The impact of the changing English higher education marketplace on widening participation and fair access : evidence from a discourse analysis of access agreements

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Citation:

The impact of the changing English higher education marketplace on widening participation and fair access: evidence from a discourse analysis of access agreements

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Abstract

This article uses a discourse analysis of access policy statements to trace the impact of differentiation and marketisation among English HE institutions that was evident before but accelerated by recent policy developments, including the increase in tuition fees. A result of this has been a shift in institutions' policy discourses that indicate less propitious circumstances for widening participation, particularly among post-1992 institutions which are now expected to improve retention and employability outcomes. Pre-1992 institutions including members of the Russell Group of selective, research intensive universities have been encouraged by policy changes to differentiate further by concentrating their outreach only on the 'brightest' of applicants from poorer backgrounds. The article concludes that widening participation of the traditional 'raising aspirations' kind becomes a much more difficult project for post-1992 institutions and correspondingly a more difficult basis for a future business model.

Access Agreements are documents that have to be agreed with Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in order for institutions to able to charge tuition fees above the basic level. They lay out how institutions will spend a proportion of the fee income above the basic fee on financial support and outreach activities to maintain access for social groups underrepresented in higher education. These may be applicants from poor backgrounds (as measured by social class, free-school meals or coming from low-participation neighbourhoods), care leavers, disabled students, some black minority ethnic groups etc. Institutions can also take the opportunity to express the institutional mission and values that helped to inform policies designed to support fair access and widening participation. As such access agreements can be seen as 'discursive events' (Fairclough 1993, 136), statements of social practice from the institutions' perspective.

Access Agreement (hereafter AA) spending can take the form of financial aid (bursaries and scholarships, fee waivers, discounted services) and outreach activities. Previous analyses of AAs has included comparative analysis of levels of financial support and of outreach priorities, of underrepresented groups targeted, and comparative analysis of AAs over time (e.g. since the first wave of AAs were agreed in 2006/7). These have mainly focussed on the statistical and other factual

content found in AAs, for example monitoring and benchmarking of performance against identified targets by institution type, and on the variable size of bursaries and other forms of financial support by institution type (McCaig and Adnett 2009; McCaig 2010; 2011; Callendar and Jackson 2008; Callendar 2009a; 2009b; Harrison 2011) and by institution type and over time (McCaig 2014).

This article uses access policy statements to trace the impact of differentiation and marketisation among English HE institutions. This was evident before but accelerated by recent policy developments (the White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System,* the Browne Review of HE finance, the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) and new guidance to institutions from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA)). A result of this has been a shift in institutions' policy discourses that indicate less propitious circumstances for widening participation. Evidence from the following analysis of OFFA access agreements shows: change over time (2006/7-2012/13); variation in how pre- and post-1992 institutions use the discourse of 'access'; and evidence of a greater concentration among institutional policymakers on the 'brightest' young people at the expense of traditional widening participation activities aimed at raising the aspirations of all young people. The article uses discourse analysis of institutional Access Agreements to illustrate the ways in which English HE institutions (HEIs) address widening participation and fair access in policy and practice. It is based on analyses of two data sets - a sample of 20 original 2006/7 access agreements and 20 2012/13 access agreements (changed to reflect the new tuition fee/financial support regime introduced by the White Paper BIS 2011a). The two samples consist of the agreements lodged by the same institutions (ten research intensive and mainly selective 'pre-1992' universities - all members of the Russell Group - and ten mainly recruiting 'post-1992'[1] universities) at both points in time.

Policy context: marketisation and differentiation

In response to the global financial crisis leading to recession from 2008/09 the Conservative led coalition government elected in the United Kingdom in 2010[2] introduced a new funding and student support regime in the 2011 White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011a). The White Paper also signalled a change in emphasis from raising aspirations for all (the traditional approach to widening participation) to addressing "significant barriers in the way of bright young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds" in order to "promote fair access" (paras 5.3; 4.45) to the most selective universities. Alongside this new guidance from the Office for Fair Access to institutions, which removed mandatory OFFA bursaries for all those that qualified on the basis of residual household income, the introduction

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[1] The terms pre- and post-1992 universities are used in the UK context to differentiate the 40 universities in existence prior to 1992 and those created after the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) which had mainly been Polytechnics or Colleges of Higher Education. These were HE institutions that did not have their own degree awarding powers (and thus could not be defined as universities) prior to the 1992 Act, hence 'post-1992s'.

