number of students over one or all years of the course. As part of their NSP awards post92s were more likely to offer bursaries (nine of the 10) than pre92s (5) and also more likely to offer bursaries in combination with fee waivers and services. Pre92s, on the other hand, were more likely to include fee waivers (9) as opposed to eight of post92s (Figure 1). It should be noted that fee waivers as part of a package of financial support are not new. The formative evaluation of the NSP noted that just over a quarter already offered fee waivers (HEFCE 2012 para 5.4) and in the original 2006 sample five pre92s and nine post-92s offering some fee exemptions for some courses on top of bursaries and AFS, albeit only one post92 (and no pre92) offered a fee exemption for full-time students on degree courses (McCaig 2008; McCaig and Adnett 2008; 2009). What was new with the NSP regime was that fee waivers were replacing cash bursaries in many cases, not augmenting them.

Figure 1 about here

In outlining the rationale for the distribution of NSP and other support five pre92s and three post92s chose to state their positions in relation to the 'fee waiver versus bursaries' debate enjoined by the Department of Business, Innovation and Science and OFFA when it declared (in guidance to institutions, BIS 2011c) that bursaries were ineffectual and fee waivers were better for the public purse. Four of the pre92s declared that bursaries were still important or indicated that they would be shifting towards *more* bursary support, but three post92s noted that they were moving away from 'bursaries for all' to a more targeted approach. This suggests, in some cases, institutional types reversing their 2006 positions, with post92s becoming more target-focussed and some pre92s more aware of the benefits of bursaries as they try to maintain or improve their support for the most needy.

Match funded element

There was a clear divergence between pre and post92 institutions when it came to the distribution of the match funded element of the NSP. Five pre92s doubled the value of the award for the same cohort while the other five used the match funded money in other ways, sometimes by rolling the funding into their own-branded scholarship schemes and thus extending them beyond the official NSP cohort. By contrast five post92s used their match funding to double the allocation (i.e. doubled the number of recipients) and two went further by more than doubling the allocation, by rolling other AFI funds into NSP-branded awards. Another post92 doubled the allocation but restricted recipients to those who were enrolled on

courses with fees above £8k per year (not all courses have to be set at the same fee level). One post-92 doubled the award to its allocated cohort but offered no support to other students, indicating a severe targeting of resource through the NSP.

NSP Additional eligibility criteria

As for many institutions the NSP allocation did not cover the number of students who would have been financially supported under the previous regime, individual institutions had to set additional criteria for selecting their recipient cohort from all those that qualified by RHI. All ten of the post92 sample set additional criteria (reflecting the poorer average backgrounds of their students) and between them used 30 different criteria. Only four of the pre92s set criteria, making use of ten schemes.

Eligibility criteria varied in their nature, with some clearly designed to meet needs and others to support applicants that had demonstrated merit, or those who had applied to specific courses. Some also rewarded those that came via local progression arrangements. Among criteria set by post92s, having been in the care system was the most commonly used (mentioned by six); merit (in form of a set number of UCAS points or being in a prescribed 'Gifted and Talented' cohort⁵) by four institutions; and those from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) by three. One post92 institution cited seven additional criteria, another five. One post92 only offered one, those on courses costing over £8,000 per year. One pre92 institution listed four additional criteria and another three (out of the total of ten for all pre92s).

These criteria were then grouped by theme and coded as either: needs based; merit (UCAS points, citing institution as first choice); course specific (STEM or other shortage subject); or local (applicants coming from local schools/colleges with progression arrangements). This revealed that more post92s focus on needs but also that some post92s appear to be adopting the behaviour of pre92s in their use of merit based and course-specific criteria for support (Figure 2).

Figure 2 about here

While the HEFCE-funded element of NSP had to be used in Year 1 only, institutions could use the match funded element more freely, and indeed combine this funding with other additional funding to create institutional scholarships of varying size and length. Analysis of how institutions chose to accommodate this showed no clear pattern in the first year of the NSP. Match funded support was all given in Y1 for five institutions (two pre92s, three post92s) and spread over all years of the course for 10 institutions (five from each category) while the offer was combined with other schemes in six agreements, four pre92s and two post92s.

⁵ Gifted and talented cohorts are usually identified by schools and form the top 5 or 10% of a year group by attainment.

