The changing policy language of widening participation in the English HE market: from WP to ‘fair access’ and ‘social mobility’

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Abstract This article analyses the changing language of 'widening participation', in general use since the Dearing Report of 1997 (NCIHE, 1997) and employs policy discourse analysis of six policy texts to link the evolution of language to describe the work of widening participation over almost three decades. The article shows clear links between the changing use of language of policy discourses employed to justify the ongoing marketisation of the higher education (HE) system through five stages between 1987 and 2017 (McCaig, 2018). It also explores the language changes in relation to different perspectives or lenses, most evident in the shift from the societal aim of widening participation to the individualised language of 'social mobility' as students came to be seen as consumers and policymakers' attitude towards system expansion began to change, with increasing emphasis on vocational further and higher education.

Keywords Marketisation; access to HE; discourse; policy change; retention; graduate outcomes

Introduction

This article presents a historical overview of changes in policy language used in the field of widening participation (WP) in the almost three decades since the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE)'s Dearing Report, *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (NCIHE, 1997). By the mid-1990s a broad policy consensus had begun to form around the idea that inequalities of access to higher education (HE) in the UK were inhibiting its ability develop sufficient highly qualified human capital to compete in a globalising world. Internationally, this consensus emerged around the discourse of 'lifelong learning' and, in the UK and globally, manifested in a series of reports during the 1990s to encourage what Dearing styled 'the learning society' (NCIHE, 1997: 7). In the UK, with its tradition of restricted entry to (in particular) selective HE institutions (HEIs), the gathering discourse of 'widening participation' to incorporate underrepresented and disadvantaged groups was given a

significant boost via Dearing, many of the recommendations of which were subsequently adopted by the incoming new Labour government from 1997. Widening participation as a policy arena and societal project that we are familiar with today was born from Dearing: 'to widen participation' has become an active verb, whereas 'widening participation' is akin to a noun.

The specific purpose of this article is to closely analyse the changing use of language by national policymakers, drawing particularly on how that language reflected changing national policy aims, and the developing interests of key mission groups of institutions in the context of stages of marketisation (McCaig, 2018). Due to the lack of space, this article is unable to consider the impact of these changes on practitioners and students, which are excellently covered elsewhere e.g. by Jones, Vigurs and Harris (2020) and Rainford (2019; 2021).

At national policy level, the paper will trace the shift from the discursive use of the term 'widening participation' to 'social mobility'; it will also address how WP is used between competing institutional groups and the discourse shift from 'widening participation' (for all by raising aspirations) to 'fair access' (a term preferred by policymakers and selective universities to describe non-discriminatory admissions). The paper will conclude by drawing out the role of market competition as the system differentiated, especially from the early 2000s, and the changing political ideology which manifested in the turn against massification among key Conservative spokespeople following the passing of the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*. While this paper focuses on the specifics of the English HE market, there will be lessons to be drawn across international systems that employ competitive differentiation to create a market effect (e.g. Australia, Canada and the United States) even as they pursue equity outcomes (Letizia, 2015; Harvey *et al*., 2018; Ortagus *et al*., 2020). The paper also illustrates ways by which successive governments have been able to shift emphasis from access to traditional, 3-year higher education study at degree-level and towards vocational higher education, often at sub-degree level, where the UK is often noted to fall behind international levels of skills acquisition (DfE, 2019).

Conceptual framework

The article uses political discourse analysis (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2013), which focuses on arguments employed in policy debates, often as rationales for reform or justifications for changes already made. This takes the form of a close reading of policy texts, resulting in critical analysis linking discourse shifts to the changing stages of marketisation as they steadily altered the emphasis from the collective interests of the state to those of the individual applicant-consumer. Political discourse analysis (PDA) in this instance differs from traditional critical discourse analysis (CDA) in that the texts analysed here are not directly comparable; not only do they represent the different perspectives of their authors (or the policymakers that commissioned them), but they also represent different stages in the process of marketisation. In addition, they vary in length, purpose and the centrality of discussions about widening access and participation to the whole document. Nevertheless, they contain the corpus of such debates over almost 30 years of policy. Table 2 (on page 25) summarises the variable use of some key terms in policy documents since the Dearing Review.

