

# Who you know, what you know and knowing the ropes: a review of evidence about access to higher education institutions in England

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This paper considers the history of access to higher education in England and reviews the evidence on the progress made in widening participation and ensuring ‘fair access’ under the New Labour governments of 1997–2010 and, insofar as is possible, under the Coalition government that has been in office since 2010. While recognising that we need also to consider the nature of what students gain access to, the focus of this particular review is on evidence about inequalities in access to higher education as presently constituted, including in particular access to what are often regarded as the most ‘prestigious’ institutions. The paper considers the various ‘barriers’ to widening participation that are said to exist—from finance, aspiration and awareness and prior attainment—and assesses claims that socio-economic inequalities in access largely disappear once prior attainment is taken into account. It then discusses the role of social and cultural capitals in perpetuating inequalities both in prior attainment and access to higher education in its various forms. The importance of ‘knowing the ropes’ is highlighted and the paper ends with a discussion of the implications of the findings of the review for future approaches to policy and research in this field.

## Introduction

Fifty years after the publication of the Robbins Report heralded a major expansion of UK higher education (Robbins, 1963), only 33.3% of young full-time first degree higher education entrants in England are from social classes 4, 5, 6, 7<sup>1</sup> and just 11.1% are from low participation neighbourhoods (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2012, 2013). Although UK governments have left final decisions about admissions to individual universities, for nearly 20 years now they have used a combination of exhortation, benchmarks and funding incentives to encourage universities in general—and ‘elite’ universities in particular—to take students from a broader range of backgrounds than has traditionally been the case. In this paper we explore the extent to which these policies have led to a widening of participation in higher education by lower socio-economic groups and consider some of the factors that continue to inhibit progress in this field. The paper focuses on students who continue on to full-time undergraduate higher education straight from school or college

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—and not part-time, mature or postgraduate students whose participation raises rather different but equally important issues (see Callender, 2013; Whitty & Mullan, 2013).<sup>2</sup> Although some historic data relate to the UK or Great Britain as a whole, we focus squarely on policy issues in England.

While the findings of this review are relevant to the growing policy debate about alternatives to higher education as currently conceived, we do not address directly the question of whether mass or universal higher education is a desirable policy goal, nor whether particular universities are more desirable to study at than others. Rather, we take the view that if higher education (or even a specific version of it) is currently taken for granted as a desirable ‘good’ for some social groups, it should not be systematically denied to others. In other words, we regard widening participation and fair access as ‘social justice’ issues.

Similarly, this particular review does not deal in any detail with the nature of the higher education to which students gain access, important as that may ultimately be in moving beyond ‘widening participation’ as currently understood (Burke, 2012; Gorard & See, 2013). While we do not dismiss demands for ‘epistemological equity’ (Dei, 2010) as mere epistemological populism, we understand the argument that, for now, social justice requires equality of access to what currently counts as ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young, 2008), provided we interpret that in its broadest sense to include ‘knowing the ropes’ as well as ‘what you know’. Nevertheless, we recognise that future progress in widening participation and student retention will require, at the very least, further changes in universities’ approaches to recruitment, course design, pedagogy and pastoral practices.

### **The growth of participation in higher education in England**

Historically English higher education (and English education more broadly) was closely associated with the Christian church and the education of the ruling class. With industrialisation in the 19th century there was a shift towards education serving wider economic, social and political aims. Hayton and Paczuska (2002) note that by the end of the 19th century the state had recognised the potential of higher education to provide a skilled and educated workforce to support the growth and competitiveness of British industry, as well as to serve the Empire. During the early 20th century, while the previous elitist system had been opened up to a certain extent, higher education was still overwhelmingly the preserve of the upper middle class; significant financial, cultural and social barriers to accessing higher education were faced by other groups (Archer *et al.*, 2002).

The shift from an ‘elite’ to a ‘mass’ system of higher education in England (Trow, 1974; Scott, 1995) would be set in train (or at least be symbolised) by the publication of the Robbins Report in 1963. This was fuelled by a combination of evidence about lack of equality of opportunity and wastage of human capital (Barr & Glennerster, 2014). The report took the view that:

Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so (Robbins, 1963, p. 8).

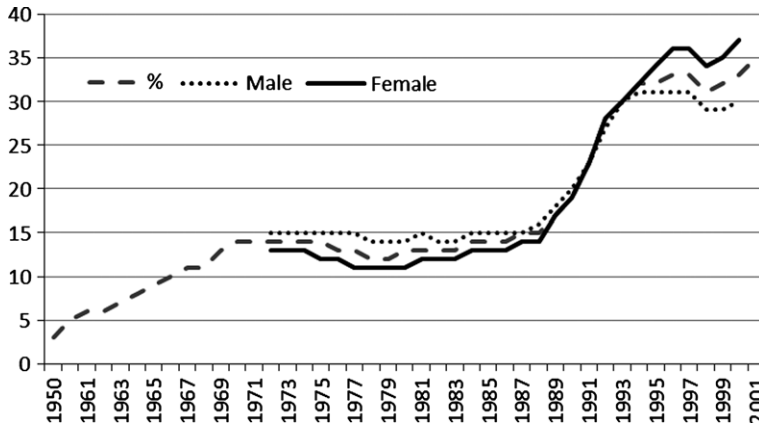


Figure 1. Participation rate (API) for Great Britain (1950–2001)

Note: The Age Participation Index (API) is defined as the number of UK-domiciled young (aged less than 21) initial entrants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses of higher education, expressed as a proportion of the averaged 18–19-year-old GB population. The measure was discontinued in 2001 and replaced with the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR).

Source: Broeke and Hamed (2008).

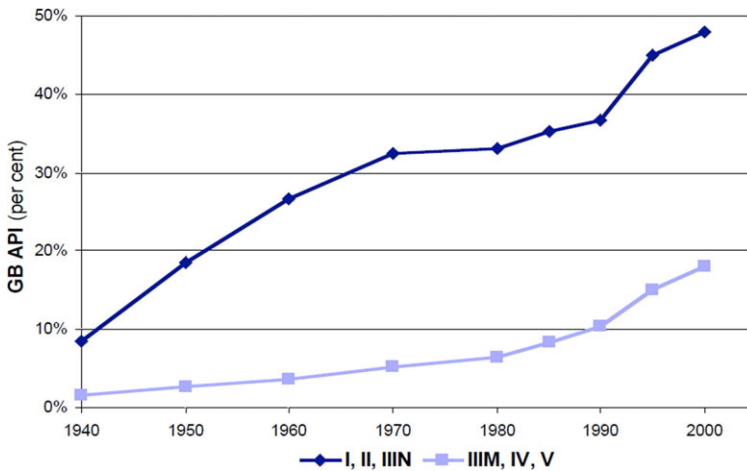


Figure 2. Higher education entrants by social class group (1940–2000)

Note: This social class classification is broken down as follows: I, Professional, etc. occupations; II, Managerial and Technical occupations; III n, Skilled occupations—non-manual; III m, Skilled occupations—manual; IV, Partly skilled occupations; V, Unskilled occupations.

Source: Kelly and Cook (2007).

This became known as the Robbins principle. At that time, new institutions joined the sector and a national system of financial support for poorer students was introduced. The massive growth in the overall participation rate in the following 40 years is illustrated in Figure 1 above.

By 1966, there were 63 institutions of higher education (HEIs) with 44,500 students. There are now 122 HEIs in England, of which 103 have official university status. In total, there are 339 institutions that have some form of higher education

provision, with over three million higher education students in all (HESA, 2012). However, the comparatively small numbers of working class students who have entered HEIs, decade after decade, have demonstrated that expansion alone is not enough to ensure equal access. As Figure 2 above shows, since 1970 there has been a considerable and persistent gap in the rates of participation in higher education between those from higher and lower socio-economic groups—a gap of about 25–30 percentage points. That gap became a focal point in particular for the New Labour government that first came to power in 1997.

### **New Labour policies**

The New Labour government, committed by Prime Minister Tony Blair to ‘Education, Education, Education’ as its three priorities, regarded the role of higher education as enhancing both economic competitiveness and social justice (Wilkins and Burke, in press). Its early years in government were dominated by the implementation of its response to the Dearing Report on *Higher Education in the Learning Society*, commissioned under the previous government (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], 1997). As a result of concerns about the sustainability of higher education funding, as well as quality and standards and responsiveness to the needs of the economy in an expanding system, the 1998 Teaching and Higher Education Act controversially abandoned the traditional student maintenance grant, reformed the student loan system and introduced a £1000 annual tuition fee for all but the poorest students.

For his second term of office, from 2001, Tony Blair embraced a new target—to increase the participation rate of 18–30-year-olds in higher education to 50% by 2010. A key driver for this policy was the need to compete in the global economy (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003; Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills [DIUS], 2008; Leitch, 2006). As part of this outlook, an emphasis on advanced ‘vocational’ education had already been signified by a number of curriculum and progression initiatives, such as the introduction of work-related Foundation Degrees in 2001. However, while New Labour viewed economic benefits to the individual and to the economy as the main driver for its expansion of higher education (Walker & Zhu, 2010), it also recognised other potential benefits to individuals and society of attending higher education, including improved health and wellbeing, as well as greater democratic participation and social cohesion (Bynner *et al.*, 2003; Schuller *et al.*, 2004; McMahon, 2009).