Comparing additional financial support (AFS) for all that qualify by income

As noted, institutions also had the option to use additional fee income to support students beyond the NSP allocation and those covered by its match funded element, and for a variety of reasons ranging from the need to support and encourage those on low incomes or particularly onerous life circumstances to those taking certain subjects (perhaps making up a recruitment shortfall) or displaying particular merit. Analysis of the 2006 agreements noted how this additional financial support (AFS) could vary enormously, providing overall support packages worth over £5000 per year for some - but also showed how difficult these packages are to absorb into any comparative analysis of support packages as they are limited to an unknowable number of recipients. Analysis of 2012/13 agreements show that the picture is just as complex as the previous regime for researchers - let alone students - to decipher (McCaig 2008; McCaig and Adnett 2008; 2009; Institute for Fiscal Studies 2012, 11) but it does clearly indicate that the NSP has had a distortion effect on the AFI spending of post92s in the sample.

For example, among the sample agreements three post92s offered nothing to those qualified by RHI but not in receipt of NSP (though one did for NSP recipients in Y2). Given that under the previous student support regime *all* students qualifying by RHI would have received a minimum cash bursary of £300 in each of the three years of their course (and the *average* bursary for the post92 sample was £865 or £2,595 over three years) there is clear evidence of a dramatic reduction in support for the poorest students.

Variation in additional financial support

There was a considerable variation in how institutions chose to use AFS. One post92 institution offered seven separate schemes, another offered four. Five of the pre92s offered two schemes as did three post92s. Six of the post-92 schemes were limited by number (i.e. providing a fixed number of awards) at the condition stage with the other schemes limited by the nature of conditions (i.e. restricted to care leavers, disabled athletic students etc). In contrast none of the pre-92 schemes were limited in this way, but were limited to those demonstrating merit or those that have financial needs.

Among pre-92s eight of the 10 agreements indicate that AFS is available to all students that qualify, with maximum support in the range of £2000-£5500. One offered support only to Care Leavers at the level of £1600, and one other (that offered support of £2000 to all that qualify by RHI) allocated £3000 to Care Leavers. Support for all that meet the RHI cut off (i.e. excluding those that attract limited support by specific need) has increased for all but two institutions in the range £400 to £4400 with the average over the 10 institutions being a net gain of £1125 per year over that support they would have received under the previous system.

Among post-92s the picture is very different with *none* of the sample offering basic financial support for *all* that qualify by RHI. This represents a reduction in bursary support for those not in receipt of NSP or other targeted support and clear evidence for the distortion effects of the NSP on AFI expenditure. While, as we have seen, eight of the 10 did offer

targeted support to various groups, none felt able to support all those that qualified by RHI, and two could not offer *any* support beyond NSP.

The situation would have changed as the scheme rolled out: allocations were doubled for 2013/14 and would have increased again by a further 50% by 2015/16 (trebling the 2012/13 allocation) to expand coverage. However, given that the 2012/13 allocation covered 16,600 scholarships (Institute for Fiscal Studies 2012, 6), even a trebling of NSP would only support half of the 100,000 students that qualified by RHI in 2012/13. In fact, funding for the third year of NSP was first cut (from a projected £150m to 50m) and then the programme was abolished altogether, with the funding redirected at (unspecified) support for poorer post-graduate students (HEFCE 2013) due to ongoing funding cuts within the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

For the two years that the NSP was in operation, the HEFCE contribution had to be used in Y1 with only the institutional match-funding element freed-up to be used to support NSP recipients across all years. In the case of pre-92 institutions, whose 2012/13 allocations almost match the number of students that qualified by RHI, future awards could have been even more generous than in 2012/13. As NSP could not be used in other ways than support for RHI qualified individuals (for example, on outreach activities), relatively few poor students would have been even more generously supported at pre92 institutions than under the previous bursary regime, though of course not in the form of cash bursaries. This would have helped NSP recipients (who would eventually pay back smaller tuition fee loans), but helped the government's plan to reduce overall public expenditure even more. The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills made this intention clear to the Director of the OFFA at time the ill-fated scheme was launched:

The subsidised loans that Government offers students represent a significant cost to the public purse. You will therefore want to ensure that institutions do not require students to take out higher loans, which the institution then recycles into poorly targeted bursary schemes On the other hand, I hope you will encourage the use of financial waivers. A waiver that does not require the student to borrow from the outset has the benefit of reducing the cost of borrowing to both the public purse and the student. (Guidance to Director of OFFA, BIS 2011c, paras 4.3-4.4)

