

## **What Drives Widening Participation Policy in the English Market?**

MCCAIG, Colin <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4364-5119>> and SQUIRE, Ruth

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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

### **Citation:**

MCCAIG, Colin and SQUIRE, Ruth (2022). What Drives Widening Participation Policy in the English Market? In: MCCAIG, Colin, SQUIRE, Ruth and RAINFORD, Jon, (eds.) The business of widening participation: policy, practice and culture. Emerald Publishing, 19-39. [Book Section]

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McCaig, C and Squire, R (2022) 'What drives widening participation policy in the English market?' in McCaig, C, Rainford, J and Squire, R (Eds) (2022) *The Business of Widening Participation: policy, practice and culture*, Emerald Publishing ISBN 9781800430501

## Abstract

This chapter provides the context for understanding how English widening participation policy has interacted with the development of a marketised and expanding higher education system (the 'dual imperative' highlighted in the Introductory chapter of this volume). It traces the intensification of market approaches in higher education since 1997, examining how these interact with and become intertwined with evolving national widening participation policy concerns. Since 1997, widening participation for underrepresented groups as a national policy aim has become firmly embedded in the activities undertaken by higher education providers (HEPs). Policy initiatives have moved between incentive and risk to encourage HEPs to address national and local inequalities of access and (later) student success and differential graduate outcomes. This chapter gives an overview of the key policy moments in this period and argues for how they have shaped the way in which the business of WP is enacted throughout the sector. It highlights how the business of WP drawn widely has become simultaneously a regulatory requirement, a way for institutions to differentiate themselves in the HE market and a key marker of institutional civic or social responsibilities. Situating this alongside the increasing focus on students and applicants as consumers, the chapter also begins to problematise the issues of collaboration and competition this creates.

## Keywords

Regulation, Marketisation, Higher Education policy, Social mobility, Higher education, Higher education expansion

## Introduction

This chapter explores the development of widening participation policy in a market context in three phases: the development of WP work as a national concern (1997-2010); accelerating the shift towards individual institutional responsibility (2010-2017); and finally regulated widening participation (2017-2021). Although separated here to highlight their importance in each phase, the WP policy concerns and solutions of each phase are not distinct and reoccur and develop, albeit not in a linear way. In relation to the theme of this book, this chapter specifically explores how widening participation policy has framed the business of widening participation, asking the questions 'what is the business?' and 'whose business is it?'.

The English Higher Education (HE) system is one of the foremost examples of marketised HE, developed over decades, multiple governments and political shifts. It is a classic example of a *neoliberal* market, in which the state shapes the market (via a series of funding incentives or disincentives) in order that the market serves national policy aims (McCaig 2018b). The application of market approaches to HE and to education more broadly is a common global phenomenon, seen by many as offering appropriate mechanisms to expand education provision and thereby gain a competitive advantage over other economies (Bathmaker & Bowl 2018). As in other nations, English HE policy has tended to emphasise both this economic imperative and a closely linked social justice argument for expansion of HE supply and demand. A concern with who benefits from HE and in what ways has been a feature of several major reviews of HE policy, recognising both the potential to

exacerbate social inequalities through maintaining an elite system and that mass expansion for national economic gain necessitates the widening of participation among those not previously engaging in HE. Since the 1997 Dearing review particularly, ‘widening participation’<sup>1</sup> has been an important aspect of English HE policy. Although sometimes treated as a separate strand of HE policy, distinct from the processes of marketisation, considerations of precisely who benefits from HE and in what ways have been an integral part of market making in HE, being a major factor in policies around qualifications, access, regulation and funding; all of which dictate the extent that participation can be widened.

There are multiple and competing conceptions of what widening participation should mean, even at the level of national policy (Bekhradnia 2003). Two competing strands have emerged, one focused on the inequalities of access and outcomes for students in the most selective institutions and courses, often referred to as ‘fair access’, and another focused on attracting and retaining students from ‘underrepresented’ groups into the HE system – the more generic ‘WP’. As a consequence, although all HEPs and many branches of government are, in policy, held to be part of the business of widening participation, precisely what this business is taken to be has varied over time and in relation to market structures. As is examined in greater detail in Chapters Six and Nine, a feature of the marketisation of the HE sector has also been the proliferation of commercial services by and for HE institutions to support their business, whether this be the selling of academic ‘products’ developed within the academy or the purchase of products and consultancy services to meet business needs. Widening participation has been part of this development, with private and third sector organisations (TSOs) offering technological platforms, training, consultancy and complete programmes to support widening participation activity. In addition, it has been a common theme of national WP policy to promote or even require collaboration between HEPs and other relevant stakeholders, such as schools, colleges, local authorities and employers, as part of a whole system approach to widening participation e.g. in such state-funded programmes as Aimhigher, NCOP and now Uni Connect based around regional partnerships. In examining how policy frames the business of WP and who is responsible, this chapter provides the context for later chapters within this book, which discuss how different aspects of widening participation policy have been enacted in different contexts and for explorations of the tensions within policy. The following sections will address the business of WP by examining three interacting and overlapping stages of WP policy development, moving from the emergence of widening participation as a national goal during the 1990s and early 2000s, to become an institutional imperative in a competitive market in the years after 2010, and finally a combination of both in a regulated system after 2017.