[2] Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have devolved responsibility for HE financing and are not considered in this paper

of the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) (BIS 2011a, 5.28-5.29) changed the context for the delivery of widening participation and fair access activities. The NSP supported only a sixth of the number of students supported by the previous regime (IFS 2012, p.6; McCaig 2014)[3]. Hereafter, government has been mainly concerned not with increasing the number of students in HE from underrepresented backgrounds, but with the proportion of poorer students attending the more selective institutions:

> Analysis by OFFA shows that the relative chance of people from low-income backgrounds studying at the most selective third of universities has worsened. The most advantaged 20 per cent of the young population were around six times more likely to attend a selective university in the mid-1990s but seven times more likely by the mid-2000s. (*Students at the Heart of the System*, BIS 2011a, para 5.7)

Introducing new guidance for OFFA the Deputy Prime Minister reiterated the emphasis on fair access, defined as access for bright students from disadvantaged backgrounds:

> Universities can and should do more to ensure fair access. Today we are setting out our expectations for the action needed to close the gap between aspiration and achievement. Social mobility in this country has stalled. It will only improve if we throw open the doors of universities, especially the most selective, to more bright students from disadvantaged backgrounds. (*Ensuring higher education is open to all*, BIS Press Release on Guidance letter to OFFA 10th February 2011 Ref? BIS 2011c)

A large part of the White Paper was concerned with rationalising an overtly marketised distribution of student numbers that would encourage these bright applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds by allowing institutions to expand provision that attracted those with the highest grades (AAB+ or equivalent on the UCAS tariff, later ABB+). This would be at the expense of core student numbers on courses that attracted lower entry profiles (BIS 2011a, p.50, paras 4.18-4.19; Taylor and McCaig 2014, p.i). Government modelling assumed that this redistribution would be reflected in the emergence of variable tuition fees: the maximum fee was set at £9,000 per year with an envisaged average fee of £7,500 across the sector to be justified by only the most prestigious institutions with the highest entry requirements. Programmes of study that required lower entry requirements would be offered by less prestigious institutions, colleges of further education and new alternative providers who could compete against them on price (BIS 2011a, p.19, paras 1.19-1.20) to create a price differential. This price signal would enable the brightest applicants from backgrounds that traditionally did not produce many applicants to the highest ranking institutions to achieve their full potential of becoming socially mobile by accessing 'the professions' (BIS 2011a, p.50, paras 4.18-4.20).

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[3] The NSP was withdrawn after two years

This process would accelerate systemic differentiation between prestigious (pre-92) institutions and the rest (post-92). An important aspect of this encouragement of competitive differentiation has been a reinforcement of institutions' autonomy in two areas of activity. Firstly, with regard to collaboration, HE institutions were no longer obliged to engage in partnerships with other local and regional groupings of colleges and universities (such as the now defunct Aimhigher Partnerships and Lifelong Learning Networks), and could thus target their outreach activity to meet their own needs. Secondly, institutions were no longer obliged by the Office for Fair Access to provide financial support to all students that qualified by residual household income (those below £25,000 per annum) and could henceforth target financial support on the whatever basis they chose (over and above the NSP allocations). Analysis shows that this has led to an overall reduction of expenditure on financial support for those from poorer backgrounds (HEFCE 2012, para 5.4; McCaig 2014).

English HEI types: differing discourses of widening participation

The theoretical conceptualisation for this analysis draws on marketing theory as an explanation of institutional behaviour (Gibbs and Knapp 2002; Maringe 2005) and employs the methodology of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1993). Marketing theory suggests that where full information is not clearly available (for example in relation to how good a degree course will be for career development) consumers will look for alternative discursive indicators of positionality (Graham 2013, 80) or classification based on 'a set of specialised recognition rules' translating into 'a generation of legitimate meaning' (Bernstein 1990, 29). This legitimacy can be cemented though the 'social appropriation' of discourses by some institutions to the exclusion of others (Ball 1990, 3). One clear positioning is based on the notion of institutional prestige, which acts as a substitute for information about quality in the minds of consumers and media commentators (Gibbs and Knapp: 2002; Brown and Scott, 2009). Prestige is, by its very nature, restricted to a few institutions, but many other can make use of an 'order of discourse' that celebrates other qualities (Fairclough 1993, 135) 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. This allowed post-92s, for example, to market their institutions in WP-friendly, inclusive social justice terms.