Discourse does not exist in a vacuum, for its own purpose, but is employed as an agency of power (Foucault, 1972; 1979; Fairclough, 1993). In practice, PDA offers an explanation for which language is employed, and why it sometimes changes over time. In this case, the prevailing context for change is the steady process of marketisation in the English HE system, a process begun the mid-1980s and one intrinsically entangled with the development of widening participation policy and language after Dearing (Jones and Thomas, 2005; Archer, 2007; Brown and Scott, 2009; Harrison, 2011; Brown and Carasso, 2014; McCaig, 2018; Selby, 2022). This leads to an understanding of how WP policy emerged from the relationship between human capital theory and competitive differentiation between autonomous institutions (McCaig, Rainford and Squire, 2022).

The main texts examined are:

- NCIHE (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (The Dearing Report)
- DfES (2003) *The Future of Higher Education*, Cm 5735 (White Paper)

- DBIS (2009) *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* (White Paper)
- DBIS (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, Cm 8122 (White Paper)
- DBIS (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, Cm 9258 (White Paper)
- DfE (2019) *Independent Panel Report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* (The Augar Review), CP 117; and speeches given by the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP, in DfE policy response (Donelan 2020; 2022)

Perspectives and framing

It is important to note that language can also be reflective of social perspective, and such terms are not always alternatives or conscious replacements. For example, 'WP' comes from a holistic or societal perspective around what we expect or need of the HE system; 'social mobility' is a term borrowed from economics that is reflective of an individual's progress due to education or training; 'fair access' is a legal perspective solely concerned with non-discriminatory practice in admissions; 'meritocracy' is a societal perspective concerned with the rightfulness of how we organise our society and thus the education system in accordance with what we see as 'dessert' for the most able. It is therefore legitimate on occasion that these terms are used in tandem; for instance, we can speak of social mobility contributing to widening participation (and vice versa), or fair access contributing to meritocracy by ensuring that barriers to access are removed. Equally, as Bekhradnia (2003) noted, it is perfectly possible to widen participation without enhancing 'fair access' (e.g. by preferencing access for specific cohorts only, in the form of positive discrimination), and equally possible to ensure fair access in a way that does nothing to widen participation if it merely shifts applicants from an underrepresented group from one HE provider to another. It is also possible to analyse terminology through the lens of macro-economics – the supply and demand of graduates for example, or indeed by taking a micro-analysis of

the policy interventions each approach implies at practitioner level, as illustrated by Table 1:

Table 1: Widening Participation and Fair Access

Activities and scope	Widening Participation	Fair Access
Generic or targeted	innovative curricula development	measuring and encouraging high ability
Supply or demand side	increasing demand by raising aspirations and alleviating fear of debt among any/all under-represented groups	ensuring no barriers to supply of 'good' students caused by discrimination; no wastage of human capital
Social or individual level	socially inclusive: increasing the number of highly educated people	individually selective: social mobility (and implied meritocracy) for those that have the highest ability; that can benefit from study at a 'research intensive' institution
Policy drivers	meeting the needs of the regional/national economy; social justice	creating and maintaining global excellence of 'UKHE'
Foci of interventions	focus on secondary and further education levels to offer a second chance for 'late developers'	focus on primary age to early identify 'gifted and talented' that can benefit from study at a 'research intensive' institution
Loci of practice	Post-1992s; FE colleges	Russell Group and other research-intensive institutions

Adapted from Chapter 3 of Bowl, M., McCaig, C., and Hughes, J. (eds) (2018) *Equality and Differentiation in Marketised Higher Education: A New Level Playing Field?* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Analysis: changing language use across six policy texts

NCIHE (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (The Dearing Report)

The Dearing Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997) is often described as the beginning of the WP policy agenda, and while there had been a long pre-history of concern about inequality of access (SRHE, 1983; Selby, 2018; 2022), Dearing was the first to recommend – and justify – state intervention specifically to widen participation

across the whole sector. This was to come in two main ways: direct allocations of state funding to institutions that already did much of this work; and a combination of exhortation and financial incentivisation for the rest of the sector, given the context:

> 'Government policy should now ensure that higher education is an active partner in the developing strategy to raise achievement and increase participation, at national, regional and local level' (NCIHE, 1997: 106, para 7.20).