New Labour policies in general recognised the importance of cultural and social factors in creating disadvantage and what they termed ‘social exclusion’ (Levitas, 2006; Hayton, 1999). As a result, New Labour placed a stronger emphasis than the previous Conservative government on achieving greater equity in who had access to higher education. For this, it employed a two-pronged policy: the first, widening participation, was primarily concerned with narrowing the participation gap between those social groups that had traditionally continued on to higher education and those that had previously been under-represented; the second, fair access, referred to the fairness of admissions processes in any institution, but it was mainly used to raise equity issues concerning which type

of institutions different social groups attended (Bekhradnia, 2003). As other gaps that once existed (such as the under-representation of women and certain minority ethnic groups) narrowed substantially, the focus increasingly shifted to those from lower socio-economic groups. Indeed, female participation had actually become higher than that of males by 7.2 percentage points by 2007 (Broeke & Hamed, 2008), although males continue to dominate certain subject areas like Engineering and Technology (85%), Computer Science (82%) and Architecture, Building and Planning (72%) (HESA, 2012).

To deliver its target the New Labour government instigated a number of policy reviews and initiatives. From 2002, all universities were required to develop and publish a Widening Participation Strategy. Dedicated funding was made available to universities through *Partnerships for Progression* and to Local Authorities through *Excellence in Cities* to increase progression to higher education. In 2004, schemes such as these were expanded and incorporated into *Aimhigher*, a major national initiative to increase the participation of under-represented groups in higher education. At the same time, the Education Maintenance Allowance, piloted since 1999, was rolled out nationally to provide financial support for students in post-16 education. The importance of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) was recognised through the creation of the Connexions service to provide all students with one-to-one advice about careers.

The issue of access soon became tied up with a re-opening of the debate about the funding of higher education more generally. The limitations of the post-Dearing reforms were significant enough to trigger a further review of higher education funding and student support. The controversial 2004 Higher Education Act reduced direct funding for undergraduate courses from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and introduced variable fees. Contrary to expectation, most universities opted to charge £3000 per annum, the highest fee allowed, rather than attempting to compete for students on the basis of differential fees.

In response to concerns about the possible impact of the new fees regime on widening participation, an Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established following the passage of the 2004 Act. All universities charging the so-called 'top up' fees were required to produce an Access Agreement stating the fee they intended to charge for undergraduate courses and setting out their plans for student financial support, as well as for outreach and retention activities (DfES, 2003; OFFA, 2004). Although students would now be liable to pay their own fees, a number of measures were introduced to support those on lower incomes, including access to loans at preferential interest rates. From 2006, a yearly maintenance grant of £2,700 for those on the lowest incomes was paid with the requirement that universities would supplement this by an annual bursary of at least £300 for those students on full state support (DfES, 2006).

Meanwhile, the specific issue of fair access had been highlighted in 2000 by Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as the result of the case of Laura Spence, a young woman from a state school with excellent grades who was denied entry to Oxford University but subsequently offered a place at Harvard (*Guardian*, 2000). Although the particular case was not clear cut, New Labour continued to pursue the broader issues it raised and, in 2003, the

Secretary of State, Charles Clarke, commissioned a review of higher education and university admissions processes, chaired by the Vice Chancellor of Brunel University. While the Review (Schwartz, 2004) did not reveal any discriminatory practices, universities were subsequently required to develop and publish an admissions policy as part of their Access Agreements to demonstrate the impartiality of their procedures.

Although there was no attempt to impose on universities quotas for students from particular backgrounds, as happens in some countries, or even to encourage positive discrimination in any strong sense, each university was given an individual widening participation performance indicator. The widening participation indicators or 'benchmarks' published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) since 2002/3 are based on the proportions of young undergraduates from state schools, low participation neighbourhoods and from socio-economic classes 4–7, adjusted to take into account the range of subjects offered at the institution and the entry qualifications of the students recruited. Some universities perform poorly against their benchmarks, although Oxford argues that its own benchmark of admitting 76% of its students from state schools is unrealistic on the basis that far more pupils in private schools achieve top examination grades.

The fact that, for whatever reason, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were proportionately still failing to access the full range of higher education institutions (HEIs) was regarded by government as a significant problem and the issue of widening participation and fair access moved up the official agenda. New Labour's 50% participation target was joined by a further target to narrow the participation gap between 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds from the top three and bottom four socio-economic classes. Gordon Brown, who replaced Blair as Prime Minister in 2007, saw this as a key measure of success in raising aspirations, narrowing achievement gaps and improving social mobility (Public Service Announcement (PSA) Delivery Agreement 11, HM Treasury, 2008, p. 7). His government also embraced the concept of fair access to selective universities with increasing enthusiasm – to growing accusations of using higher education for 'social engineering'.<sup>3</sup>

Following the economic crisis of 2008 policies began to change once again. By 2010, to contain spending on higher education in a context of rising demand, overall student number controls were re-introduced, with fines for over-recruitment (Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2011). Arguably, this made universities more cautious in their admissions decisions, having less flexibility to offer places to applicants with slightly lower grades. Nevertheless, the 50% target remained in place, as did Aimhigher. A 2009 White Paper, *Higher Ambitions*, maintained a focus on fair access, setting in train a review by the then head of OFFA, Martin Harris, into further ways to improve access to highly selective universities (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2009a). Ultimately, however, the most significant 'post-recession' initiative would be the establishment of a major review of higher education funding chaired by Lord Browne, which was commissioned by Peter Mandelson under New Labour but did not report until autumn 2010, by which time a Conservative-led Coalition government was in office.

### New Labour’s performance against targets

We can begin to evaluate New Labour’s performance in this field by considering the extent to which what Boliver (2008) calls quantitative inequality and qualitative inequality were each reduced during its period of office. Quantitative inequality describes variation in the proportions of young people from different socio-economic backgrounds participating in higher education. Qualitative inequality describes the distribution of higher education participants from different socio-economic groups across different courses or institutions. So, in broad terms, the first is a measure of widening participation, the second of fair access.

#### Quantitative inequality

In 2007, the government revised the methodology it used to measure the participation gap to take into account changes in the overall socio-economic make-up of the population (Kelly & Cook, 2007).<sup>4</sup> The new measure showed a more positive picture than that shown in Figure 2 above, with the participation gap declining since the mid-1990s and standing at 20.2% in 2007/8. This is shown in Figure 3 below.

Later reports from HEFCE, using different measures of disadvantage based on higher education progression rates in specific geographical areas identified as low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs), also presented positive findings (HEFCE, 2010, 2013). As Figure 4 shows, the rate of increase in participation for the most

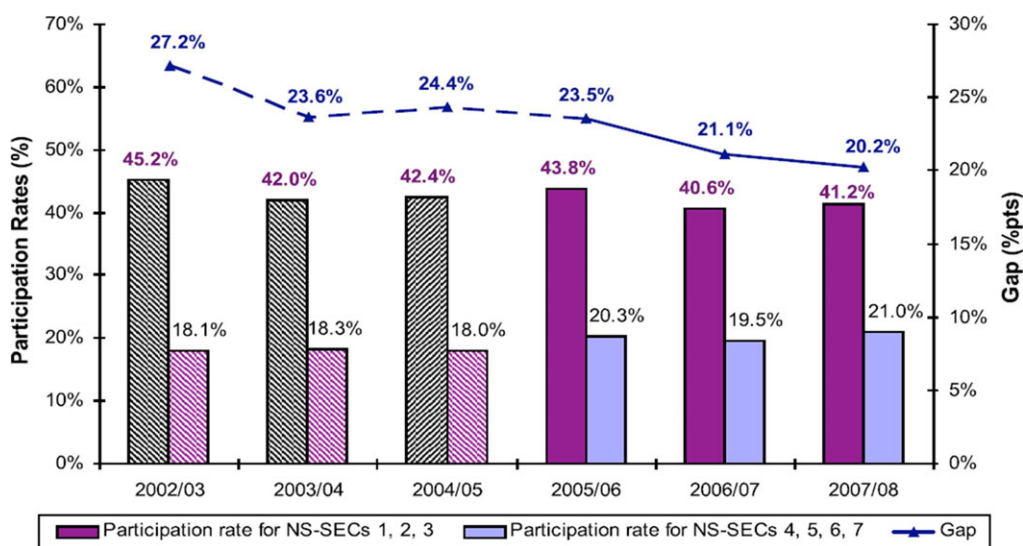


Figure 3. Participation rates (FYPSEC) of those from high and low socio-economic background and their gap (2002–2008)

Note: This figure shows the Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic Class (FYPSEC) measure. FYPSEC covers English domiciled 18–20-year-old first time entrants to full time higher education at UK HEIs and English FE colleges who remain on their courses for at least 6 months. The measure draws from a number of data sources and there remain several weaknesses, including incomplete coverage and socio-economic background as reported by the student.

Source: BIS (2009c).