## **Policy context**

This chapter takes as its starting point the 1997 report of the Commission on Higher Education, commonly known as the Dearing report. This report has been widely noted as a significant moment in the development of widening participation policy, bringing use of the phrase and associated activity firmly into the mainstream of HE policy (Stevenson et al., 2010). However, it is important to note the context of the report and its recommendations, which built on decades of previous policy and institutional activity. The report was commissioned by a Conservative government in 1996, reporting in 1997 to a relatively receptive incoming Labour government which had placed education as a central issue in its manifesto. The report was commissioned in the context of a funding crisis for

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter uses the term ‘widening participation’ to encompass the broad range of activities and policies since 1997 that are concerned with increasing the volume or proportions of ‘under-represented’ students in HE. Currently, the major term within English policy is ‘access and participation’ but widening participation is still both widely recognised within England and has global recognition as terminology for this work.

universities and significant debate about the ongoing role of the state in shaping an emerging HE market. Two phases of large scale and rapid expansion in the 1960s and late 1980s/early 1990s, had moved the UK from an elite to a mass HE system (Trow 2007), including extending participation to greater numbers of women, ethnic minority and older students. At the time of the Dearing Report, 42% of 18–30 year-olds were engaged in higher education, with the largest growth ‘spurt’ occurring between 1988 and 1992 when participation grew from 15% to 33% (McCaig, 2000). Much of this expansion of HE had taken place in (state run) Polytechnic institutes and colleges, leaving a more socially exclusive university sector unaffected. In the decade leading up to the report, marketisation policy had focused on creating an ‘efficient’ HE system, that would ‘take increasing account of the economic requirements of the country’ (DES, 1987:2)

Abolition of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics as part of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act had attempted to drive ‘cost effective expansion’ (DES, 1991: 12) through the application of competition between this now wider range of providers for publicly funded student numbers. A lack of political appetite to increase public expenditure on HE and a preference for application of new public management (Hood 1995) and market principles to control pricing in the sector led to a tense relationship between universities and government and ongoing debates over a sustainable funding model for HE. By the time of the Dearing Report, there was widespread consensus around the idea that the cost of an expanded HE system could not be borne by the state alone, with students, as the primary beneficiaries, most likely to have to bear some of the cost.

### **The politics of expansion**

Expansion prompted by an economic necessity of accessing new student markets to meet the nation’s human capital needs, but also commitments to equality and social justice, were common across western democracies in the second half of the twentieth century. However, in the British (and later the English) context, system expansion had to start from a position in which autonomous universities (independent of the state and established as Exempt Charities) were often impervious to the needs of the national economy and effectively rationed access to HE by social background due to their close links to Public (independent) Schools which effectively controlled the definition of merit that underpinned educational qualifications (Todd 2021, Brown and Tannock 2009). While the 1944 Education Act legislated the funding of ‘secondary education for all’ and indeed made provisions for the enhancement of technical education up to the age of 18, the state’s only method of expanding the higher education system was the founding of new – equally autonomous – institutions (such as Colleges of Advanced Technology and some new ‘Plate Glass’ universities in the 1950s and 1960s). Later, following the Robbins Report of 1963 which exposed the huge inequalities of access, especially for women and disabled students in his call for rapid expansion, growth mainly occurred through the establishment of thirty Polytechnics from 1965 (Kogan 1971). Even here, the state in the form of a Labour government (1964-70) which also launched a ‘university of the Air’ (the Open University) felt unable to take on the elitism of the university sector: Robbins himself had anticipated more universities and more graduates to meet the needs of the national economy, not an established body of ‘second division’ institutions run by local education authorities to meet regional labour market demand (Kogan 1971; McCaig 2000). The consequent ‘binary divide’ within the system simultaneously reinforced inequalities of access and protected the universities from the tawdry business of widening access to the masses. Any analysis of policy reforms aimed to widen participation in the late 1980s (culminating in the 1992 Act that abolished the binary divide) has to begin from this starting context.

### **Widening participation activity within institutions**

Although not generally referred to as ‘widening participation’, many HE institutions engaged in activities intended to provide routes into HE for non-traditional university applicants. Often targeted at adult learners, providing access and continuing education courses, sometimes with flexible HE entry routes, were part of institutional commitments to community engagement and civic responsibility. There were also specific initiatives for targeted groups with unequal participation in and outcomes from HE, including disabled students, women, ethnic minorities and mature students. Following the 1992 FE and HE Act, the new single funding body, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) had due regard to ‘a widening of access and greater opportunities’ (Davies 1994: point 5.4), and established an advisory group to explore the role of universities in widening participation. At this point, this activity, which would come to fit under the umbrella of widening participation, was largely at the discretion of individual institutions, with some nationally funded initiatives that institutions would opt into if where these aligned with their social justice and business objectives. By the time of the Dearing report, although there was some developing understanding and expertise on widening participation, it was often at a local level and highly context specific, with a range of variously defined target groups.