Engagement by age and social group

Age group engagement

Age groups engaged with is an important indicator of variation between HEI types because in analyses of WP activity (HEFCE 2006) and of the content of access agreements (McCaig 2008; McCaig and Adnett 2008; 2009) pre92 institutions have been more likely than post92s to engage with primary school pupils and correspondingly less likely than post92s to engage with those over the age of 16, including mature students. Analysis of age

groups specifically mentioned in agreements in relation to outreach activities and in the original analysis (2006) focused on five groupings: primary school age (5-11); secondary school age (11-16); 16-18 (those continuing in school or college education after the end of compulsory schooling at 16); 16-19 (young people who have left compulsory education but who are in training or employment and who could still be attracted by the prospect of higher education); and mature adults over the age of 21.

Both institution types engaged with more age groups in 2012 than in 2006, though the effect is seen more strongly among pre92s which engaged with a total of 44 age groups in 2012 agreements (36 in 2006). Post-92s engaged with two more age groups in total (39 in 2012, 37 in 2006). The largest change in engagement by age group was among pre92s with five additional institutions focussing on the primary age group, and four more on mature students than in 2006. Two fewer pre92s cited the 16-19 age group and in both cases the institution's agreement cited primary as an age group engaged with for the first time, indicating a shift in priorities.

Among the post92 sample there was less overall change in the number of age groups engaged with, but again movement was mainly in the area of primary and mature students. Although the number of agreements citing primary as an age group engaged with increased by one overall, two other post92s had stopped engaging with this group. One of the (non-sample) institutions providing interview data noted that it had given up outreach in primary schools to focus on areas more likely to be productive, given the proximity of two pre92s in its locale. Three additional post92 agreements cited mature students as an age group to engage with, making eight of the 10 in 2012 agreements. One post92 changed from focussing on four age groups in 2006 to only two in 2012, shifting away from both primary and mature age groups. The only age group that saw an overall decline was the 16-19s, no longer cited by two pre92s and one post92.

Overall both pre and post92s focused more on the primary age group than previously, presumably in an attempt to identify academic talent at the earliest possible age to be nurtured and supported with outreach activities throughout their school careers, and this is particularly true for pre92s in both 2006 and 2012 agreements. The slight dropping-off of engagement with the 16-19 age group may reflect an acknowledgement that decisions about progressing into higher education will have been made by the most academically bright pupils by age 13/14 (years 10-11 being the time when pupils identify GCSE options and begin their courses). Post92s had (in 2006) been more interested in this group than pre92s, and more heavily recruited from among those with fewer and/or lower rated qualifications. Again the drop in engagement with this group among post92s may reflect a change in priorities as they try to move away from their status as WP institutions, presumably in an attempt to attract more school leavers with 'better' GCSEs and A levels (manifested in higher UCAS tariff point scores).

Underrepresented social group engagement

Analysis by social group engaged with in access agreements over time is equally revealing of shifting priorities by both pre and post92 institutions. Overall the changes in

engagement may suggest a degree of catch-up by pre92 institutions as they focus on groups previously overlooked as a response to OFFA's enhanced emphasis on benchmarks in their guidance to institutions. This may also reflect HEFCE guidance on how to target widening participation cohorts (HEFCE 2007). Underrepresented groups engaged with were categorised as: black minority ethnic (BME); asylum seekers/refugees; disabled learners; looked after children; those from lower socioeconomic classes (SEC); those from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN); parents/carers of potential students; those in workplace or work-based learning (WBL). Engagement here is defined in a slightly different way to engagement with age groups as it extends beyond pre-entry outreach to include transition and retention support for non-traditional students and resources used to develop or support new workplace-based or vocationally focussed curricula designed to support underrepresented groups.

Overall there was far more engagement across the board between 2006 and 2012 for both institution types. Pre-92s engaged with a total of 53 social groups in 2012 (41 in 2006). Seven pre-92s had increased the number of groups engaged with (one from two to six groups), two engaged with the same number and one with one less group. Among post-92s a total of 47 groups were engaged with compared with 37 in 2006. Six agreements indicated an increase in the number of social groups engaged with, one by six groups, while three institutions were engaged with one less group than in 2006 and one stayed the same.