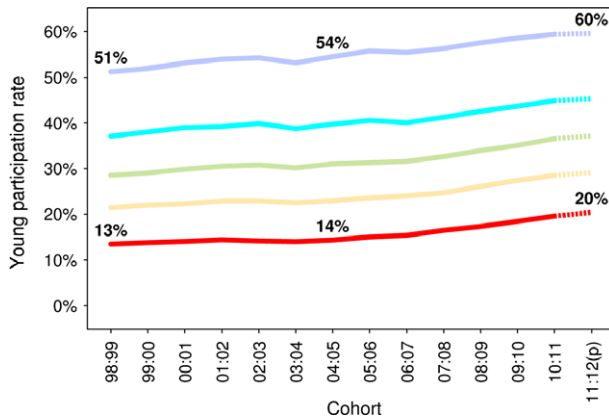


Figure 4. Trends in young participation for areas classified by HE participation rates (POLAR2 classification, adjusted)

Note: POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) is a classification of small areas across the UK according to their rates of participation by young people in higher education and is used by HEFCE as a basis for the distribution of widening participation funding and assessing institutional performance in widening participation. POLAR2 has now been replaced by POLAR3. See HEFCE (2012) and <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/ourresearch/polar/>

Source: HEFCE (2013).

disadvantaged areas was considerably greater than that for areas of greater advantage, particularly after 2004/5. As a consequence, by 2011/12, most of the additional entrants to higher education attributable to the higher participation rate were from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Certainly, then, there has been a clear trend of wider participation among those from LPNs. Other research, however, has highlighted the need to consider participation in more nuanced ways. McCaig and Harrison (2014), for example, have cautioned against an undue focus on performance in LPNs on the basis that this can concentrate outreach activity in such areas to the neglect of the much larger numbers of disadvantaged students living elsewhere. The findings of projects undertaken as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), brought together in David (2010), provided evidence that there remained disparities and differences between diverse social groups. More recent data from the UK's University and College Admissions Service (UCAS, 2014b) show that whether a young person applies to university has continued to be heavily influenced by a number of factors, including social background, gender and ethnicity, as well as where they live. Comparative data from earlier recruitment cycles showed a big increase in applications from young people from some minority ethnic groups in England, particularly black teenagers, where the proportion of applicants rose from 20% to 34% between 2006 and 2013 (UCAS, 2013). Chinese teenagers were the most likely to apply, followed by other young people of Asian heritage. White teenagers were the least likely to apply, with only 29% seeking places. McCulloch (2014) has explored the regional differences in admissions and identified higher aspirations and higher attainment in London, as well as the greater proximity of university places there, as particularly significant in explaining the higher progression rate to higher education in the capital.



### Qualitative inequality

The task of assessing performance in relation to the issue of qualitative inequality—the type and prestige of the higher education institution attended by different groups—introduces many more challenges. However, work undertaken by Boliver (2010) at Nuffield College, Oxford has sought to throw light on the processes involved. It builds on the theory of Effectively Maintained Inequality, which suggests that, as access to higher education expands, those groups of people who had previously had more exclusive access will attempt to maintain their advantage by seeking out supposedly ‘better’ education (Lucas, 2001). Whether the education received at more prestigious institutions is actually of higher quality or not does not matter to a certain extent, especially if education is viewed as a screening system or a ‘partly positional good’ (Hirsch, 1976; and see Adnett & Davies, 2002). In England, many pupils from middle class backgrounds attempt to maintain their positional advantage by attending highly prestigious institutions. As in the USA, there is thus a tension between access to the system and stratification within it, so that ‘student access to the system as a whole does not mean access to the whole system’ (Bastedo & Gumpert, 2003, p. 355).

Using data from 2001/2—part way through New Labour’s time in office—Boliver (2008) pointed to the uneven distribution of students from different socio-economic groups across different types of university, with 20% of entrants to ‘old’ universities coming from professional families compared with 10% of those going to ‘new’ universities.<sup>5</sup> Figure 5 shows the uneven distribution of students in a different way, with 44% of students in higher education from professional families attending Russell Group universities but only 23% of those from unskilled backgrounds.

Boliver (2013) subsequently extended her analysis to cover the years 1996–2006 and found that throughout the period applicants from lower social class backgrounds

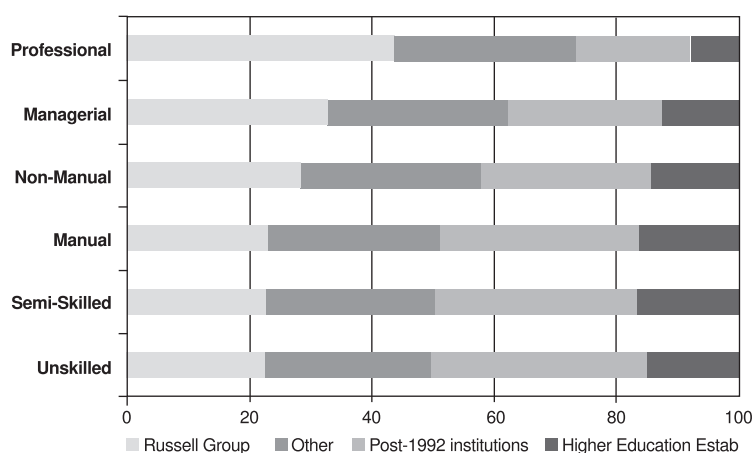


Figure 5. Type of university attended by socio-economic background

Note: ‘Other’ refers to pre-1992 universities that were not members of the Russell Group at the time. ‘Higher Educational Estab[lishments]’ means here ‘non-vocational institutions that have yet to be awarded university status’ (Machin *et al.*, 2009, p. 6).

Source: Machin *et al.* (2009), in Hills *et al.* (2010).

and from state schools were less likely to apply to Russell Group universities than their peers from higher social class backgrounds and private schools, and that those from state schools and certain minority ethnic groups (though not from lower social class backgrounds as such) were less likely than their peers to receive offers. She therefore concluded that access to Russell Group universities was still 'far from fair' (p. 344).

The more fine-grained the distinctions between universities, the more noticeable was the social gradient and access to the most prestigious higher education institutions was still dominated by those from elite independent schools. In 2007, 46.6% of young full-time first degree entrants to the University of Oxford came from private schools (HESA, 2009). This figure was all the more striking when you consider that only about 7% of English children are educated in such schools (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2008). Analysis undertaken by the Sutton Trust, a UK charity working to improve social mobility through education, which looked at participation in selective universities specifically, suggested that around 30% of students at what it regarded as the most prestigious universities (the 'Sutton 13')<sup>6</sup> came from just 200 schools (out of a total of around 3700 secondary schools and colleges). It further found that just under half of the students at Oxford and Cambridge came from just 200 schools (Sutton Trust, 2008).

It would appear, then, that while there was some progress in widening participation under New Labour, there remained considerable qualitative inequalities. Even though the different measures used in the various studies outlined below produce slightly different results, the broad picture is clear. Thus, the report of the aforementioned review by the then head of OFFA (Harris, 2010) found that, although widening participation efforts had had a positive impact overall, the picture was different if the group of what the report calls 'highly selective' institutions was considered separately. It showed that, although the overall higher education participation rate of the least advantaged 40% of students had increased since the mid-1990s, the participation rate of the same group at the most selective third of universities had stayed constant. The gap between the most and least advantaged had actually increased in these universities as those from the most advantaged backgrounds (the top 20%) were now more likely to attend these institutions than they were in the mid-1990s.

A more nuanced and slightly more positive picture can be derived from the most recent work by Crawford (2012) and Chowdry *et al.* (2013), which not only shows a significant narrowing of the socio-economic gap in entry to higher education overall between 2004/5 and 2010/11, but also some narrowing of the gap at 'high-status universities'<sup>7</sup> during this period, partly driven by a slight fall in participation among the most advantaged students. In contrast, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission set up by the Coalition government found that the proportion of students from state schools who started full-time courses in Russell Group universities fell slightly between 2002/3 and 2011/12, while a separate measure of how many students came from disadvantaged backgrounds also saw a fall (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission [SMCPC], 2013).

A recent report from OFFA (2014), albeit just using area-based data, seems to confirm that limited progress was made in tackling qualitative inequality as compared with quantitative inequality during the New Labour period and indeed beyond.

Figure 6 below, which covers the New Labour years, demonstrates that, while participation at low and medium entry tariff institutions showed a significant improvement during that period, there was no equivalent change at high entry tariff institutions.

In other research during the New Labour period, the Sutton Trust claimed that there was a group of state school students who were ‘missing’ from the UK’s ‘leading’ universities (Sutton Trust, 2004). The report suggested that there were 3000 academically able state school pupils who were not taking up their fair share of places at ‘leading’ universities, despite having met the entrance requirements. The authors concluded that ‘well-qualified young people aren’t staying out of higher education, but they are setting their sights lower than either their [academic credentials] permit or their peers in private schools’ (p. 4).

That comment of course ignored the fact that students may well be making rational decisions about what is right for them. Nevertheless, the consequent concentration of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in less prestigious universities prompted some commentators to argue against widening participation in higher education (see for example McCartney, 2006; Lea, 2008). They suggested that these students were being enticed into institutions and courses that were unlikely to add much value in terms of their future earnings potential.