Much of this was anticipated by Fairclough writing twenty years ago. Drawing in part on Foucault's notion of the increasing commodification of the social world, Fairclough (1993) analysed the marketisation of the English higher education sector by focusing on the language used in texts from different types of English HE institutions (now known as pre- and post-1992 universities) noting that language, as a social practice interacts with the social context (Fairclough 1993, 134). Such texts - discursive events - are seen as an attempt to create a hegemonic discourse that places an institution within a relational context to other institutions (ibid, 136). Discourse thus establishes a 'type' in relation to an alternative 'type' of institution and this can be

encoded in language, in behaviours and practices to create a narrative. Fairclough also anticipated a degree of interdiscursive mixing (Fairclough 1993, 147) between institution types, with both pre- and post-1992s learning from each-others' language and practices, and this has been observed in subsequent analyses of access agreement discourse (e.g. McCaig and Adnett 2009; McCaig 2011; Graham 2013; Bowl and Hughes 2014), which demonstrate convergence between types as well as a general ratcheting-up of discourses of 'quality' across the board. The following analysis thus employs the discourse analysis method of Fairclough, applied to a different set of texts in a different era, and supports his hypothesis that institutions are seeking to create and sustain narratives that differentiate them from institutions of another type, and also identifies a degree of interdiscursive mixing around the notion of WP (Robertson 1997).

The process of differentiating the English HE sector began with the establishment of the Higher Education Funding Council for England to oversee the newly unified sector. The ending of the 'binary' system of higher education (between independent Universities and public sector Polytechnics in 1992) created a system of 130 universities. Thereafter differentiation - the need to establish a place in the crowded market - was officially encouraged from the beginning of the unification process (see for example HEFCE 2000).

Variations by institution type: widening participation and fair access in pre- and post92s

Since the Labour Government, elected in 1997, came to power with a social justice agenda that including widening participation to higher education a series of financial incentives and accompanying regulations (including the introduction of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) have been put in place (see McCaig 2010). This included mandatory involvement for all HEIs in aspiration-raising outreach work as directed by the state-funded Aimhigher programme and as part of Lifelong Learning Networks. OFFA Access Agreements also obliged institutions to explain how they would address inequalities in access and mandated financial bursary for all students from low income groups. Mandatory bursaries for all have been dropped (OFFA 2011) and institutions are free to target support at groups they wish to attract.

Widening participation in its generic system-wide sense is focused on raising the aspirations of *all* young people that might benefit from higher education if they could be encouraged to achieve the requisite grades at school. Fair access - a subset of WP of concern to individual institutions (Bekhradnia 2003) - is conceptually based in research by the Sutton Trust that identified several thousand school leavers in each year cohort with the ability to attend the most selective institutions, but who did not and who were thus believed to be wasted talent because of the tendency of the professions to recruit mainly from pre-1992 institutions (Sutton Trust 2004). This human capital argument has been highly influential among policymakers concerned

with social mobility; its underlying assumptions were present in *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011a) and in OFFA Guidance for the submission of revised post-2012/13 Access Agreements (OFFA 2011) both of which actively encouraged the identification, through targeted outreach, of these 'brightest' young people by selective institutions.

Pre-1992 institutions have long practised this 'fair access' version of WP. Earlier analyses of the content of the original set of 2006/7 AAs showed that pre-1992s were far more likely to carry out their outreach with bright younger children (often from primary age) than post-1992s and also more likely to use their student support packages to reward merit (McCaig and Adnett 2009; McCaig 2010; 2011) on the principle of the early identification and 'hot-housing' of talented youth, if it could be found and kept on track through interventions.

Post-1992 institutions can rarely rely on tradition, prestige or their standings in international university rankings in their marketing, however they can and do draw on a series of values to inform a different set of discourses that are more favourable to the notion of widening participation. Key elements of post-1992 discourse around WP are accessibility and diversity, being welcoming and student-friendly and catering for the needs of mature and part-time students. Accommodating much of the growth in student numbers over several decades, including the majority of those without the highest entry qualifications (based on UCAS tariff points) (HEFCE 2011) means that post-1992s are heavily engaged in WP in two major ways. Firstly they have to recruit largely from social cohorts least likely to attend higher education, with the least likelihood of having familial experience of HE and (generally) less disposable income to consider tuition fees and time away from the labour market viable. Secondly, when recruited WP students often require more transitional support to persist and succeed and this comes with associated costs.