### **The development of widening participation as a national concern (1997-2010)**

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Ron Dearing, was charged with making a thorough review of how higher education should ‘develop to meet the needs of the UK over the next 20 years’ (NCIHE, 1997: 3). The final report dedicated a full chapter to ‘widening participation’, the contents of which went on to shape much future widening participation work and was significant in several ways:

- It raised the profile and importance of widening participation on both economic and social justice grounds
- It drew renewed attention to differential HE participation by socio-economic group
- It determined that there was a need to ‘promote progression’ to expand HE participation
- It set ‘aspiration’ as a central concern for widening participation outreach
- It articulated a role for both government and individual universities in tackling low participation among some underrepresented groups

Prior to the Dearing report, widening participation work was the individual concern of institutions, with some targeted work led by or funded by HEFCE after 1992 (Selby 2018). However, this was small scale, not intended to tackle a national issue of participation that would affect the whole sector. By framing ‘promoting progression’ as an essential part of expansion on the basis of social justice and economic grounds, as well as making it clear that this activity could be considered the collective work of universities and funding bodies, the report established the basis for future national outreach programmes and for a sector-wide strategic approach to encouraging and monitoring activity.

Although the Dearing report did mark a major shift in identifying a need for universities and government to actively promote HE engagement, it also – like Robbins’ - expected that participation would widen naturally as provision expanded. There were also expectations that the majority of expansion would come in the form of part-time and sub-degree qualifications delivered by FE colleges and post-1992 institutions (DFEE 1999). As under previous expansions, some of the work of widening participation was expected to be the creation and provision of courses that would be accessible and attractive to ‘non-traditional’ students, as well as meeting the changing needs of the labour market (HEFCE 2006). It was taken for granted that the needs of this group would be mostly met through provision within institutions with an existing track record in widening participation,

rather than shifting the composition of all institutions which would potentially contravene institutional autonomy over admissions. However, although the assumption of WP largely being the business of post-92 institutions was still present in WP policy throughout the 2000s, with HEFCE committed to ‘increasing opportunities’ for vocational learners and lifelong learning (HEFCE, 2009), it was joined by other strands of work concerned with the point of entry to HE, ‘top’ universities and generating additional demand from ‘suitable qualified’ representatives of underrepresented groups.

‘Promoting opportunity’ became a major strand of widening participation work during this period, initially linked to initiatives led by the DfEE and then DfES aimed at raising attainment in deprived areas, and also within individual institutions with the support of targeted HEFCE funding. In 2004, the activities of ‘Partnerships for Progression’, led by HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council, and the ‘Excellence Challenge’, launched by the DfES, were formally brought together into a single national outreach programme, Aimhigher. Aimhigher was closely aligned to the Labour government’s 1999 target of ensuring that 50 per cent of 18-30 year-olds should experience HE, with work therefore concentrated on schools outreach and on ‘raising aspirations’ through dissemination of information and providing experiences of HE to young people.

The Aimhigher programme was organised on three levels, with national programmes and coordination from a small HEFCE team, nine regions covering England and local ‘area partnerships’, which in turn devolved some funding directly to schools and colleges. The programme was one of several partnership approaches to education initiatives launched under new Labour governments (1997-2010) (including Connexions partnerships to link school-age interventions such as careers services and the nine Learning and Skills Councils and Regional Development Agencies) and was intended to link universities with schools, colleges, local authorities and training providers to tackle the issues of non-progression at a local level. Aimhigher was funded from 2004-2011, with around £1 billion of government funding over this time. The programme engaged with every HE institution, although to varying extents, often depending on how closely the programme aims aligned with institutional ones (Waller, Harrison & Last, 2015). This large-scale national approach to widening participation was a core part of government WP strategy but faced significant challenges in identifying and targeting ‘under-represented’ students (at least until HEFCE issued targeting guidelines, HEFCE 2007), in balancing the tensions of national policy and local needs and, significantly, in proving its value to institutions and to government. We should also note that only after the use of national guidelines for targeting and their gradual adoption did it become possible to evaluate the effectiveness of outreach, a central concern of both HEFCE and the Office for Fair Access from 2011 (HEFCE and OFFA 2014). A fuller discussion of evaluation policy and practice can be found in Chapter Seven of this volume.

### **The 2004 Act: widening participation enters the marketisation business**

The introduction of tuition fees, first through the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, and then further ‘top-up’ fees in the Higher Education Act 2004 (to a maximum of £3,000 per year), was a factor in focusing attention on the point of entry to higher education and on the role of all institutions in widening participation. Once students were framed as consumers and beneficiaries of HE, a focus on their ability to exercise choice within the system and to receive fair benefits from participation became crucial parts of the justification of fees. The assumed price differential was designed to drive efficiency and quality, representing differential outcomes from a graduate education reflected in institutional league tables. This was part of a shift from a recognition of horizontal differentiation within the sector (celebrated by HEFCE 1994 and HEFCE 2000 statements), with institutions having different and distinct missions and a wider range of provision, to greater emphasis on pre-existing vertical differentiation which valorised selective and more ‘traditional’

providers in a linear 'league table' format (McCaig 2018a; 2018b). Although price differentiation did not emerge, with nearly all institutions choosing to charge the new maximum fees, there were still implications for WP in this vertical differentiation, inadvertently highlighted by the establishment of the Office for Fair Access by the 2004 Act. This required any institution wanting to charge the new variable fee maximum to declare how they would use a proportion of additional fee income (i.e. above the £1,000 basic fee) to protect access for those from low-income backgrounds that may be deterred by the higher fees.