Apart from those from lower SEC backgrounds both pre and post92s had the same trajectory of either rising or declining engagement with groups between 2006 and 2012. Two fewer pre92s cited lower SEC groups in 2012 than in 2006 while one additional post92 cited this group in 2012. This may reflect the greater reliance on those from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) based on students' home post codes as a proxy for social class, although there is some research that questions the validity of some data sources including postcode data from which the LPN measure is derived (Harrison and McCaig, 2014; Harrison and Hatt 2010). The other social groups gaining the most new attention from institutions are the disabled and looked after children. Correspondingly less engagement was reported with BME groups and asylum seekers/refugees (a category whose legal status has changed and who are no longer able to enter higher education). Pre92s cited more engagement in 2012 than in 2006 with disabled students, those from LPN and parents/carers, and report less engagement with BME and lower SEC. Post92s were more engaged in 2012 with disabled students, those from LAC backgrounds and LPN than they were in 2006, but also less engaged with BME, than in 2006 (Figure 3).

Figure 3 about here

BME as a category is interesting as it is an increasingly heterogeneous grouping containing many ethnic groups that are not underrepresented in HE, and may have received less attention in part because of the emphasis on benchmarks (post92s in particular are mostly well over benchmark already) and because many of the underrepresented BME groups are

also engaged with via LPN or lower SEC categories. Interview evidence suggests that institutions routinely note what others are focussing on and quickly adapt to what are in effect market signals, notably in the 2006-12 period when the 'looked after children' (LAC) category came to prominence following a pilot 'access accreditation' scheme run by the Sir Frank Buttle Trust (a charity set up to promote access to HE for those from social care backgrounds). Two post92s (and no pre92s) engaged with this group in 2006, nine of each did by 2012.

Discussion: Changing patterns of engagement and support 2006-12

The hypothesis that the removal of mandatory bursaries for students from the poorest backgrounds and the refocusing of expenditure on the NSP would reduce financial support available to all that qualify by RHI is clearly supported by this evidence and other published analyses of the effects of the new student support regime (IFS 2012). Indeed, such an outcome was an intended consequence of government policy announcements that institutions should be free to target access support in any way that they wish. The Deputy Prime Minister, at the initial launch of the NSP, declared that:

For too long, too many doors of our universities have been closed to bright students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Government is determined to throw them open. These proposals will ensure that the most highly selective universities are compelled to offer generous scholarships to gifted students from low income backgrounds. (BIS 2010b)

If the picture on financial support is straightforward the picture on outreach engagement is more nuanced but no less revealing. This analysis shows an increase in engagement by both age and social groups among the sample of pre92s and a corresponding narrowing of focus on behalf of many of the post92 sample. The paper has discussed several reasons for this. The enhanced role of benchmarking in the guidance for new access agreements seems to have concentrated minds across the board, as has an awareness of what competitor institutions are doing. This may have impacted on those post92s that are moving away from groups they have a long tradition of providing opportunities for, in many cases over and above national benchmarks (for example some minority ethnic groups, those from LPNs, 16-19 year olds and those from lower SEC), while for pre92s the enhanced benchmark emphasis may have obliged them to look again at how they were spending their outreach budget.

As we have noted, there is more focus on both age and social groups among pre92s than previously. This may explain much of the 'catching up' to the performance of post92s with these groups (for example looked after children and travellers, on few institutional 'radars' in 2006) and mature students (who are much thinner on the ground in pre92 institutions). Conversely several post92s evoked benchmarking to reiterate past successes or highlight benchmarks already met. One post-92, for example, noted that it had been so successful in the recruitment of BME groups that it was no longer doing anything specific for them; another that it was successful in its mission to serve those from lower socioeconomic

groups because over 40% of its home undergraduates came from that background (although over 40% is the norm for post92s); other post92s spoke of 'continuing to offer' (unspecified) opportunities or 'aiming to maintain' their benchmark.