Analysis method

As noted above, this analysis is based on two data sets; a sample of 20 original 2006/07 access agreements and 20 2012/13 access agreements. The two samples consist of the agreements lodged by the same institutions (ten research intensive and mainly selective 'pre-1992' universities - all members of the Russell Group, - and ten mainly recruiting 'post-1992' universities) at both points in time. The original sampling rationale was prompted by research into the revealed differences in understanding and use of widening participation policy and practice among these two institution types carried out in 2005 (HEFCE 2006).

Statements from sample access agreements were thematically analysed using NviVo to produce a dataset of comparative statements by institution type and across the time series. Themes were identified from the content and layout of access agreements (which usually adhered to a basic template format). Key themes drawn from in this paper include: *strategic aims and objectives; historical record on access;*

access enhancement statements; and outreach targeting. In each paired set of statements set out below the actual text is taken from the same thematic section of the agreements wherever possible; the later agreements were more likely to follow a set format, making statement-comparison easier. Note that in the following narrative and tables types are shortened to pre92 and post92 while institutions are attributed anonymously as Pre1-10 (if pre-1992 institutions) and Post1-10 (if post-1992 institutions).

Post-1992: confronting changing market conditions

As noted above, post-1992 institutions in particular had to face up to the changing context for widening participation created by economic downturn and the introduction of higher fees, as well as competitive market pressures for potentially contracting student numbers during the 2006-2012 period. One post-1992 institution (Post5) was open about the challenges presented by marketisation and the new funding regime for further efforts to widen participation, indeed it had foregrounded looming difficulties in its 2006/7 agreement. Where the scope for improvement was already limited in 2006/7, by 2012/13 it faced major challenges and hinted that portfolio review would lead to the *'withdrawal of degree programmes which our research suggests will not fare well in the new environment'.* Post1 responded to the new conditions in a different way; by looking further afield for applicants and shifting its focus from the sub region with the aim of becoming a *'national provider'* (Table 1).

Table 1. Post92 discourse shift: widening participation becomes a challenge

Inst	2006/7	2012/13
post5	The University has performed well in terms of recruiting regionally and especially from low-income groups and local ethnic-minority communities. Despite sector-wide growth in these areas, further improvement has been achieved with the result that we continue to exceed the benchmarks. **The scope for further improvement is now more limited.**	The change in University funding, in which the balance of the cost of studying has been largely shifted from the State to the graduate, **may become a major challenge to widening participation and through it to increasing upward social mobility**. ……. research also suggests that changes to the national funding model may also **change the relative demand for particular programmes** and specific institutions. In response we have **reviewed our portfolio, and withdrawn degree programmes which our research suggests will not fare well in the new environment**.
post1	[The] University is proud of its record over more than 160 years of offering opportunities to participate in higher education to those who have traditionally been excluded. This central tenet of [post1's] Mission will continue to be of huge importance as opportunities are offered to **students from low participation**	As [post1] University has developed its **strategy for student recruitment to move from being a sub-regional provider to a national provider**, it has, in keeping with its [mission] **targeted …. schools in cities across England** whose pupil intake reflects many of the widening participation target groups

	neighbourhoods in [the borough and wider region], those with disabilities and those from ethnic minorities	

Post-1992s: the rising importance of 'retention and success'

In addition to the newly challenging circumstances faced by post-92s in particular, OFFA guidelines for new access agreements from 2012/13 set new obligations for institutions that already had a good record on WP (as measured against benchmark performance of similar institutions). Henceforth they had to demonstrate how they would improve retention and success rates in the development of their benchmarking targets. In the following two examples the institutions clearly have different starting points - Post5 uses more businesslike language in both statements, while Post3 employs a more educational register - but both respond to the 'retention and success' discourse of the White Paper. Post5 used the discourse of *'student success'* in its 2006/7 agreement, but with no reference to non-continuation or retention; and Post3 highlighted *'student retention'* as a key metric in its 2006/7 agreement along with increased progression opportunities. Both institutions enhanced these statements in 2012/13 agreements: Post5 by building on their '*already excellent student support*' to maintain '*current market advantage*' in conjunction with the Students' Union (a discursive signifier of the rise of student-as-consumer interests). Post5 also reinforced the signal discourse shift from the institution (which is proud of being socially inclusive) to one that aims to 'o*ffer student excellent value for their investment',* a clear focus on the individual beneficiary. Post3, noting how difficult recruitment was likely to be in the early years of the new fee regime, endorsed the new guidance on retention by promising to *'rebalance its outreach and financial support'* to reflect this (Table 2). This clearly implies a shift towards recruiting applicants with higher UCAS points, who are least likely to drop out of higher education (OFFA 2011).