Higher status institutions could focus their WP efforts on activities intended to ameliorate the impact of student fees, offering generous bursaries to targeted groups of students (McCaig & Adnett 2009; McCaig 2011). They could also focus their outreach efforts on high-achieving potential students, creating competition over a small number of socially disadvantaged but suitably qualified young people, as noted by analyses of access agreement statements, (Graham 2013; Bowl and Hughes 2013; McCaig 2015). Institutions already recruiting large numbers of WP students (and thus larger numbers of those entitled to a bursary due to their low-income backgrounds) offered less generous financial support, leading to a significant overlap between student recruitment and widening participation aims.

Over Labour's period in office (1997-2010) WP policy increasingly became concerned with, not simply the actions of expanding post-92 institutions, but also those of higher status selective institutions. The introduction of fees brought into sharp focus the question of social exclusivity within these institutions and whether paying students could fairly access the perceived social and economic benefits of all parts of the sector. This concern with selective institutions and courses was present in Dearing but became increasingly part of political and public debate about HE, ultimately leading to a notable addition to widening participation policy in 2001:

By 2010, increase participation in Higher Education towards 50% of those aged 18-to-30. Also, *to make significant progress year on year towards fair access*, and to bear down on rates of non-completion. (DFES 2001:14. Own emphasis.)

This 'fair access' strand of widening participation became a key aspect of WP policy, forming part of instructions to HEFCE and, from 2004, to the newly formed Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Although initially particularly focused on access, concerns around admissions practices and the impact of fees on demand, fair access came to encompass a range of WP activity focused on 'top' universities, eventually also aligning with a policy focus on a narrow definition of 'social mobility' (an economic measure of intergenerational change experienced by families in labour market positions (Todd, 2021)), which apparently only highly selective institutions could guarantee. The lobbying efforts of organisations like the Sutton Trust and the political controversy over raising tuition fees also generated media and political interest in this aspect of WP work. By 2010, with a Conservative-led Coalition government the fair access/social mobility strand of widening participation was more prevalent in policy discussions (e.g. Browne Review 2010, Students at the Heart of the System White Paper, BIS 2011; OFFA 2011). Even before this, the notion of fair (non-discriminatory) access had been mentioned in House of Commons debates (e.g. Hansard, 5 Nov 2008), a committee charged with examining the role of universities in access to the professions (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009) and a review commissioned to explore what more could be done to widen access to highly selective universities (Harris, 2010). The passing of the Equality Act (2010), which delineated certain 'protected characteristics' gave fair access a legal definition based on non-discrimination: it was no longer possible to deny access to HE on any basis *except failure to meet entry requirements*, which were of course the exclusive preserve of autonomous institutions.

Given this context, work to widen participation under the rubric of 'fair access' included outreach targeted at high-achieving students also considered to be disadvantaged on the basis of individual characteristics (ethnicity, age, gender) or contextual factors (type of school, characteristics of home area), financial support and incentives to attend selective institutions and contextual admissions practices (such as offers of places at a lower tariff). There were expectations that pressure would need to be applied to selective institutions to encourage sufficient investment in this work, particularly given assumed disincentives to recruit students who may be at greater risk of non-continuation.

As far back as 1999, all institutions had been required by HEFCE to provide a statement on their widening participation activity (HEFCE, 1999). These initial plans came with the expectation that institutions would take significantly different approaches to WP depending on their context, in keeping with the encouragement of competitive differentiation (McCaig 2018b). As national initiatives emerged and concerns increased that higher fees would exacerbate inequalities in HE participation, there were movements towards more standardised sector-wide approaches and towards greater expectations that selective institutions would find ways to ameliorate the impact of fees on entry to HE. As noted above, the 2004 Higher Education Act established OFFA specifically to regulate widening participation, and further drive widening participation activity within institutions, reflected in access agreements. Ultimately, OFFA did little to exercise its (actually limited) powers, largely acting as a guide and advisor. Although criticised as a 'toothless authority' (Jones & Thomas, 2005), OFFA, alongside HEFCE, did steer the work of institutions, placing greater emphasis on individual institutional investment in widening participation, though without significant means to pressure institutions towards specific activity or, crucially, to alter their admissions policies and practices. However, OFFA also endorsed competitive behaviour among institutions as they were encouraged to target both financial support bursaries and scholarships and outreach according to their own missions and recruitment needs (Callender 2009a; 2009b; McCaig and Adnett 2009; DBIS 2011; OFFA 2011; Browne 2010). A fuller exploration of the key policy enactment roles of HEFCE and OFFA can be found in Chapter Three of this volume.