Taken together, the data presented here raise serious doubts about the success of New Labour’s approach, particularly in relation to fair access. Some commentators have criticised the premises underlying New Labour policies—for example, those of Aimhigher—for focusing on the assumed deficits of individuals rather than structural issues (Gewirtz, 2001; Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Burke, 2012). While these may be valid criticisms, increasing awareness about university among under-represented groups was necessary and continues to have value. Many of the significant advances

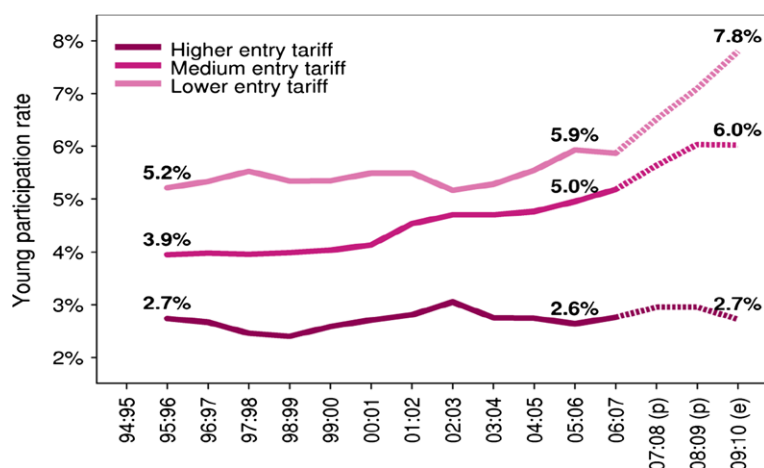


Figure 6. Participation rates of the most disadvantaged 40% of young people in entry tariff institution groups

Note: OFFA classifies institutions according to whether their young entrants have, on average, higher tariff, medium tariff or lower tariff scores from their entry qualifications (relative to other institutions).

Source: Harris (2010). See also OFFA (2014).

in access to education, such as the participation of women, have occurred partly as the result of their increased demand for university places. Without the changes in awareness brought about by Aimhigher and similar provisions among prospective students, their families and their teachers, change might have been far slower (Doyle & Griffin, 2012). Collaboration between institutions through Aimhigher in particular allowed for more efficient targeting of resources and its focus on widening participation in general instilled confidence in schools and colleges that HEIs' efforts to increase progression to higher education were not merely part of a recruitment drive for a particular institution. While Aimhigher had many limitations, it should be noted that few universities had seriously engaged in outreach work targeting under-represented groups before these New Labour initiatives.

### **Coalition policies**

Although the recommendations of the Browne Report were not adopted in full by the Conservative-led Coalition government elected in 2010, they were pivotal in paving the way for the most radical change in the funding and organisation of UK higher education for the last 40 years, accelerating the move away from direct public funding of universities towards financing through fee income. The introduction of an increased maximum fee of £9000, not paid up-front by the student but recovered later through an income-contingent loan, was highly contested in parliament and the subject of fierce resistance from students (Burke & Hayton, 2011). A number of concessions designed to enhance social mobility were made, which were essential to maintain the coalition with the Liberal Democrat party, which had previously opposed the charging of tuition fees. A National Scholarship Programme was introduced providing fee waivers for academically able students from poorer backgrounds (HEFCE, 2011). The powers of OFFA were increased and Les Ebdon, the former Vice-Chancellor of a post-1992 university, was appointed as its new Director. This created anxiety among selective universities and accusations from Conservative members of a parliamentary select committee that his policies were a recipe for social engineering and the dumbing down of higher education (Paton, 2012). Universities charging over £6000 in fees were required to produce an Access Agreement showing how they would enhance their strategies to assist students from under-represented groups by providing financial support, ensuring fair admissions, delivering outreach activities and improving student retention.

These measures, combined with the closure of Aimhigher, resulted in a significant change in the way that university outreach activities were funded and delivered. The increased focus on the performance of individual universities in reaching their widening participation recruitment benchmarks has stimulated more energetic outreach and admissions measures in selective universities than previously seen. However, the loss of the collaborative planning framework afforded by Aimhigher resulted in many schools and colleges losing the link with higher education that they previously enjoyed. Equally controversially, the Coalition abolished the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for 16–19-year-olds in education, along with Connexions careers provision. There is a new on-line careers service for adults but there is no specified provision for 16–18-year-olds. Responsibility for IAG for this age group has been

devolved to schools and colleges, raising serious concerns about inequalities in provision particularly for students without strong family and community traditions of entering higher education (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013). The new arrangements have also been criticised by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2013) for creating a patchy and inconsistent pattern of provision, which could leave children in some schools without appropriate advice.

Because the Coalition parties have been unable to agree the terms of a new Higher Education Bill, much of the government's policy making on higher education has necessarily been ad hoc. Nevertheless, its flagship White Paper was clearly entitled *Students at the Heart of the System* and the Coalition also remained publicly committed to its post-election pledge to increase social mobility and attract 'a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds' (HM Government, 2010, pp. 31–32). Meanwhile, the Coalition reforms to the schools system have been far-reaching, including in their implications for progression to university.

The government's decision to reform national school examinations at both GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and A-level (usually taken at age 16 and 18 respectively), and to restrict the number of alternative qualifications that count in school and college performance tables, may make it harder for students from non-traditional backgrounds to achieve the grades necessary to gain entry to university. Nevertheless, this removal of recognition for some vocational qualifications, following the Wolf Report (Wolf, 2011), could arguably make it clearer as to which qualifications they need to gain admission as there is a clear advantage in taking 'traditional' subjects (Iannelli, 2013). The government has anyway taken the view that university is not necessary the right aspiration for all school leavers. Consequently, it has espoused apprenticeships, both in their own right and as an alternative route to university. Although this position may be little different from the post-recession position of New Labour (BIS, 2009b), the rhetoric on this point has been somewhat stronger, at least until recently when the same cause was actively promoted by the current leader of the Labour Party (Miliband, 2014).

The Department for Education (DfE) has also introduced destinations data, including entry to Russell Group universities, as a new performance indicator for secondary schools. This may suggest that it does not value other universities. Such an outlook may also have been reflected in the decision by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to allow universities to recruit as many high achieving students as they could (initially those with AAB grades in Advanced or 'A-level' examinations but subsequently extended to ABB grades), in so far as it is the more selective universities that attract the vast majority of such applicants.

At this stage, it is unclear what effect these various Coalition policies will have in practice on widening participation and fair access. What Callender and Scott (2013) rightly portray as a strongly contested higher fees regime has not actually resulted in a reduction in applications from school leavers on the scale predicted (Independent Commission on Fees [ICOF], 2014; UCAS, 2014b). Nor does the change seem to have disproportionately affected entry to higher education by disadvantaged students in the younger age group. In contrast, concerns about persistent qualitative inequalities remain (Sutton Trust, 2014). The government has not given a clear indication

how it will avoid the re-emergence of a two-tier higher education system with advantaged students in more prestigious universities and less advantaged students in the rest, rather like the binary system that existed prior to the re-designation of polytechnics as universities in 1992.

Fears of such a development were heightened in the autumn of 2013 when it emerged that the relatively protected status of higher education in the face of continuing cuts in public sector spending could be under threat. First, it was announced that the National Scholarship Programme (NSP), introduced earlier in response to demands from Liberal Democrat Party members of the Coalition, would be abandoned for undergraduate students from 2015, and HEFCE funding to universities would be further reduced. In the event, the decreases in funding were not as dramatic as some had feared but the impact of the 6% cut on post-1992 universities, serving large numbers of students from under-represented groups, is likely to be significant. It has already been suggested that there has been a deterioration in the levels of financial support available from universities, alongside a marked shift in some institutions away from generic widening participation to a 'focus on the brightest poor students' (McCaig, *in press*), a finding confirmed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (Dearden & Jin, 2014). While these contrasting approaches are often seen in terms of differences between pre- and post-1992 universities, Bowl and Hughes (*in press*) conclude from their study in one region of England that responses have been influenced as much by the historical and cultural context of any particular institution.

In December 2013, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, unexpectedly announced that student numbers would be increased by 30,000 for 2014/15 and that student number controls would be ended from 2015/16 onwards. Although potentially welcome news for widening access to the system as a whole, the detailed effects of this change remain unpredictable (Hillman, 2014). There is a possibility that expansion could be concentrated in the newer higher education providers, while more traditional institutions with significant research income choose to maintain their present size and status, making competition for entry to them even tighter, to the potential detriment of applicants from disadvantaged families and schools. There are also concerns about the quality of the student experience if there are growing student numbers and a decreasing unit of resource, which in turn may lead to renewed calls to raise the level of the cap on fees.

Nevertheless, it is encouraging for widening participation that, in a period of reduced public funding overall, £22 m has been earmarked for universities to develop collaborative outreach activities to ensure contact with universities for all schools and colleges. The proposed National Network for Collaborative Outreach (HEFCE, 2014a) has come largely in response to a growing recognition of some negative outcomes arising from the closure of Aimhigher, most notably the existence of groups of schools lacking direct contact with a university. Under Aimhigher, local partnerships were required to engage with all schools and colleges in a defined geographical area. As universities have increasingly focused their outreach activities on schools that will enable them to meet their own widening participation performance indicators, some schools have been neglected. The intention now is that every secondary school in England will have a single point of contact.

Whatever the emerging shape of the higher education system in the coming years, widening participation and fair access are likely to remain major issues for the foreseeable future. Indeed, a new National Strategy for Access and Student Success was published in April 2014 (BIS, 2014). Taking a student life cycle approach it identifies three broad stages: access, encompassing outreach activities and admissions; retention and student success; and progression into further study and employment. The clear focus on evaluation is an important development for widening participation but it will be some years before we can make a judgement about the impact of current and future activities.

With this in mind, we now explore what we currently know about the continuing barriers to participation and access with a view to identifying what else might be done to ensure more equitable access to higher education. In so doing, we recognise that there are limitations in removing barriers if we do not 'change the nature of whatever it is that people are meant to be participating in' (Gorard & See, 2013, p. 102), but we take the view that enhancing equality of opportunity to access the current system is a necessary, though not a sufficient, ambition for our society.