Having persuasively made the argument that the creation of the 'learning society' (NCIHE, 1997: 9, para 1.10) was central to the wider national concern to resume growth in the system (review respondents suggested a participation rate of 40% was required, para 1.15), the learning society also required workers:

> 'to renew, update and widen their knowledge and skills throughout life. This will influence the system, character and scope of higher education in very many institutions' (NCIHE, 1997: 10, para 1.16).

There was also the equity case, which was in truth a combination of an argument for social justice with another that recognised that – given the changing labour market with ever fewer opportunities for those with redundant credentials (NCIHE, 1997: 54, para 4.12) – the economy faced an irresistible tide of demand that it would be politic not to ignore:

> 'Apart from the economic imperative, there are other influences pointing to resumed growth. Unless we address the under-representation of those from lower socio-economic groups we may face increasingly socially divisive consequences. As a matter of equity, we need to reduce the under-representation of certain ethnic groups and of those with disabilities' (NCIHE, 1997: 10, para 1.17).

The economic argument for continuing growth having been made, Dearing was able to address the barriers manifested in differential participation and what this implied for institutions offering HE. Here the argument drew on the morality of the societal perspective:

> 'As participation increases, the cost of non-participation grows too. … Society and higher education institutions have, therefore, a moral obligation to concern themselves with continuing differences in levels of participation by different groups' (NCIHE, 1997: 102, para 7.5).

Moving on from the 'why' to the 'how', the report outlined how the state should use its financial powers:

> 'We recommend to the Government and the Funding Bodies that, when allocating funds for the expansion of higher education, they give priority to those institutions which can demonstrate a commitment to widening participation, and have in place a participation strategy, a mechanism for monitoring progress, and provision for review by the governing body of achievement' (NCIHE, 1997: 107).
>
> 'We … propose that each governing body should devise a clear policy about its strategic aims for participation with particular reference to those groups who are known to be under-represented; and that it should monitor admissions and participation against those aims' (NCIHE, 1997: 107, para 7.22).

A third major plank was to be the creation of state-funded programmes to oblige regional collaborative work, focussing on 'projects designed to address low expectations and achievement and to promote progression to higher education' (NCIHE, 1997: 108), particularly around Information Advice and Guidance (IAG).

It should be noted that the focus for a lot of the envisaged new places was at sub-degree level and workplace learning. The review reflected complaints from some respondents about the competitive nature of HE and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funding which some feared was leading to the homogenisation of the sector, thereby potentially threatening the diversity of the sector (NCIHE, 1997: 251, para 16.11). Diversity had been apparent since the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* and celebrated by the new HE funding councils (HEFCE, 1994), but had stimulated the emergence of two 'mission groups' representing the older and more selective 'pre-1992' universities, the Russell Group (for those with medical schools) and the 1994 Group (of older universities without medical schools), seeking to differentiate their provision from the new 'post-1992' universities (mostly former state-funded polytechnics and HE colleges)[i].

Taken as a whole, Dearing firmly established WP as both a policy goal and a concept, with a full set of justificatory arguments, language and policy prescriptions still familiar to us almost thirty years later. Dearing presented expansion as inevitable and necessary and, given that increasing participation

would *ipso facto* imply widening participation, it would create access for social groups long denied such opportunities. Widening participation became both a new way of conceptualising inequalities of access, encompassing moral and emancipatory arguments, and a practical set of solutions to the challenges of transitioning to a 'learning society' in the face of global competition.