### **Widening participation beyond the sector**

Beyond the state and HE institutions, widening participation as a national concern in this period captured the attention of some parts of the media, private and charity sectors. The Sutton Trust, founded in 1997 by the philanthropist Sir Peter Lampl, focused on educational opportunities for young people from 'non-privileged backgrounds', co-funding a programme of summer schools at selective universities and publishing research on the social exclusivity of educational institutions and professions. Charities and emerging edu-businesses also featured as delivery partners in Aimhigher activities, with organisations like Brightside (founded 2004) and IntoUniversity (founded 2007) gaining political attention and funding from universities and, in the case of Brightside, directly from HEFCE. The work of such organisations featured in policy debates, often as examples of best practice (e.g. Milburn, 2009; Hansard, 15 Mar 2007), but were not considered essential components of the delivery of WP. Access to funding for such organisations was generally through Aimhigher partnerships, individual institutions or philanthropic donations, with limited demand for their services. This will be explored in more detail on Chapter Six: The Role of the Third Sector.

The business of widening participation in the 1997-2010 period was still emerging, reflecting the developing marketisation process and the changing needs of the economy, with historical, institutionally-based activity focused on adult learners giving way to national outreach, focused on young participation. Although market mechanisms, at least in terms of pricing, were still limited, institutions' positions in a hierarchy interacted with how they were engaging with WP. For post-1992



universities who already catered for almost all of the student groups identified as under-represented, engaging with national programmes like Aimhigher, developing new courses and delivering institutional WP activities aligned with plans for their own expansion. For pre-1992 institutions, this activity was less immediately relevant to their student recruitment goals but, as the designers of the HE market had hoped (DfE 2003; HMSO 2004) competition between selective institutions to enrol high-achieving students from under-represented groups (in the name of fair access) was emerging, along with outreach activity to identify them, such as the Gifted and Talented strand of Aimhigher (NFER 2009).

### **Accelerating the shift towards institutional responsibility (2010-2017)**

The programme of the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government after May 2010 highlighted two areas that would have an impact on the direction of widening participation over this phase. Firstly, in response to the 2008 financial crisis, there was a strong focus on austerity and a general 'bonfire of red tape' across government that led to the closure of Aimhigher, Lifelong Learning Networks and the Connexions service (which offered careers advice and guidance for school-age children); henceforth, market forces driven by consumer choice would determine educational outcomes and career trajectories, with HE institutions free from regulatory oversight (OFFA) and entanglement with state-funded social engineering (HEFCE) to focus outreach and recruitment to suit their own missions and needs (Browne 2010).

The closure of Aimhigher was partly justified by the paucity of evidence of its impact, partly caused by analysis of 'the wrong metrics' (Harrison 2012), though many former Aimhigher partnerships continued to practice collaborative outreach, funded from institutions' pooled budgets. Secondly, the concept of 'social mobility' was put at the heart of policy rhetoric around higher education and education more broadly. The Coalition's programme for government stated that they would judge the forthcoming review of higher education against 'the need to increase social mobility' (2010: 31). Whilst the term widening participation remained in the policy discourse as a generic descriptive term for any change in the social composition of the expanding number of students in the system (as well as 'feelgood' wider policy goal), the priorities of 'fair access' for the 'most able' were the prescribed variety of WP for those parts of the system that were concerned with maintaining the 'Global Excellence' of the UK HE brand. As noted by critical discourse analyses of the first set of OFFA access agreements after 2006 (Graham 2013, Bowl and Hughes 2013, McCaig 2011 and 2015), only by offering social mobility to the selected few would pre-1992 institutions justify charging the new maximum fee. Hence, widening participation became ever more important to the differentiation of the market.

### **Variable fees and the choice-driven market**

In October 2010, the Browne Review, commissioned in 2009 by the Labour government as an expected review of the fee regime introduced in 2006, produced its report. Its recommendations were broadly built upon the previous system, variable fees (now covering the whole cost of tuition) with no upfront costs and loans provided by government to be repaid by the graduate once their earnings were above a threshold. However, it completed the shift away from government funded higher education; henceforth all student funding (rather than around a third of teaching costs as between 2006 and 2012) would follow the student. In effect the whole system would be responsive to the demands of applicant-consumers, school leavers making rational choices based on enhanced information (BIS 2011).