### **Barriers to participation and fair access**

Since well before the publication of the Robbins Report in 1963, finance has usually been seen as the main barrier preventing students from under-represented groups accessing higher education. This is one of the reasons why funding issues have been at the heart of debates over higher education policy. In the next part of this paper we explore the various economic, social and cultural factors that lead to differential participation in higher education. While the term 'barrier' has been justifiably criticised by Burke (2012) when used to focus attention on the so-called inadequacies of prospective students, that is not what we intend here. Indeed, we begin by exploring the material impact of insufficient financial resources, something that Burke herself agrees is a real 'barrier'. We then go on to explore aspirations and awareness, and attainment, and discuss how these factors relate to the social and cultural capitals accessible to those from under-represented groups and thereby begin to explain the enduring class differences in university admissions.

It is important to contrast our use of the concepts of social and cultural capital with those that underpinned New Labour's social policies, based as they often were on addressing the perceived 'deficits' of individuals and communities (Gamarnikov & Green, 1999; Gewirtz, 2001; Leathwood & Hayton, 2002; Burke 2012). Instead, we follow Bourdieu (1986) who recognises that social or cultural capitals are expressions of differences in status and power within an unequal social system. In his analysis, economic, social and cultural capitals are all considered in terms of enabling and restricting engagement with education. He also expanded his concept of capitals in relation to education, distinguishing between intellectual or scientific capital (subject expertise), academic capital (understanding of rules and customs within the academy) and social capital (social connections). As we shall see, in those terms, success in educational institutions thus depends not just on 'what you know', but also on 'knowing the ropes' and sometimes, even today, on 'who you know'.

*Student finance*

There have been concerns at each successive change in fees policy that students from 'non-standard' backgrounds would be particularly adversely affected. Such concerns have received some support from an academic literature that suggests there may be subtle financial inhibitions, particularly affecting those for whom applying for university was already a marginal decision. Some commentators even suggest that there are fundamentally different perceptions about finance among people from different social backgrounds. For example, Burke (2012) claims that 'the willingness to accept debt as an inevitable part of the pursuit of "success" is tied to particular (white, middle class) values and dispositions' (p. 139). Certainly, it is often claimed that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are likely to be more debt-averse (Van Dyke *et al.*, 2005). Callender and Jackson (2008) reported that low-income students are more likely than their wealthier peers to perceive the costs of higher education as a debt rather than an investment. However, Davies *et al.* (2009) did not find evidence of greater debt aversion among disadvantaged students after taking account of school grades and a preference to live at home. Rather, they concluded that any debt aversion arose from the more marginal benefit that students with lower grades might expect from higher education (see also Mangan *et al.*, 2010).

While debt aversion may not usually be pivotal in the decision on whether to enter higher education, it may have an impact at the margins, especially for disadvantaged students. A study by the Institute of Employment Studies (BIS, 2010), which looked at the importance of finance in higher education participation decisions, reinforced this picture. It found that while finance did not seem to be a central factor in student intentions, there were differences between those from different backgrounds, with non-traditional students appearing more debt-averse, particularly concerning loans. Callender and Jackson (2008) found that, although finance did not necessarily affect decisions regarding whether to study or even what to study, it did seem to play a role in considerations of where to study.

That young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to choose to live at home with their parents both restricts their choice of university and means that they can miss out on other aspects of the traditional residential experience of higher education (Davies *et al.*, 2008; Mangan *et al.*, 2010). It is not clear that the financial assistance available to students is sufficient in contexts where the young person cannot draw on additional support from parents to cover the full costs of attending higher education away from home. It is also the case that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely than other students to take up part-time paid employment during their time at university (Van Dyke *et al.*, 2005), which could interfere with their academic studies leading to lower grades through fewer study hours and a greater propensity to drop out.

After HEIs were allowed to charge variable fees, the government expected institutions to spend some of the additional income that would be generated on supporting poorer students through bursaries. In 2006/07, HEIs in England spent approximately a fifth of the additional income they earned through fees on such support. Research by Callender (2010) examining the bursary and institutional support available to students from poorer backgrounds showed that there were considerable differences in



terms of bursaries available across HEIs. Each university had a bursary scheme with different criteria and levels of support, creating a very complex system and one that too often introduced new inequities into the system rather than reducing them. The IES study cited earlier found that the level of knowledge and information regarding what financial support was available was low (BIS, 2010; see also Callender, 2009). This supported other research (Davies *et al.*, 2008), which suggested that many bursaries and grants were not being taken up at that time. Dearden and Jin (2014) also comment on the continuing complexity of the system of financial support.

A great deal of the work in this area took place before the new £9000 fee regime was introduced in 2012, so the impact of that change is only beginning to emerge. As we have seen, the decision of the Coalition government following the Browne Report to allow maximum fees to rise from around £3000 to £9000, funded by income-contingent loans, rang loud alarm bells for those concerned with equitable access to higher education (Garner, 2009). However, although there has been a reduction in overall application rates under the new fees regime (UCAS, 2012, 2014a), application rates for young people from more advantaged backgrounds fell by more between 2011 and 2012 than they did among those from less advantaged backgrounds. There was also no discernible tendency for less advantaged students to be more likely to avoid courses charging the highest fees. Although this analysis suggested that the new regime had not disproportionately affected disadvantaged 18-year-olds, there were significant drops (of up to 40%) in applications from mature students and part-time students (Universities UK [UUK], 2013; ICOF, 2014).

### *Aspiration and awareness*

The tendency to position under-represented groups as lacking in aspirations, while central to the prevailing policy discourse on widening participation, has been seriously criticised in much of the sociological literature (Archer *et al.*, 2002; Burke, 2012; Gewirtz, 2001). Even more sympathetic writers have queried the strength of the evidence base for the link between socio-economic background, aspiration and attainment (Gorard *et al.*, 2012; Baker *et al.*, 2014). In the context of Aimhigher, work undertaken by Atherton and colleagues at the University of Westminster explored the aspirations of those in the first year of secondary school (Year 7) and found no lack of aspiration in terms of jobs or higher education (Atherton *et al.*, 2009). Parental aspirations for their children to attend university also appear to be high across all social classes (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2010). This work stands in contrast to the 'poverty of aspiration' thesis that is often referred to by politicians and even by practitioners in the field. However, more fine-grained distinctions in terms of cultural capital, which we will discuss later, may be relevant here.

While younger children from all backgrounds tend to have similar levels of aspiration, there needs to be further investigation and analysis of the mechanisms that moderate this aspiration over time. The Milburn Review of Access to the Professions (Milburn, 2009), presented some of the steps that could be taken to develop aspirations and translate them into improved outcomes. A key issue here is how expectations modify aspiration, particularly as students move through secondary school. Menzies (2013) found that disadvantaged pupils often have high aspirations, but they

may not know how to achieve them and consequently may struggle to maintain them as a viable option. He also pointed to the importance of high-quality careers advice, work experience and work-related learning, together with learning-focused mentoring, in helping to maintain aspirations and expectations.

Thus, IAG is a key element of policy that is aimed at increasing participation both quantitatively and qualitatively, although it is also an area in which much more could be done. For example, recent work by the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) highlighted the lack of appropriately skilled and qualified careers staff in schools, with fewer than one in three of those delivering careers education having had any training in the area (McCrone *et al.*, 2009; see also Davies, 2012). Such work highlights an important weakness in current provision in that, while one study found that many Year 7 students knew about university and said they wanted to go there, it also suggested that they had little idea about the steps they would need to follow to get there (Atherton *et al.*, 2009).

Bok (2010), drawing on work in Australia, argues that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds do have aspirations about going on to higher education, but 'have less developed capacities to realise them'. They therefore have 'to perform in a play *without a script*' (p. 163). Despite their aspirations, they do not 'know the ropes' to use our own expression. Put another way, experiences and cultural capital affect 'navigational capacities' (Appadurai, 2004), which vary between those from different backgrounds. The ability to navigate educational pathways is also seen by Bok to be 'influenced by students' access to "hot" knowledge' provided by families and local networks (p. 176), which has huge implications for those who are 'first in family', especially in terms of entry to 'elite' institutions. This analysis is somewhat reminiscent of Bernstein's discussion of those working class families in the 1960s who valued the 'end' of having a grammar school education, but did not understand the 'means' of achieving it (Bernstein, 1977).

In similar terms, Menzies (2013) suggests that, in the current context in England, disadvantaged parents and people in their social networks can lack the experience and knowledge to help their children. He argues that engaging parents to help them understand what their children's aspirations involve and what will help achieve them is an effective way of raising attainment. It is, however, worth noting that other research has suggested there do not seem to be any negative consequences associated with young people having high educational expectations, even if these are not realised (Reynolds & Baird, 2010).

### *Prior attainment*

Regardless of these somewhat inconclusive findings about aspiration and expectations, it is clear that the major direct impediment to students proceeding to higher education is low prior attainment. Research undertaken at the Institute of Education, the London School of Economics and the Institute for Fiscal Studies claims to have demonstrated this more clearly than ever before (Chowdry *et al.*, 2010). Since 2001 there has been a national census of all state school students, which collects information about individual students and allows us to track them through their schooling—thereby identifying which schools they attend and their performance in national tests.

It also allows us to monitor the performance of different groups of students, including students who receive Free School Meals (FSM)—the main proxy used by government to identify disadvantage. The research study, which was undertaken between 2005 and 2010, linked such census data to other data on which pupils entered higher education and which university they attended. Its headline finding was that, while there was a considerable gap in higher education participation between those from different backgrounds, this gap was actually very small once prior attainment had been fully taken into account. Figures 7 and 8 below show the gap between those from different socio-economic backgrounds for females and males respectively—and the way in which that gap shrinks or even disappears once prior academic attainment is controlled for.