Table 2. Post92 discourse shift: from achievement to retention-and-success

Inst	2006/7	2012/13
post5	The University …. is a teaching and learning led university that **places students' needs first**. …… This is combined with high levels of student achievement and success in graduate employment. The University is committed to its local community and to actively taking education to students in order to widen participation, as well as **delivering excellence in teaching and enhancing student success**.	We are enhancing our already **excellent student support** mechanisms and ensuring our infrastructure is of the highest quality and fit for purpose. **Working closely with our Students' Union we are also taking steps to identify and support students who may be at greater risk of withdrawing from their studies**. In our view these developments will help ensure we retain our current market advantage, and **offer students excellent value for their investment** in our programmes.
post3	The [plan] commits the University to a	On both absolute and benchmark measures

number of relevant targets and these are the targets that underpin the Access Agreement. They include: • increasing its undergraduate numbers; • sustaining **student retention rates** at or above the relevant benchmark; • moving closer to its benchmarks for students from low participation neighbourhoods and lower socio-economic groups; • securing, with partners, a complete qualifications map and increased progression opportunities for local learners.	against the key HESA performance indicators we can be shown to be **broadly mid-range** in terms of both our number of under-represented students and our performance on **non-continuation,** in relation to the sector as a whole: As the section on milestones and targets demonstrates we intend both to sustain our strongest areas of performance, and to make progress on other indicators in the context of what will be a **very challenging period** for recruitment. The University …. has considered the advice from OFFA in relation to the balance of expenditure on the range of access measures it will employ. In particular we **welcome the new emphasis on measures to support retention and student success**, and the opportunity to support some of the activity previously funded by …Aimhigher. It is our intention therefore to **re-balance our expenditure in order to provide a more tightly focused strand of financial support and a greater balance of expenditure on outreach and retention.**

In these two areas we can see how post92 institutions' discourse has changed to accommodate or anticipate threats to widening participation and how they have reacted to the new policy environments. Such institutions can no longer rely (for access agreement purposes) on being inclusive and diverse; the requirements have changed and so the language shifts from what the inclusive and diverse *institution* is to what benefits accrue to the successful *individual* student. In business marketing terms this represents a discourse shift from one focussed on inputs (the applicant and the welcoming institution) to outputs (employable graduates).

Pre92s: from widening participation for all to 'fair access' for the 'brightest.

Pre92 institutions, already less reliant on widening participation students and with generally higher retention rates, had a different set of issues to confront in the new marketised policy context. As noted above, the language of the White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* encourages institutions to focus on the 'brightest' and the 'most able, least likely' group of young people to attend institutions with the highest entry requirements in order to maximise their opportunities for upward social mobility (BIS 2011a para 5.3). For pre-1992s this manifests as a policy shift from partnership working with other local institutions to raise aspirations for all young people to attend higher education; these institutions were henceforth free to target outreach activities only those with the potential to achieve the grades required

by pre-92s from underrepresented groups (BIS 2011a, paras 5.28-5.29). 'Fair access' for this group (rather than exhorting access for all) becomes the aim that pre92 discourse has to address for OFFA, though it is notable in the following extracts that 'widening participation' is the term used for this activity.

The major difficulty for institutions like Pre6 is to square the circle of high entry criteria and widening access to cohorts that usually do not achieve those criteria. Thus Pre6 moved from a specific outreach target (an increase in the percentage of state-school applications) in the 2006/7 agreement to incorporating WP as a strategic priority in its new five-year plan (though with no reference to specific targets). Pre6 also interestingly cited a track-record going back to 1998 that was not mentioned in the 2006/7 agreement, perhaps reflecting how low WP was as a priority, even in the context of an access agreement. Pre10 also talks about access more fully than in the 2006/7 agreement (citing Russell Group comparators), and, as with Pre3, reference is made to issues beyond its capabilities to influence, in this case *'challenges relating to the suitability of A level choices'* (Table 3).