The subsequent White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' (BIS 2011) did not follow Browne's recommendations for a fully market derived fee system, instead introducing a capped maximum fee of £9,000 per year. The expectation was that this new maximum would only be charged by a small number of institutions, with others positioning themselves between this maximum and the £6,000 basic fee. However, once again, the intended price differential between institutions did not emerge, with nearly all institutions charging above the predicted £7500 per year deemed to make the scheme affordable according to HEFCE modelling (HEA 2014). In an attempt to incentivise lower average fees – and more importantly, a fee distribution with only the most desirable courses attracting the new maximum fee as a critical market driver - modifications were made to student number controls (SNCs). Limits on funded student numbers had been in place since 2009 to control HE expenditure in a challenging financial climate, but were now altered to incentivise institutions to recruit unlimited numbers of high achieving students (within a fixed cap, meaning they would take correspondingly fewer students with lower grades). As an attempt to drive down average tuition fees in the less selective parts of the sector (and stretch the fee distribution), a further tranche of additional student numbers was allocated to institutions charging £7,500 or lower. With demand from applicants remaining high however (even as the number of 18-year-olds in the population was falling), not only did these incentives fail to produce the intended price differential, nor did they act to redistribute high achieving students across the system (most of those with the highest grades already attended the most selective institutions) as intended, as demonstrated by HEFCE's own 2011 modelling (HEA 2014).

Among recruiting post-1992 institutions, however, the *fear* of losing their better qualified applicants if the SNC regime continued was prevalent (HEA 2014), with many incentivised to go 'up market' in terms of their entry requirements demanded and research credentials (crucial metrics in the published league tables). Ensuing programme reviews led in some cases – including high profile Russell Group institutions - to a cull of under-recruiting and/or expensive provision, which threatened provision of part-time study and, in some cases the breadth of provision where demand fell off (HEA 2014; McCaig & Taylor, 2017). Such were the failings of the SNC regime that it was abolished after only two years, having failed to anticipate continued high demand right across the sector (rather than just within the favoured elite 'old universities' of the Ministerial imaginary) and a reluctance among even Russell Group institutions to jettison disciplinary breadth (the definition of a university) and their own social justice-inflected and pluralist missions. Following a Treasury announcement ending SNCs in November 2013 (HM Treasury 2013) a fully demand-led system with no number caps was introduced from academic year 2015-16, in a move described by HEPI's President Bahram Bekhradnia as appearing to be 'a final and desperate attempt to create a market in higher education where there has been none so far' (Bekhradnia, 8 May 2014). What would be the prospects for the business of WP in a renewed period of expansion?

### **Doubling down on individual responsibility for social mobility**

The Coalition government's focus on social mobility continued with a 2011 social mobility strategy, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* (Cabinet Office 2011). The strategy explicitly outlined its interest in *relative* social mobility as an indication of a fair society. The strategy suggested that, as demand for skilled workers was outstripping supply, there was 'room at the top' for highly qualified graduates. The approach was therefore to focus on 'raising aspirations' and incentivising those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to take advantage of opportunities presented by this additional space, as had happened in earlier periods of social mobility, such as the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when changes to the labour market created increased demand for clerical and managerial workers (Todd, 2021: 105-128). This of course reiterates the centrality of human capital imperatives to any discussion of the

social phenomena of widening participation, and that social justice benefits that accrue from reducing barriers to access alone are rarely enough to drive national policy.

### **The shift from ‘access to HE’ to ‘participation and success in HE’**

This focus on widening participation as part of social mobility renewed scrutiny beyond the point of entry, on retention, student success and degree outcomes that had first been featured in the 2011 White Paper (BIS 2011) and OFFA guidance to institutions developing ‘new access agreements’ for the post-2012 funding regime (OFFA 2011). For many institutions, particularly post-1992 institutions with large proportions of WP students (up to 40% of their intake qualified for financial support on the basis of Residual Household Income), student support and teaching and learning had long been part of what was considered widening participation activity, but this had not always been reflected in the language of national policy or as closely scrutinised. This ‘student lifecycle’ approach was picked up in OFFA and HEFCE’s 2014 joint strategy (OFFA/HEFCE 2014) and made explicit in guidance to institutions on their access agreements and institutional target setting. Henceforth, and particularly since the OfS subsumed HEFCE and OFFA, post-1992 and new alternative HE providers (encouraged since 2011, legislated for in the 2017 Higher Education Reform Act) would be monitored more closely in relation to retention and successful graduate outcomes.

The policy shift towards considering widening participation throughout the student lifecycle also aligned with the framing of institutional responsibilities around quality and enabling student choice. With funding now following individual students, ensuring applicants were exercising their choices to generate the expected market differentiation of price and ‘quality’ formed the basis of several developments, including the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The introduction of the TEF, set out in a 2015 Green paper when differential fee limits were envisioned for those awarded ‘Gold’, ‘Silver’ and ‘Bronze’ status, was intended to provide another form of market signalling that would enable potential applicants to assess ‘what they are getting for their money’ (DBIS, 2015: Part C, para 21.).