Another finding of the research was that, while participation in ‘high-status’ universities was not evenly distributed across different groups when looking at the raw numbers, this bias towards higher socio-economic groups attending higher-status institutions was reduced once other variables were included. Again, it seems that prior attainment was driving the uneven distribution of students attending different types of higher education institutions, although the work by Boliver (2013) cited earlier suggests that this claim should be treated with caution at least in respect of some groups.

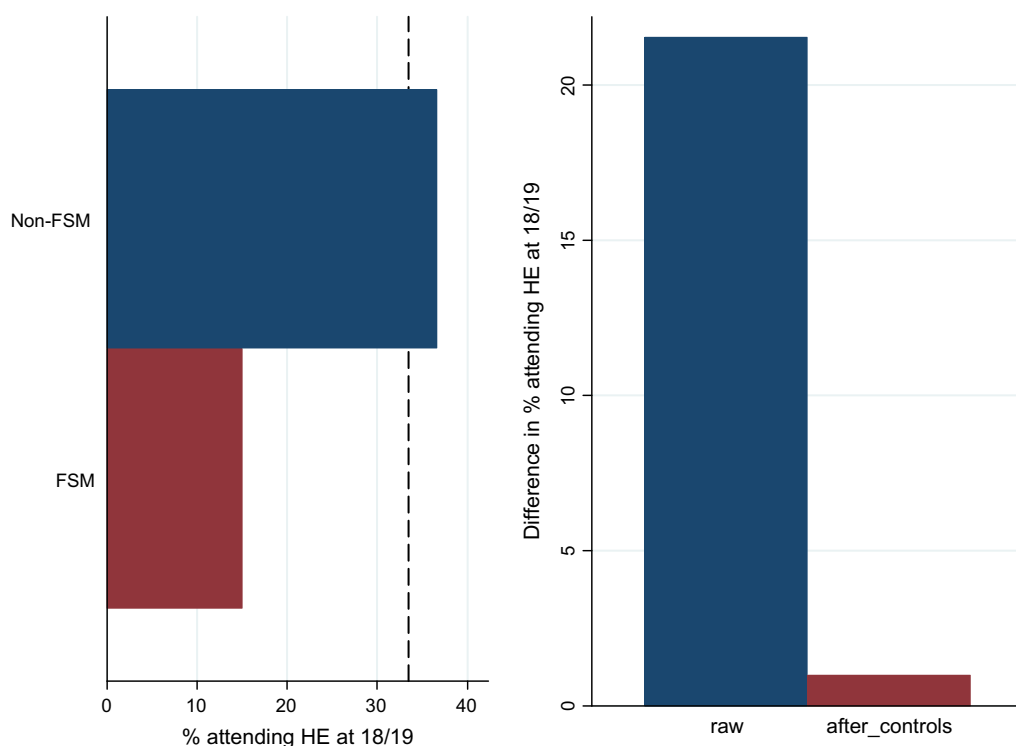


Figure 7. Raw socio-economic gap in higher education participation rates at age 18/19 for females (left-hand panel) and difference after adding in controls (right-hand panel)

Note: Dashed line is the average participation rate of all females.

Source: Vignoles and Crawford (2010).

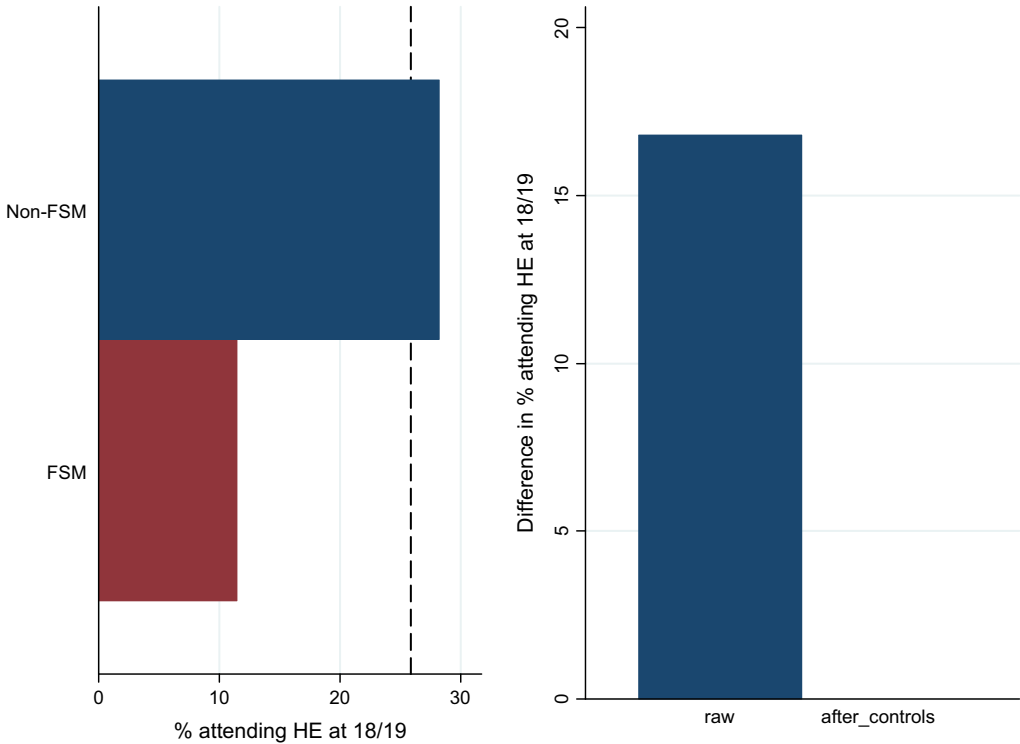


Figure 8. Raw socio-economic gap in higher education participation rates at age 18/19 for males (left-hand panel) and difference after adding in controls (right-hand panel)

Note: Dashed line is the average participation rate of all males.

Source: Vignoles and Crawford (2010).

Nevertheless, Anders (2012) argues that much of the apparent socio-economic gradient in university participation can be accounted for by prior attainment as early as age 11. He finds little evidence of different success rates among university applicants with similar attainment at that age. As such, most of the participation gap arises at or before the decision to apply to university, with lower prior attainment by young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds preventing them from applying in the first place. Overall, this work concludes that socio-economic background *per se* does not have much of a direct impact on higher education entry. While participation and socio-economic background appear to be correlated this relationship seems to be mediated through educational attainment.

A very recent study by Crawford (2014) suggests that the key school influence on participation may be its capacity to produce good examination performance at age 16. The implications from this would be that in order to narrow the participation gap, the only options likely to have any impact would be those targeted at raising school attainment of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or making use of contextual data to identify those students from less advantaged backgrounds, including underperforming schools, who may have greater academic potential than their attainment to date might suggest. Crawford notes that this latter approach seems to

be supported by positive evidence about the university performance of such students once admitted.

### **The importance of social and cultural capital**

Although much of this research suggests that, using standard indicators to measure disadvantage such as socio-economic group, student postcode or free school meals, social background is not important in determining the higher education participation rate once prior attainment is taken into account, social disadvantage may prove to be a more significant influence if different indicators are used. Various studies have used other indicators, such as whether the family home is rented, the number of siblings, the books in the home, and the level of education of parents. It may therefore be that we need to consider students' social and cultural capital and not just their socio-economic status if we are to get a grip on patterns of participation.

Cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu, means culturally valued forms of privilege, specifically in terms of education and broader cultural taste, passed down through families that, unlike money, does not take an overt economic form. Bourdieu believed that 'the transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 246). In studies of contemporary education systems the concept of cultural capital is often used when considering how parents 'play' the education market (see, for example, Reay, 2004). The cultural capital acquired through a combination of well-informed, educated parents, high achieving schools and a peer group with similar aspirations and expectations tends to result in the higher attainment required to attend selective universities (Reay *et al.*, 2013). This particular combination of lifestyle, values, dispositions and expectations is often referred to in the sociological literature as a middle class 'habitus', to use Bourdieu's own term.

Bourdieu's definition of social capital is less clear, but crucially includes access to durable social networks 'of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition', which can be drawn upon to perpetuate privilege (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).<sup>8</sup> Families that lack past experience of higher education often find it difficult to provide the support and guidance their children need to make informed choices and do not have easy access to the sorts of networks that can help provide support and opportunities for middle class families (Ball *et al.*, 2000; Reay *et al.*, 2005).

This does not mean that students from other backgrounds are entirely excluded even from high-status universities, but we do need to bear in mind that the relatively small number of pupils from lower socio-economic groups attending the most prestigious universities means that they may well be untypical of their group in important respects that could remain even if attainment levels improve overall. Reay *et al.* (2009) interviewed high achievers from groups under-represented in higher education and found that rather than feeling excluded such students had developed the capacity to move between cultures. Their findings suggest that these students had embarked on this process early in their school careers, developing reflexivity and resilience that transformed their habitus.

Research undertaken for the Sutton Trust found that school students whose parents had not been to university were only likely to apply to the more prestigious universities if they were predicted to gain very high grades in their school leaving examinations. Conversely, students whose parents had attended university were more likely to apply to prestigious universities even with lower predicted grades (Curtis *et al.*, 2008). Shiner and Noden (in press) have recently confirmed that candidates from less privileged family backgrounds remain less likely to target high-status institutions even when other variables are taken into account. They note that self-exclusion by qualified candidates seemed to be a greater issue for low socio-economic students than for black and minority ethnic candidates.