DfES (2003) *The Future of Higher Education*, Cm 5735 (White Paper)

Given the wide-spread acceptance of Dearing's various prescriptions and the adoption of many of the recommendations by the Labour government, WP duly became established as a policy concern for whole HE sector. However, as early as 2000 the central concept of diversity as an unalloyed good was being questioned by a HEFCE statement; expansion would not be funded if it just offered innovation for its own sake (HEFCE, 2000):

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

Meanwhile, selective universities, represented by the Russell and 1994 Groups, were simultaneously pushing for higher 'top-up' fees and arguing for the need to differentiate their offer from the generality of HE. This can be seen as creating a market signal of where the most valuable higher education was being delivered in the newly unified market.

All this formed the backdrop to the 2003 White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003). As with Dearing, the main purpose of the White Paper was the need to justify an increase in tuition fees; however, in the newly envisaged regime competitive differentiation would enable applicants' real choice about where to study, with the clear quality signal of higher fees at institutions that could justify them. Thus, differentiation became a cornerstone of later stages of marketisation, pitting applicant choice (demand) against competing suppliers encouraged to differentiate their wares; a clear shift from the

earlier stage in which competition was encouraged and diversity celebrated as a 'good thing' in its own right (McCaig, 2018). In the 2003 White Paper, policy was able to move on and the language of quality, enabled by differentiated provision, entered the discourse:

> 'There is a broad consensus within higher education that all of these elements are both welcome and necessary. However, it *is unreasonable to expect all higher education institutions to sustain all of these activities simultaneously at global, and not just national, levels of excellence*. No higher education system in the world is organised in this way. Rather, scarce resources are applied in such a way as to produce *a focus on comparative advantage: individual institutions focus on what they do best, while the sector as a whole achieves this much wider range of objectives*' (DfES 2003: 20, para 1.37; emphasis added by author).

As we shall see, this move away from the centralised and societal prescriptions of Dearing would have implications for how differentiated HEIs approached WP. In his Foreword, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Charles Clarke identified 'two areas where our universities have to improve':

> 'First, the expansion of higher education has not yet extended to the talented and best from all backgrounds. In Britain today too many of those born into less advantaged families still see a university place as being beyond their reach, whatever their ability.
>
> Second, we have to make better progress in harnessing knowledge to wealth creation. And that depends on giving universities the freedoms and resources to compete on the world stage' (DfES, 2003: 2).

Having justified the need for more resources and linked this to quality (competing on the world stage), Clarke then went on to outline a third challenge, which was to ensure that students from poorer backgrounds were supported in the context of the new variable maximum tuition fee contribution of £3,000 per year of study (to cover about a third of the cost of tuition), replacing the 1998 blanket £1,000 fee regime.

A notable feature of the 2003 White Paper was that it mostly eschewed the use of the term 'widening participation', preferring the notion of 'fair access', even though the sentiments and exhortations of the chapter of the same name largely built on the Dearing prescription. Throughout the entire document, 'WP' merited three mentions, 'widening access' another two, while 'fair access' appeared 11 times in the text. The main new policy proposal was to 'appoint a Higher Education Access Regulator' (DfES, 2003: 68), in itself an acknowledgement that the new fee regime and particularly the variable pricing element were likely to impact applicants from low-income backgrounds. Within six years, policy language had moved on from 'widening access and participation for all' to the need for a Director of Fair Access as a safety net to protect those that may lose out due to market competition.

DBIS (2009) *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* (White Paper)

This White Paper was the first to reflect higher education's move from the responsibility of a department of education to one primarily concerned with business, innovation and skills. It was also launched as a response to the 2008 global financial crisis. In the Foreword, Peter Mandelson, then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, declared that:

> 'The question we face now is how we continue to widen access and sustain and improve standards of university excellence in an increasingly pressured international context and in a more constrained public spending environment' (DBIS, 2009: 3).

Having framed access with excellence, Mandelson went on to elide social justice with social mobility (a term that did not appear in the 459 pages of the Dearing Report) and the skills needs of the economy.