### **Social mobility and the role of outside organisations**

Although widening participation policy seemingly gave renewed emphasis to the role of individual institutions in tackling previous failures, it also created an opportunity for outside organisations keen to contribute to broader social mobility aims. Over this period, partly encouraged by a political environment that articulated a significant role for social enterprise in tackling social inequalities (Cabinet Office, 2006), the national issue of social mobility attracted many entrepreneurs and philanthropists to found charitable and non-profit organisations aimed at tackling widening participation. Without Aimhigher and Connexions services, there were some gaps in provision aimed at schools and a new academies system that enabled individual schools to exercise their own purchasing power. For both individual institutions and for collaborative work, outside providers could add capacity for outreach programmes and provide specialist expertise or technological platforms. Partnerships and funding arrangements emerged between universities and charities such as Brightside, IntoUniversity and the Brilliant Club, to deliver new and established programmes of outreach activity. Many newer organisations followed the established model of the Sutton Trust, whose summer school programme worked in partnership with selective universities and had become a favoured example of good practice (Harris, 2010). Initially small scale and primarily based in London, these organisations captured the attention of media and politicians, being consulted for the 2012 report of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission and, from 2013, explicitly mentioned as suitable partners for access and participation work by HEFCE and OFFA (OFFA/HEFCE, 2014). By the end of this period, third sector organisations particularly were regularly listed as

consulted parties for policy enquiries and were delivering widening participation activities at a national scale, though they remained largely reliant on partnerships with HE providers to do so.

### **The dual economy of widening participation policy: competition and collaboration**

Whilst the regulatory and funding structure of HE assumed that responsibility for widening participation lay with individual institutions, the environment of competition for students worked against tackling issues of low participation at a national scale. Institutions had few incentives to reach out to regions without local HE provision and, particularly for selective institutions, increasing their own market share by poaching from other selectives did nothing to impact the size of market as a whole. This issue was raised by OFFA and HEFCE in their joint *National Strategy for Access and Student Success*, which recommended the formation of national collaborative outreach networks to 'maximise the impact and coverage of their [institutions'] access work, reduce duplication and recognise the contribution institutions make to widening access beyond their own student intake' (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014:10). In 2014, funding of £22m over two years was allocated to create a 'national outreach network' (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014). The resulting National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) scheme funded 34 regional and four national networks from Dec 2014 to Dec 2016. The evaluation of the scheme concluded that its aims were broadly met but that the collaborative model faced many challenges, in part due to the power imbalances within networks and the residual 'interinstitutional culture of competition' (HEFCE, 2017: 6). The scheme was in 2017 succeeded by a new collaborative outreach scheme in the form of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) and its assumed importance in meeting national policy aims is reflected in its continued funding – under the banner of Uni Connect – to at least 2025.

During this period WP policy both emphasised the actions of individual institutions in a competitive market, and also relaunched state-funded collaborative activity intended to overcome the limitations of that same market, only four years after the demise of Aimhigher. HE policy was increasingly driven by market mechanisms, constructing applicants as consumers whose choices would drive improvements and create variable pricing in the sector. This extended to and involved WP policy, which necessarily was linked to any expansion of the market and concerns about inequality as some students might be 'priced out' or might not exercise their choices in ways that government considered to be in their (or the economy's) best interests. The market environment also created disincentives for institutions to recruit widening participation students who, historically and on average, had higher rates of non-completion and lower entry qualification profiles, thus threatening an institution's league table position. Yet simultaneously, institutions were charged with making more progress on widening participation, being held to account for the composition of their student body and for outcomes for those students by OFFA. 'Doing' widening participation was increasingly a necessary part of business for institutions and a strategic activity, particularly for selective institutions which failed to or only narrowly met benchmarks for participation and student outcomes. These themes will be explored more fully in Chapter Five.

The regulatory scrutiny of activities and claimed successes pitted parts of the differentiated sector against each other, competing to move WP students (or the relatively few of them that achieved the necessary entry requirements) around the system, rather than changing the composition or capacity of the system. The state, of course, has no leverage over institutions' legal autonomy when it comes to setting entry requirements; here the only currency is A level (or equivalent) grades held by applicant-consumers. For many institutions there was also an ongoing commitment to and interest in widening participation for reasons of social justice, diversity and inclusion, with investment in a range of activities throughout the student lifecycle to widen participation. However, balancing these commitments with also generating metrics that would signal a strong institutional market position

necessarily limited the ability of the sector to widen participation, even when all types of provider were engaged in collaborative partnership work. The dual economy of institutional competitive behaviour and (effectively) mandated collaborative work suggests the latter largely serves the purpose of correcting for market failure, given the continuing lack of progress in widening participation to more selective institutions.

### **Regulated widening participation (2017-?)**

The 2017 Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) represented significant movement towards a marketised HE sector, introducing several new concepts: the risk of failure and exit for institutions that were not financially viable (previously the funding council would intervene to prop-up failing institutions or facilitate mergers); a single regulatory body for access, participation and quality standards focused much more on the interests of students as the primary consumers (the Office for Students); and the promotion of 'teaching excellence' as another market differentiator, in recognition that research metrics should not be the sole proxy for quality, as they can seem to be in institutional league tables (McCaig, 2018). As in the previous phase, in policy developments that fed into the HERA there was a strong emphasis on student choice and on the role of government intervention to remove 'information asymmetries between students and institutions' (DBIS, 2015: Part C, para 6.). The OfS was charged with promoting 'equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education provided by English higher education providers' (HERA, 2017: section 2), to be partly managed by the requirement for institutions charging above the basic fee (£6,000) up to the basic fee cap level (£9,250) to produce an 'access and participation plan' (APPs, successors to OFFA access agreements in the OfS regime). In setting out approaches to access and participation, the OfS specifically admitted that regulation was necessary because 'market mechanisms are not sufficient to drive the desired outcome' (OfS, 2018:15).