A small exploratory study by Noble and Davies (2009) sought to investigate empirically whether cultural capital influenced decision making about higher education. The researchers hypothesised that there may be cultural capital effects working independently of standard indicators of socio-economic factors, such as parental employment. In order to test this hypothesis they constructed an instrument to measure the type of 'cultural capital' that appeared to result in successful progression to higher education and tested whether this had an impact—independent of parental background (as measured by occupation) and predicted grades—on the probability of a student's intention to participate in higher education. While this is obviously a different measure from whether they actually go, the research produced some interesting results. Predicted grades (used as the proxy for attainment) were still the most powerful predictor, but having the 'right' sort of cultural capital did appear to have an independent impact. The combination of lower attainment and the 'wrong' kind of cultural capital was particularly detrimental.

A later study by Davies *et al.* (2014) found a very strong association between parental education and intentions towards higher education and that cultural capital differences were more important to the choices of students expecting average grades than students expecting high grades. They also explored whether different aspects of cultural capital—indicated by engagement with 'highbrow culture', parent/school interaction and familiarity with current affairs—affected intentions and they found that each of their measures did have a positive impact. However, only the parent/school interaction element of cultural capital impacted on students' expectations of a graduate premium. The relevance of this is that students with high expectations of a graduate premium are more likely than others to want to go to university after taking account of expected grades, home background, ethnicity and type of school attended. They hypothesise that one possible transmission mechanism is that students high in this aspect of cultural capital are able to access better information and this helps them to be more confident in their predictions of a graduate premium.

In the light of their findings, these researchers argue that it makes sense for widening participation initiatives to identify students with non-graduate parents, low levels of cultural capital or low graduate premium expectations as less likely than other students to intend to go to university. They suggest that awarding reduced fees or offering participation in outreach activities on the basis of income indicators at the personal level (e.g. eligibility for free school meals) or the local level (e.g. area deprivation rates) seems less sensible than using indicators like these, which are more likely to be related to significantly lower intention to go to university.

Other work also suggests that the very process of deciding whether or not to go to higher education is significantly different for those from different cultural backgrounds (Ball *et al.*, 2002). Table 1 summarises two types of higher education ‘chooser’. The ‘embedded chooser’ is someone who is more likely than not to go on to higher education, whereas the ‘contingent chooser’ is less likely to progress on to higher education.

Even though this categorisation has its limitations, not least through being derived from a comparison between individuals with multiple differences, it is useful heuristically. If more contingent choosers are to enter higher education, an area that is particularly important is the support, advice, guidance and encouragement given to students, usually through their schools, in applying to university—including choice of course and institution. Unfortunately, as indicated earlier, existing arrangements leave much to be desired (Davies, 2012) and the recent changes may even have exacerbated that problem. In particular, such provision is vital for those young people whose family does not possess relevant cultural capital and social networks to provide appropriate support and guidance.

With regard to qualitative inequality in particular, Demack *et al.* (2012), using data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), found that young people engaging with activities ‘culturally valued’ within a middle class habitus were much more likely to access Russell Group Universities than their peers, although the relationship was largely indirect. Davies *et al.* (2014) point out that cultural

Table 1. Characteristics of contingent and embedded choosers

Contingent choosers	Embedded choosers
Finance is a key concern and constraint	Finance is not an issue
Choice uses minimal information	Choice is based on extensive and diverse sources of information
Choice is distant or ‘unreal’	Choice is part of a cultural script, a ‘normal biography’
Few variables are called up	A diverse array of variables are deployed
Choice is general/abstract	Choice is specialist/detailed
Minimal support (social capital) is used	Extensive support (social capital) is mobilised
Ethnic mix is an active variable in choosing	Ethnic mix is marginal or irrelevant to choice
Choosing is short-term and weakly linked to ‘imagined futures’—part of an incomplete or incoherent narrative	Choosing is long-term and often relates to vivid and extensive ‘imagined futures’—part of a coherent and planned narrative
First-time choosers with no family tradition of higher education	‘Followers’ embedded in a ‘deep grammar of aspiration’ which makes higher education normal and necessary
Narrowly defined socioscaples and spatial horizons—choices are ‘local’/distance is a friction	Broad socioscaples and social horizons—choices are ‘national’/distance is not an issue
Parents as ‘onlookers’ or ‘weak framers’/mothers may give practical support on families making the choice	Parents as ‘strong framers’ and active participants in choice

Source: Ball *et al.* (2002). See also Reay *et al.* (2005).

capital may play a role in admissions to elite universities that is different from the role it plays in the choice of whether to go to college at all. Work on admissions to Oxford by Zimdars *et al.* (2009) has provided some insights into this. Adapting their own measure of cultural capital to suit 'a highly competitive educational transition', they found that it was not just participation in activities associated with 'high culture', such as playing a musical instrument or visiting museums, that counted in that context. Rather, they concluded, 'children who read and understand high culture . . . fare particularly well in the competition for a place at Oxford' (p. 661).

School as well as parental background may be particularly relevant here. Some research by BIS and the Sutton Trust (BIS, 2009d) examined where the barriers lay in terms of students from different types of schools attending what they regarded as the more prestigious institutions. This showed that, while there were significant differences between the proportions of similarly qualified students attending prestigious institutions from different types of schools, this seemed to be due to disparities in applications to these types of institutions rather than any bias from admissions tutors at the point of entry. Mangan *et al.* (2010) identify a big difference between private and state schools in the support they offer students. This suggests that more consistent support at state schools and colleges is needed if their students are to apply to more selective universities.

This may seem to shift responsibility away from the HEIs and admissions' tutors who are often charged with presenting barriers to higher education participation. However, other research suggests that cultural practices and processes within institutions do still have an effect on admissions as even a standard 'fair access' approach tends to favour those with a particular sort of cultural capital. In their work on admissions to Fine Art degrees, Burke and McManus (2009) certainly uncovered a range of unintended exclusionary practices within contemporary admissions processes.

Two projects undertaken at the Institute of Education for the Sutton Trust are also relevant here. One project examined the effectiveness and sustainability of relationships between schools and universities (Tough *et al.*, 2008) and made a number of recommendations on improving the impact of school–university links intended to widen access. It advocated more work with younger children; more sustained interventions engaging the whole cohort not just a select group; more joint working between teachers and university staff, especially on activities around academic subjects; and involving parents where possible. The project by Curtis *et al.* (2008) mentioned earlier looked specifically at the support and advice given in schools around applying to the more prestigious universities. It focused on schools that had a good track record of sending relatively high proportions of pupils to these universities despite a relatively disadvantaged intake. The research found that, even in these schools, there was a lack of systematic discussion about the status of universities and a hesitancy to encourage borderline students to apply to the 'Sutton 13' institutions. In fact, teachers were wary of students 'over aspiring' and tried to make them be more 'realistic'. The project recommended that schools should ensure that their pupils know about the full spectrum of universities; that school staff should be open with pupils regarding the characteristics of different universities; and that universities should be more transparent about their admissions policies.



Finally, it is important to note that cultural capital and type of schooling are important in decisions about courses as well as those about institutions. As Coyne and Goodfellow (2008) note, choices made in terms of future study at ages 14 and 16 determine both the level of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) skills in the population and also the numbers of students with the necessary background to continue studying STEM subjects post-16 and at university level. Archer *et al.* (2012) point to the role of family background in such decisions about which subjects to study. Archer (2013) uses the concept of ‘science capital’ to mean ‘science-related qualifications, understanding, knowledge (about science and ‘how it works’), interest and social contacts (e.g. knowing someone who works in a science-related job)’ (p. 13). She reported that, by Year 9 (13–14-year-olds), only 32% of those with ‘low science capital’ had career aspirations in STEM subjects as compared with 60% of those with ‘high science capital’. Such findings suggest that targeting of widening participation outreach activities should focus on those without relevant aspects of the middle class habitus described above, not be entirely led by the HEFCE benchmarks of socio-economic class and LPNs and that outreach activities themselves should provide subject enhancement opportunities to develop ‘subject capital’ such as that described by Archer in relation to science.

However, the role of schools themselves in the reproduction of patterns of subject choice is again significant here. Harris (2010) observed that one has only to recognise that ‘the range of sciences offered in independent and selective schools is often wider (than in non-selective state schools), and that science-based subjects such as medicine are disproportionately offered by selective universities and at least some of the reasons for a skewed application pool are immediately very clear’ (p. 73).

It seems then that some quite complex interactions between home, school and university cultures pose a considerable challenge for those seeking to widen participation and fair access in higher education and these help to explain why only limited progress has been made to date.

## **Where next?**

### *Policy directions*

We have shown that, while some progress has been made in increasing the proportion of the population experiencing higher education, there is still a considerable way to go in widening participation. Significant issues remain, particularly in relation to achieving entry to more selective universities for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and especially those with limited access to the sorts of social and cultural capital that facilitate entry to higher education.