> 'Everyone, irrespective of background, has a right to a fair chance to gain those advantages. This is vital not just as a question of social justice and social mobility but also for meeting the economy's needs for high level skills' (DBIS, 2009: 3).

Reflecting the business and skills emphasis of the department now responsible for HE, educational expansion would henceforth lean increasingly on vocationalisation and efficiency:

> 'We compete on knowledge – its creation, its acquisition, and its transformation into commercially successful uses. Although universities have a civic, cultural and intellectual role, they are central to this process' (DBIS, 2009: 3).

Efficiency as a theme allowed the 2009 White Paper to continue the competitive differentiation discourse of the 2003 version, but with a harder edge: the threatened removal of funding for those institutions unable to compete (DBIS, 2009: 4). While the language of widening participation still appeared (13 mentions), it had been superseded by 'fair access' which appeared 17 times in the text, including in the title of the WP section 'Wider and fairer access to Higher Education' (DBIS, 2009: 24). There were far fewer mentions of key WP terms such as 'raising aspirations' (1) or 'outreach' (3). While the government was still committed to the 50% young participation target:

> 'It is important to recognise that this ambition does not imply that half of all school-leavers should continue immediately to university to study on a conventional three year degree programme. The traditional pattern of three year, campus-based honours degrees is not the only route to higher skills, nor the only way to prepare successfully for modern economic life' (DBIS, 2009: 26, para 6).

Anticipating demographic change which was to reduce the number of 18-year-olds in the population, the White Paper emphasised the opportunity to make HE more responsive to the needs of the economy (DBIS, 2009: 26, para 8).

Overall, the White Paper *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* was still supportive of WP successes but contained fewer positive references to the benefits of competition than the 2003 document. The 2009 version was much more focused on the needs of the economy and reforming the student finance system by commissioning Lord Browne to conduct a review, reflecting shift from the DfES to BIS, and also notably introduced the individualist economic language of social mobility (which appeared five times in the text).

DBIS (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, Cm 8122 (White Paper)

As with the 2009 White Paper, the preoccupation here was the student finance regime introduced in the wake of the Browne Review (DBIS, 2010) and the election of a Conservative and

Liberal Democrat coalition government, specifically introducing a series of market incentives (including student number controls) designed to lower average tuition fees (Taylor and McCaig, 2014). Following the introduction of the new variable cap of £9,000 per year of study – to cover the whole cost of tuition – fees set by institutions for academic year 2012/13 (£8,250) had settled uncomfortably close the maximum, threatening the Resource Accounting Budget (RAB) based on assumptions of affordability set at £7,500 per year of study (Taylor and McCaig, 2014; McCaig and Taylor, 2017). Two elements of the new regime have subsequently had an impact on how the language and discourse of widening participation developed.

Firstly, graduate repayment of the whole costs of tuition (rather than a proportion) positioned the choice of applicant-consumers at the nexus of the market relationship (Brown and Carasso, 2014. Consequently, institutional level WP work had to shift towards the provision of Key Information Sets for all degree programmes, and a greater emphasis placed on information advice and guidance (IAG) as part of outreach to schools and colleges. Places would no longer be created; demand had to be stimulated by outreach in competition between autonomous providers. Secondly, *Students at the Heart of the System* and accompanying Office for Fair Access (OFFA) access agreement guidelines (OFFA, 2011) emphasised that 'retention and success' for students should be of an equal concern as access. The White Paper hoped to stimulate growth in the system, in part by incentivising new 'alternative' providers which would offer HE at lower price points:

> 'Better information will enable students to make informed choices about where to study. But that will not be enough unless popular higher education institutions and courses can expand, and new providers, including those who offer different models of higher education, can enter the market' (DBIS, 2011: 46, para 4.1).