In addition to regulating competitive institutional widening participation, the OfS took over funding the HEFCE's national collaborative outreach programme (NCOP), renamed Uni Connect in 2019. The programme funds 29 collaborative partnerships (including schools, FE colleges, some Third Sector providers and local authority bodies) charged with working with 'students who are on a trajectory to go onto higher education in terms of attainment, but who may choose not to' (HEFCE, 23 June 2017) and thereby close the participation gap. Funding is area based, with resources focused on pupils living in areas with lower-than-expected progression rates based on Key Stage 4 attainment and area ethnicity profile.

In this phase, the business of widening participation has arguably returned to its mid-2000s mode, with state funded collaborative outreach to raise demand from underrepresented groups, alongside a regime of institutions encouraged to widen access to their own institutions, based on their own perceived competitive needs. The main difference – from the perspective of both the state and HE providers – is that the whole business is more closely monitored by regulation, albeit without financial sanctions. The regulatory environment, although not determining the precise activity of institutions, has steered them into alignment with national performance measures and has put pressure on institutions to deliver activity with measurable outcomes. The current Uni Connect emphasis of working with Y9 to Y13 young people has raised concerns for the continuation of activity working with younger pupils, where outcomes aligned to targets can take several years to emerge, and for targeted work by institutions that does not directly align with the OfS' key performance measures; however, institutional Access and Participation Plans offer providers more leeway than OFFA access agreements beyond national priorities, and performance is no longer benchmarked against similar institutions. Interestingly, in a HERA context of 'risk and exit' for failing

institutions, it is unlikely that failure in relation to WP elements of the regulatory system would put a provider at financial risk such that it would be allowed to exit the market, and as such OfS may prove as ‘toothless’ as OFFA was said to be. Indeed, the OfS itself notes that in relation to one of its targets:

To eliminate the gap in entry rates at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups’, the Office is not expecting to achieve this target until 2038-39. (Office for Students 2021)

## **Conclusion**

The development of the ‘business of widening participation’ has been closely tied to the development of the market. In early phases, outreach activity was encouraged to expand the market demand from interested and suitably qualified applicants, and has successfully widened participation to hundreds of thousands of young people that would not have had access to HE without expansion. However, because selective institutions reacted to expansion by maintaining higher entry requirements (citing institutional autonomy to deflect most efforts to widen access to their provision in the name of maintaining their position in global rankings, Bowl and Hughs 2014; McCaig 2015; 2018a) the market effect has merely reinforced the impermeability of access for the disadvantaged to that higher education most likely to open doors to the most remunerative and influential professions (law, journalism, medicine and the natural sciences).

Expansion within the post-1992s, FE colleges and new providers, where the majority of underrepresented groups progressed into anyway, has also led to greater development of activities to support retention of these students. Activities that improve ‘retention and success’ have increasingly become the outcome measures of most interest to OfS regulators, finally actuating the initial imperative for reform began with the 2011 White Paper and Joint Strategy (HEFCE and OFFA 2014). As tuition fees were introduced and steadily increased, so did a focus on moderating the impact of these on the lowest income students, with national funding schemes and universities encouraged to offer financial support. With demand remaining high, even in the context of the Covid-19 disruption, the impact of bursaries as incentives to widen participation across the whole system appeared minimal but almost all institutions retained these after 2012 (after which they were no longer mandatory) to either support their competitive position or – in the case of post-1992s - with consideration for their impacts on retention and success, as institutions’ own research demonstrated that bursaries helped prevent marginal students from dropping out (OFFA 2016; Harrison and McCaig 2017).

With increasing shifts to framing the student applicant as consumer, and development of market mechanisms which positioned the choice of the applicant as a lever to drive quality, and, theoretically at least, price, there has been greater emphasis on outcomes and student experience, with a corresponding focus on WP activities across the student lifecycle. There has also been an increasing application of metrics that can be used to signal market position, with metrics also used to regulate (or monitor) WP performance. At an individual institution level, these have further galvanised competition between selective institutions in attracting students who fit WP criteria *and* meet their entry requirements. At the national level, HE providers have been obliged to continue to use targeting based on area-based measures, long since considered questionable in identifying disadvantage at individual level (e.g., Harrison and McCaig 2014). This suggests that the development of the Executive-level policy aim of system marketisation, now over thirty years in development and refinement (McCaig 2018b), has increasingly impacted and become entwined with another higher-level policy aim of widening participation to groups previously underrepresented, in

order to increase the national pool of highly educated human capital and address social inequalities of access. However, without policy reforms to the ways in which student admissions are managed – in effect an intrusion on institutions’ autonomy over admissions – there is little chance that applicants without the kind of socially advantaged background that is associated with good educational achievement prior to HE entry will be any more likely to access the most elite universities and professions. (Elliot-Major and Banerjee 2019)

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