Table 3. The challenge of widening access for Pre-1992s

	2006/7	2012/13
pre6	Objectives: The [University's] overwhelming objective when designing its new package of financial support was to maintain and, **if possible,** to encourage an increase in the number of applications from good candidates from poorer backgrounds…. **We aim to increase applications from state schools by five percentage points by 2009**. It is worth **underlining, however, that we will not increase the intake of students from such groups unless the applicants meet our highly competitive entry criteria**	[The University] is committed to widen access to higher education in general and to [university] in particular. '**Engagement' remains one of the strategic priorities of our five-year Strategic Plan** and widening participation is one of the key tenets of our engagement policy. [the University] has been involved in widening participation and access initiatives since **1998**……… we face **specific challenges relating to the suitability of A level choices** ….. However, we are pleased with the **progress made towards our benchmarks for state school, low socio-economic and low participation neighbourhood students**. We aim to build upon the success of recent years, by reaching more pre-university students from a wider cross section of society and continuing to recruit students from these underrepresented groups to [the university]
pre3	It remains the University's policy to admit UK students of the **highest academic calibre** and potential irrespective of financial or other non-academic considerations. However, as a leading international university, [this university] **attracts high quality applicants** from the rest of the EU and further afield. …. Entry to [this university] typically requires	The standard A-level offer for entry to [the University] is currently advertised as A*AA. *There is a **large pool of qualified applicants and competition is rigorous…***

pre10	a minimum of three grade As in appropriate GCE A Level subjects (or their equivalent). *There is **a large pool of qualified applicants and competition is rigorous….***	
pre10	The **Russell Group universities** believe that it is part of our social responsibility to increase and widen participation in HE and that able students from any background should be able to attend universities with the most demanding entry requirements. The Group also acknowledges the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body. The educational opportunities offered by Russell Group universities are distinctive, especially in relation to subjects such as Medicine, and the Group is concerned to ensure that a wide range of students can benefit from these opportunities	We are **proud of our strong record on access and widening participation**: we are the best performer within the **Russell Group** universities in terms of exceeding our HESA benchmarks for the proportion of state school students we recruit. …. The University […] **has a global reputation for academic excellence in both its research and education**. Ranked among the top 100 universities in the world, we are committed to attracting the most talented students, **regardless of background**, to benefit from our outstanding research-led education..... **Our stated strategy is to transform the lives of our students as a result of their experience at [the University],** fully preparing them for employment in their chosen careers. **We actively welcome students from all backgrounds,** supporting them in removing any perceived constraints on their career choices through their learning and experience **at a leading international university.**

Pre-1992: enacting fair access by Realising Opportunities

As noted above, for pre-1992 institutions widening participation is often reconceptualised using the discourse of social mobility which can be afforded by enabling *fair access* to higher education and the professions. HEFCE, from 2011, funded a programme designed to create a national framework for such targeted outreach work among some Russell Group institutions (five of which are included in this sample). The Realising Opportunities programme offers a suite of interventions that would prepare young people for access to *any* research-intensive institution (BIS 2011a, p.59, para 5.20). An example of how Realising Opportunities is used discursively to actuate the meritocratic Robbins principle is presented by Pre7 (Table 4):

Table 4. Pre-1992 discourse shift: realising opportunities for 'fair access'

pre7	2006/7	2012/13
	The University is committed to widening participation and fair access. We wish to encourage able, highly-motivated and	*[The] University is committed to widening participation (WP) and fair access,* **and our strategies and activities are based**

	enthusiastic students of all ages, and from all backgrounds and contexts, to apply to our degree programmes. Our admissions policies and practices are based on principles of integrity and fairness, and involve the assessment of each applicant's ability, achievements and potential. ...... We also know that many talented and able people **do not feel confident** about applying to university. This may be because they have no family experience of higher education, or because they lack confidence about their ability to achieve the necessary entry requirements for **a university like [this one]**	**on our belief that ability should be able to access opportunity, regardless of circumstance**. We wish to encourage able, highly-motivated and enthusiastic students of all ages, and from all backgrounds and contexts, to apply to our degree programmes.. ... **the ground-breaking Realising Opportunities scheme,** a national fair access programme through which twelve highly-selective research-intensive universities work together to promote WP