Expansion was still encouraged, but the signal was that it was up to applicant-consumers to choose carefully where to study and how much they should pay if they couldn't meet the entry requirements of the most selective institutions:

> 'There are already different providers and courses available to cater for this variety in demand. Over 1,600 bodies, public and private, at home and overseas, offer some form of UK

> higher education provision, around 250 of which are further education colleges. *Colleges have displayed particular strengths in reaching out to non-traditional higher education learners including mature and part-time students*. They also have a distinctive mission particularly in delivering locally-relevant, vocational higher-level skills such as HNCs, HNDs, Foundation Degrees and Apprenticeships' (DBIS, 2011: 46, para 4.3; emphasis added)

The main WP section of the White Paper, Chapter 5, was significantly entitled 'Improved social mobility through fairer access', and here the notion of 'fair access' was for the first time closely aligned with social mobility specifically for 'bright young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds':

> 'Higher education can be a powerful engine of social mobility, enabling able young people from low-income backgrounds to earn more than their parents and providing a route into the professions for people from non-professional backgrounds. But … there are *significant barriers in the way of bright young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds* accessing higher education' (DBIS, 2011: 54, para 5.3; emphasis added)

Discursively linking access with academic excellence and institutional autonomy in a single sentence encapsulated the ethos of competitive differentiation that Ministers sought to stimulate. Across the whole White Paper there were just eight mentions of 'WP', 31 of 'fair access' and three of 'social mobility'. In its guidance to OFFA, the government signalled the transition from a system-wide emphasis on raising overall numbers to one that focused on the needs of individual institutions:

> 'The guidance set out significantly increased expectations for the priority that institutions should give to fair access and widening participation. We want to see a shift away from assessment of inputs and processes, to a focus on clear outputs from access activities and measurable progress against appropriate measures *and targets chosen by the institution* and agreed with OFFA' (DBIS, 2011: 60, para 5.22; emphasis added).

OFFA guidance for what were termed 'new access agreements' for 2012/13 and beyond created conditions which directly expected HE institutions to differentiate their WP work: henceforth the main priority was to be a focus on retention for those with relatively low retention rates (OFFA, 2011: 10) as part of the recognition that 'Access agreements will vary between institutions' (OFFA, 2011: 8, para 28).

This was handily laid out in a set of broad spending guidelines: those with a low proportion of under-represented students should spend around 30 per cent of fee income above £6,000 per FTE on access commitments; those with an average proportion of under-represented students should spend around 22.5 per cent of fee income above £6,000; those with a high proportion of under-represented students were directed to spend around 15 per cent of the fee above £6,000. (OFFA 2011: 13)

The use of language of retention and success, focusing on outcomes rather than inputs, was here reinforced with differentiation; institutions were henceforth obliged to choose how they 'did' WP and thus how they would be categorised in the marketplace.

DBIS (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, Cm 9258 (White Paper)

The main purpose of the text was to justify a legal framework within which the market reforms signalled by the previous White Paper (DBIS, 2011) could be actualised: creating a 'level playing field' with all HE providers (HEPs) now operating under a single regulatory regime based on risk, operated by the new Office for Students (OfS), replacing HEFCE and OFFA. Measures were introduced to encourage new providers into the market in the hope that the sort of competition envisaged in *Students at the Heart of the System* (DBIS, 2011) would emerge and have a downward effect on average tuition fee levels. What this implied for widening participation was a renewed focus on monitoring of progress against set quality indicators, the better to expose relative failure as a further market signal for applicants.

Risk-based quality assurance would expose 'red flags about shifts in provider activity or behaviour, or failure to meet a range of input and output benchmarks' (DBIS, 2016: 33), further shifting the emphasis onto providers to focus on retention and graduate outcomes rather than access to HE. While 'student recruitment levels' was among the key indicators (DBIS, 2016: 33), the main thrust of the White Paper was about making the supply side of the market work better:

> 'By creating a market regulator that has an explicit duty to promote choice, we will increase quality, efficiency and value for money through better informed choices and competition, and further enhance the globally renowned quality of our teaching' (DBIS, 2016: 63).