However there is evidence of other factors in play beyond what we might call 'access saturation'. Some new post92 agreements indicate a change of emphasis in their language and in their outreach and financial support priorities which hint at a move away from widening participation and towards the 'quality' end of the market. Where agreements talked of access, some now lay more emphasis on the language of 'employability outcomes' and becoming a 'provider of professionals' to the employment market. Interviews carried out alongside this analysis with those responsible for writing access agreements revealed that each of the (non-sample) post92s consulted were raising their entry requirements and one had a declared intention to move from being a 'recruiting' to a 'selecting' institution. Some post92 respondents also noted that they had in recent times developed scholarships and outreach programmes focussed specifically on identifying merit, and which, as they are not targeted at traditional 'access students' do not even feature in the institution's access agreement. The United States, which has a longer experience of high tuition fees and the student support mechanisms similar to England, has seen a growth in institution-specific merit aid schemes increasingly focused on their own institutional needs and institutional missions, and less on broader societal needs over time (Heller 2006; 2008) and are seen as a potential threat to widening participation Callender 2010; McCaig 2011)

We have already noted the increased emphasis on merit-based financial support criteria, and IFS analysis of which students receive the largest bursaries notes how cash bursaries are higher among students who achieve the highest entry grades (AAB or higher, later ABB or higher) "because the practice of offering scholarships based on academic merit is a feature of both the old and new systems" (IFS 2012, 18). Interestingly it goes on to note that the average bursary for lower achieving (sub-AAB) students at post92 institutions has fallen, suggesting that such institutions are "concentrating their bursary resources on high-achieving students, perhaps with the view of attracting more of them" (IFS 2012, 19). This focus on attracting high attaining and thus meritorious school pupils may be the driver for more concentration among post92s on the primary age group who could be encouraged by targeted support to achieve grades AAB or above when they take their A levels. If these indications are borne out they would certainly show a market effect (i.e. a flight to quality), though not necessarily one that ministers would welcome if they want to further concentrate the best achieving students in the few highly selective universities. The high entry grade policy of Student Number Controls, another attempt, along with the NSP, to create market conditions that would have potentially been damaging to widening participation by obliging institutions to focus mainly on ABB and above applicants, was also abandoned in 2013 (HM Treasury 2013).

Another explanatory factor for the rise in engagement may be 'game playing' among pre92s institutions. OFFA guidelines require that additional fee income is spent on outreach engagement in an effort to increase applications from groups that are underrepresented at each institution (against benchmarks for similar institutions). However, OFFA has no remit to

affect admissions to higher education or oblige autonomous institutions to change their entry requirements beyond the encouragement that they explore the use of contextual information in their admissions processes (OFFA 2011). OFFA does require that a proportion of AFI is spent on access (the average for the pre92 sample is 30.2%) and the increase in outreach engagement activity (along more generous financial support for students) to a wider range of age and social groups is the manifestation of that expenditure, even if it fails to change the socio-economic profile of pre92 students. Indeed, some have criticised the new regime for increasing the 'deadweight effect' of access spending (IFS 2012, 27). Such institutions would doubtless welcome applicants from underrepresented backgrounds but as they are not obliged to lower their entry requirements outreach can be seen as a low risk game with no costs, funded as it is from additional fee income that such institutions, the Russell Group in particular, lobbied for (Russell Group 2010).

Conclusion

Institutional responses to the new student support regime, as outlined in OFFA access agreements and in NSP arrangements, clearly demonstrate a market effect, most overtly on the behaviour of post92 institutions. Not only did post92s recognise that they were not able to financially support as many of their traditional intake (on average students from poorer backgrounds) through the NSP, there is evidence that they had also begun to adopt many of the outreach and recruitment strategies previously typical of pre92 institutions in order to increase their market share of higher achieving applicants (with notable success in 2012/13 at least) (Baker 2012) as they were steered to do by the higher achieving Student Number Control policy. However, in order to achieve this many have abandoned their traditional constituency by focussing on merit and subject shortfalls as criteria for what highly targeted aid they can afford to provide. Where once such post92 institutions marketed themselves as access institutions with a mission to widen participation, any attempt to move into an aspirational market segment reduces the diversity of institutions and hence opportunities for social mobility for the many - which is of course a fulfilment of the social justice remit of higher education. A student support system designed to help the brightest of the poor to enter selective universities and simultaneously help cut public expenditure necessarily leaves post92 institutions and students that aspire to them out in the cold. This could be seen as an attack not only on the aspiration-raising WP agenda but also on the financial future of dozens of institutions.

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