As well as using collaborative programmes such as Realising Opportunities, Pre92s increasingly refer to their civic leadership role (contra to their previous involvement in state-mandated partnerships like Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks). One of the ways this is discursively signalled is through the emphasis on the identification and continual support of the *'most able, least likely'* group of *'gifted and talented'* young people who can be supported and encouraged to apply to the most selective institutions. For Pre10 this is portrayed as a *'strategic and structured approach'* that meant a withdrawal from the kind of *'general aspiration raising'* work that was the basis of the Aimhigher partnership model. For many, such as Pre4, this means a continuing focus on younger age groups (mentioned in 2006/7 in the context of Y9); by 2012/13 the '*most able, least likely'* group are not only highlighted as a strategic target in the document, but the age-focus had extended downwards to include primary-age pupils (Y5 and Y6). Targeting is also evident in the highlighting of subject disciplines and specific professions for Pre4 and Pre9 (Table 5).

Table 5. Pre-1992 discourse shift from generic aspiration raising to targeting (only) the brightest

	2006/7	2012/13
pre10	The Russell Group believes that the outcomes of the National Academy for **Gifted and Talented** Youth's 'Higher Education Gateway' project could be of real interest to member institutions. The Group is committed to attracting and admitting those **most able to benefit from the type of courses we offer**	....adopting a more **strategic and structured approach to outreach** and widening participation across the University. .... A more **output focussed approach through working in a targeted** way with **less 'general' aspiration raising** and a **clear focus on driving up academic attainment**, leading to a realistic aspiration to progress to Higher Education
pre4	Last year, our centrally co-ordinated	**Find and support talented people ('most**

	outreach programme alone worked with 14,500 young people. Working with **young people from year 9 me**ans that much of this activity takes time to feed into University targets and we are confident that we will continue to encourage more under-represented groups into the University	**able, least likely')** with the potential to succeed at this University…. We will c**ontinue to work with young people aged 13 or under (including within primary schools**) to raise their aspirations and awareness of higher education through: Student volunteer outreach which involves over 400 students annually; annual festivals such as the **Science Festival and Festival of the Arts**
pre9		**Targeted outreach for access to selective courses / careers / professions**. The major expansion in our outreach activities builds on our experience of running successful, programmes such as [xxxx and xxx] – **intensive, profession-specific programmes** for cohorts of students from under-represented groups.

Conclusion

This article has used Fairclough's method of discourse analysis to show the ways by which the two types of English HE institutions have reacted to recent policy changes in terms of the positionality on widening participation and fair access. Institutions are seeking to create and sustain narratives that differentiate them from institutions of another type, in ways that Fairclough would recognise. The fact that many pre-1992s have begun to address the issue of widening participation and fair access between the two data sets also provides evidence that the changing policy environment has led to a degree of interdiscursive mixing (Fairclough 1993, 147). Post-1992s have clearly had to make more accommodations to policy change, reflecting the ongoing differentiation of the sector due to long term marketisation as well as the specific policy changes introduce in the 2011 White Paper and OFFA Guidelines. While to some extent analysis reveals that pre-1992 institutions are more likely than in the past to make reference to their track record in widening participation, it is discursively highlighted in terms of the *challenge* of widening access given the prior need to maintain league table positioning, and the type of WP work funded by them is more likely to be focussed on the '*most able, least likely*' group of bright, young pupils that show potential to succeed at Russell Group universities. Recent policy changes, including the demise of Aimhigher and other state-mandated WP programmes, have clearly enabled pre-1992s to concentrate only on their own primary interests, further differentiating them from post-1992s.

For post-1992 institutions the picture is very different. No longer, following *Students at the Heart of the System* and the new OFFA Guidance (2011) can they rest on their track records in widening participation among underrepresented social groups.

Post92s face pressures from many sides. They are threatened by the spectre of higher tuition fees deterring poorer applicants (which hasn't yet been realised (UCAS 2013)) and the league table pressure to raise entry requirements, which is seen as a more threatening aspect of marketisation than the Student Number Control policy by many in the sector (Taylor and McCaig 2014). They are also threatened by the radical decline in part-time and mature student numbers since the start of the economic downturn (UUK 2012; 2013). The specific result of this pressure are new challenges, particularly in relation to the need to demonstrate (and thus concentrate outreach activities) *recruitment and success* that have the potential to make widening participation of the traditional 'raising aspirations' kind a much more difficult project for post-1922s and correspondingly a more difficult basis for a future business model.

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