In total, 'widening participation' was mentioned 25 times in the text and 'fair access' 28, but both were easily eclipsed by the 96 mentions of 'social mobility'. The subsequent *Higher Education and Research Act 2017* passed into law just before the 2017 election at which the Conservative government lost its overall majority, thereafter governing on a 'confidence-and-supply' basis with minority parties. The campaign featured a promise by the Labour Party to abolish fees completely if elected, prompting another review of the fee regime post-election.

DfE (2019) *Independent Panel Report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* (The Augar Review) and the government response (Donelan, 2020; 2022)

The subsequent Review of Post-18 Education Funding (Augar Review) was charged by then Prime Minister Theresa May with addressing the failure of the market to create a price differential to match the perceived quality differential (DfE, 2018) but not to question the market principals of the post-2012 settlement – in other words, make the market work more efficiently:

> 'The review will not make recommendations related to the terms of pre-2012 loans or to taxation, and its recommendations must be consistent with the Government's fiscal policies to reduce the deficit and have debt falling as a percentage of GDP' (DfE, 2018: 3).

Efficiency would come from creating incentives that would deter some people from expensive three-year undergraduate provision:

> 'This review will look further at how we can ensure our post-18 education system is joined up and supported by a funding system that works for students and taxpayers. For example, in recent years the system has encouraged growth in three-year degrees for 18 year-olds, but does not offer a comprehensive range of high quality alternative routes for the many young people who pursue a technical or vocational path at this age' (DfE, 2018: 1).

Another argument deployed by Augar – that the wrong choice of course could harm students – was then elided with the concept of (undefined) 'low value degrees':

> '[F]or a small but significant minority of degree students doing certain courses at certain institutions, the university experience leads to disappointment. We make recommendations intended to encourage universities to bear down on low value degrees and to incentivise them to increase the provision of courses better aligned with the economy's needs' (DfE, 2019: 10).

Augar further emphasised the lack of skills at Levels 4 and 5 and noted that England is now among the highest for young participation at undergraduate level in the OECD (DfE, 2019: 20). Yet, those from disadvantaged backgrounds stand to gain the least benefit in terms of a social mobility uplift from degree education:

> 'Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately likely to attend low tariff institutions and more likely to drop out. These students are also less likely to achieve first class or upper second degrees compared to their more advantaged counterparts and to earn less after graduation' (DfE, 2019: 24–25).

Here again the implication is that applicant-consumers without sufficient entry requirements for more selective providers should instead undertake vocational skills training at sub-degree level; however, the funding system steers them towards university degree programmes (DfE, 2019: 25). Perhaps unsurprisingly given its context, the Augar Review contained no mentions of widening participation, and only one of fair access, but social mobility appeared 25 times in the text.

In the government's first response, Michelle Donelan's 2020 speech on what she called 'true social mobility' (Donelan, 2020), clearly developed the themes outlined by Augar:

> '[T]oday I want to send a strong message – that social mobility isn't about getting more people into university. For decades we have been recruiting too many young people on to courses that do nothing to improve their life chances or help with their career goals. …
>
> And universities do need to do much, much more to ensure that all students - and particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds - are recruited on to courses that will deliver good outcomes ….
>
> Since 2004, there has been too much focus on getting students through the door, and not enough focus on how many drop out, or how many go on to graduate jobs. Too many have been misled by the expansion of popular sounding courses with no real demand from the labour market' (Donelan, 2020).

The Universities Minister's prescription was to redirect applicant-consumers away from traditional three-year academic degrees:

> 'True social mobility is about getting people to choose the path that will lead to their desired destination and enabling them to complete that path. True social mobility is when we put students and their needs and career ambitions first, be that in HE, FE or apprenticeships' (Donelan, 2020).

Subsequent government statements in further response to Augar continued with the use of language that implied that the relentless, risk-based focus on quality was the only prevention for failure at the provider level, and would even benefit those no longer encouraged to 'access' them: 'Through this tough regulatory action, we are protecting students from being let down by these institutions' (Donelan, 2020).

Policy discourse changes: a summary

Radical language shifts from providing opportunities for all (widening participation), to concerns about a specific set of institutions (fair access to more selective universities) as part of the stimulation of a competitive market for applicants, itself justified as the emphasis shifted to the individual's social mobility (Table 2). The most recent linguistic turn builds on the social

mobility theme, encouraging some applicants to pursue cheaper vocational qualifications, including Degree Apprenticeships in 2015, which have only tangential links to widening participation (Pullen *et al.*, 2024).

Table 2: Changing use of key terms in policy documents since Dearing Review (NCIHE, 1997)

Document	'Widening participation/ access'	'Fair access'	'Social mobility'
DfES (2003) *The Future of Higher Education*, Cm 5735 (White Paper)	5	11	0
DBIS (2009) *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* (White Paper)	13	17	5
DBIS (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, Cm 8122 (White Paper)	8	31	3
DBIS (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, Cm 9258 (White Paper)	25	28	96
The Augar Review (DfE, 2019)	0	1	25

As noted above, what this journey illustrates is not merely a fashion-shift in language that replaces one term with another. Changes in wider discourses and specific language terms reflect changing policy prescriptions (in relation to different stages of marketisation; McCaig, 2018) but also perspectives: the variable purpose of the texts and the power relations they represent. So, while documents can and often do conflate terms such as 'WP', 'fair access' and 'social mobility', PDA reveals that the way those terms are deployed vary depending on the purpose or argument being made (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2013).

Hence, the OFFA guidance from 2011 mentions 'social mobility' less often than any of the White Papers issued by DBIS (2009, 2011 and 2016), and later statements designed to shift applicant behaviour towards vocational skills (Augar, Donelan and DfE) usually only evoke WP in a pejorative sense, part of the problem they are seeking to address as one policy technology subsumes another.

The introduction of variable partial and then full-fees made students consumers who individually had to be persuaded that HE would enable their own social mobility. Individual applicants were hardly expected to be concerned about whether there was widening participation across the entire HE sector; although arguments designed to appeal to applicants had to reference the need for non-discriminatory fair access (DfES, 2003) and their consumer rights (DBIS, 2016). They also needed reassuring of the quality of what they were consuming, the main pre-occupation of the OfS regime after the 2017 Act. Concerned about the rising costs of the system and the need to therefore shift a large proportion of applicants away from expensive three-year undergraduate provision (Donelan, 2020; DfE, 2022; Halfon, 2023), questions of access were secondary to policymakers. They were merely concerned with the efficiency of the pathways to social mobility they had created. It is noticeable that even under Conservative-led governments the market-driven expansion that begat widening participation for Dearing remains unquestioned; the concern has become about the nature and cost of that expansion.

Widening participation as a discourse and set of language terms persists mainly in the context of collaborative programmes (such as Uni Connect), and noticeably these remain to be encouraged and funded as acknowledged market correctives (OfS, 2018), even as official discourse favoured social mobility when justifying the regulatory mechanisms introduced by the OfS (DBIS, 2016). It is noticeable that Labour plan to build on the benefits of collaborative WP work (Blake, 2024), but WP is a discourse restricted to system-wide policy and analysis rather than the concern of individuals or individual providers (DBIS, 2011; OFFA, 2011). Fair access is discursively assumed to be guaranteed by equalities legislation (*Equality Act 2010*).

'Meritocracy' is a much vaguer term assumed to be present as long as access is not capped, although its proponents (e.g. Mandler, 2020) tend to ignore structural inequalities that lead to differential access and outcomes (Young, 1958; Woolridge, 2021). Language, as ever, reflects power relations; in this case, the shift away from the language of widening participation is a symptom of the neoliberal shift from the concerns of the collective state (Dearing) to the concerns of the responsibilised individual (Morrison, 2017) as part of the marketisation of English higher education.

[i] Following the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* there are no state-funded HE institutions in the UK. All providers are either in possession of a Royal Charter or are Exempt Charities and all have legal autonomy over admissions and what HE they decide to provide.

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