Although prior attainment is the most important element in accessing higher education, differences in ‘who you know’ (social capital) and ‘knowing the ropes’ (cultural capital and more specifically academic capital) can still affect applications, admissions or student success, particularly in ‘high tariff’ selective universities. To move forward and broaden access to higher education we need to revisit some of the basic premises of the New Labour discourse that continue to define current policy. The combination of a simplistic ‘equal rights’ approach to widening participation

linked to deficit models of disadvantaged communities continue to constrain what can be achieved or even thought (Southgate & Bennett, 2014). At the same time, although there is considerable emphasis in education policy discourse on ‘closing the gap’, there is currently little appetite within any of the main political parties for the sort of wider redistributive policies that would radically address the underlying causes of the continuing socio-economic and cultural differences in educational performance and participation (Whitty & Anders, 2014).

What does this mean for future policy and practice? Is it possible to make any further progress under current conditions and what might that look like? If we agree that progress is possible, then what action might be taken to achieve short term gains without losing sight of a need for more fundamental cultural change in higher education?

In this final part of the review, we focus on some of the areas where progress might be made, even at a time when there have been suggestions that we are experiencing ‘a retreat from widening participation’ (McCaig, in press). We begin with university admissions as an example of the dilemmas and contradictions involved in widening participation policies and practices. We then consider other aspects of school and university education where, in the light of the evidence reviewed earlier, meaningful interventions might usefully be made.

*Admissions to Higher Education Institutions.* Although it is 10 years since the Schwartz Review on admissions to higher education, there has been no sustained increase in the number of students from under-represented groups progressing to selective universities. Within its own terms, the review did succeed in making admissions processes more transparent. However, the limitations of its ‘common sense’ premises around ‘ability’ and ‘equal chances’ are now apparent. Capability theorists such as Sen (2005) argue that having the ‘right’ to access education, health services or political freedoms is not sufficient if an individual lacks the ‘capability’ to exercise that right. Although the concept of capability runs the risk of essentialism, particularly when linked to a fixed set of ‘capabilities’ (McCowan, 2011; Sen, 2005), it does highlight the limitations of the ‘rights’ approach when ‘embedded’ choosers are more likely to have the capacity (and grades) to progress than ‘contingent’ choosers.

Several radical proposals have been put forward on reforming higher education admissions (see, for example, Monbiot, 2010; Gorard & See, 2013). In the current context, however, the most realistic way forward in selective universities is likely involve increased use of contextual data in selecting students for higher education on the ‘basis of an ability to excel, not purely on previous attainment’ (Clegg, quoted in Paton, 2012). This is already a standard criterion when a choice has to be made between two similarly qualified candidates. Adopted more widely, it would involve making more use of information on applicants’ backgrounds and their schools’ performance in deciding what offers to make (Bridger *et al.*, 2012). Crawford (2014) identifies school performance as a particularly useful indicator to use. An increase in the use of relevant background information was recently confirmed by a survey of universities in which 37% of those that responded said they used such ‘contextual data’—and most of the remaining ones planned to do so (Harrison, 2013).

Even so, there remains some resistance to this approach, not least from the private schools sector (BBC, 2010). From a rather different perspective, Her Majesty’s Chief

Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has suggested that his own former students at the Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, a disadvantaged area in East London, would not want to feel ‘patronised’ by ‘special privileges’ that admitted them to degree courses with worse A-level results than their wealthier peers (Paton, 2012). While this can be read as a robust and well-meaning rejection of ‘special treatment’ based on a deficit model, it is not clear that it sufficiently recognises the sort of social and cultural factors identified in this review.

As Wilshaw himself has rightly pointed out, the use of contextual data risks becoming formulaic—e.g. reducing entrance grades by a fixed amount for all those from lower socio-economic groups or from particular types of school—thereby reducing the scope for judgement by admissions tutors. Yet relying on the judgement of admissions tutors also has its limitations as it may merely reproduce existing attitudes and pre-conceptions. Following on from Burke’s work on exclusionary practices in admissions referred to earlier in this paper, Burke *et al.* (2013) explored the attitudes of higher education staff through a series of in-depth interviews and discovered that staff held very conflicted views about ‘widening participation’ students. They concluded that, in order to address unintended bias, university staff need information about research findings, opportunities to reflect on their own practices and greater ongoing engagement with prospective students from under-represented groups.

A good example of this approach was an institutional initiative to increase the participation of local further education college students in the highly selective BA Fine Art degree at Goldsmiths, University of London (Hayton *et al.*, in press). This action research project increased admissions from under-represented groups, but also helped to identify the limitations of the ostensibly scrupulously ‘fair’ admissions process developed by the University. During the course of the initiative it became apparent that students with equal creativity, skill and commitment did not have the capacity to negotiate the admissions process. Interventions were therefore developed to support potential applicants, which challenged both the habitus of the prospective students and the University’s institutional habitus and associated admissions processes. Prospective students successfully developed the capacity to compete on more equal terms with their more privileged counterparts and a number of them gained places on the degree and went on to succeed (Goldsmiths, 2014). This example illustrates that some positive cultural change can take place within current conditions, provided interventions are developed with a degree of reflexivity that recognises that any so-called ‘deficit’ is not based solely in disadvantaged young people but embedded in universities’ own structures, procedures and attitudes.

Universities might also give greater consideration when making offers of places to activities and qualifications (including the Extended Project Qualification<sup>9</sup>) that encourage analytical thought and a sense of agency that prepare young people for university study and develop the sort of subject capital that makes it easier to achieve top grades at A-Level. In assessing candidates, there could also be a wider understanding of the challenges for some social groups of engaging with certain extra-curricular activities (e.g. music lessons and other expensive enrichment programmes), along with a greater recognition of the value, as well as the challenges, of taking on paid work and family responsibilities (Burke & Hayton, 2011).

*Closing the attainment gap at school level.* We have noted that prior attainment, especially getting good grades at GCSE as well as A-level, seems now to be the most important factor in accessing higher education in England (Crawford, 2014). In the longer-term, ensuring high levels of attainment throughout the school system must be the goal. The extent of that challenge is clear from the work of Gorard and See (2013) on overcoming disadvantage at school level. They recommend making schools as uniform as possible; offering schools greater incentives to take students from disadvantaged backgrounds; stronger home/school links; and interventions that ‘improve students social and emotional learning, happiness and civic engagement’ (p. 165).

Attainment cannot anyway be separated from the social and educational context in which young people find themselves (Ball, 2010). Differences in cultural capital are already deeply implicated in different patterns of attainment in school (Reay *et al.*, 2009; Ball, 2010; Mills, 2008). Nevertheless, there is scope for contesting their effects through interventions beginning in primary schools and continuing throughout school careers. Through collaborations with schools, universities can themselves play an important role in broadening horizons, motivation and supporting attainment-raising strategies. The current Director of Fair Access, Les Ebdon, has been advocating outreach measures of this nature in his public statements and in his negotiations with universities about their access agreements (Coughlan, 2013; Boffey, 2013). Thornton *et al.* (2014), in their survey of strategies to raise or maintain aspirations, found that a sustained approach, where prospective students engaged with universities on a number of occasions, was most effective.

Universities therefore need to move beyond the generic campus visit to offer a planned programme of academic engagement developed in collaboration with schools. They are well-placed to offer curriculum enhancement activities that could go some way in providing the broader perspective on school subjects that, as Demack *et al.* (2012) demonstrate, is so critical to aspiration and attainment. Curriculum-focused outreach activities involving academic staff and students specifically designed to build subject capital and encourage active engagement with learning are likely to be crucial to successful participation and progression. An academic element in mentoring can also prove helpful here.

*Careers Education, Information and Guidance (CEIAG).* For prospective students negotiating the system, or ‘knowing the ropes’, is particularly challenging for the ‘contingent’ chooser. As we have seen, for ‘embedded’ choosers successful progression to higher education is the normal pattern. As Reay *et al.* (2005) found in their research, it is ‘simply what people like them do’ (p. 161). In addition, their schools, with large numbers of students progressing to university, have the institutional habitus—that is relevant connections, expertise and knowledge—to support students through the choice and application process. Equity would seem to demand that this knowledge and capacity should be available to all students through school–university links rather than being solely dependent on family background, social contacts and similar sources of ‘hot’ knowledge (Slack *et al.*, 2014).

There is now considerable expertise among university outreach teams in delivering what Paczuska (2002) called the ‘admissions curriculum’—information about higher education, how this relates to careers, the significance of extra-curricular activity and

the development of the skills required to make a strong application. This work needs to be strengthened and developed in collaboration with those schools and young people in most need of support. However, in view of the working class suspicion of official knowledge identified by Ball and Vincent (1998), and an apparent preference for 'hot' knowledge from students' own social networks, schools and universities will need to develop strong community links, so that potential students are matched with successful students from similar backgrounds to themselves (see also Shaw, 2012).

The new Local and National Networks for Collaborative Outreach will need to be given sufficient resources and longevity to ensure that all secondary schools and colleges have a direct link to a university and a range of CEIAG activities that take account of the complexity of decision-making processes for young people. Ideally, there should be funding in schools and colleges to facilitate liaison and there is a strong case for extending this to clusters of primary schools (Tough *et al.*, 2008).

*Accountability and performance.* Despite the well-rehearsed issues arising from the marketisation of higher education and the target culture fostered by New Labour (Ball, 2012; Brown, 2011; Leathwood & Hayton, 2002), it is likely that league tables, performance indicators and regulatory bodies such as OFFA and Ofsted are here to stay. Although they can have perverse effects in some circumstances, within a competitive culture, regulation and targets can have a mitigating and positive effect in protecting those at risk through disadvantage. For this reason it is important to maintain the requirement for universities to report on their efforts to widen participation. The current arrangement of reporting to OFFA on some aspects and HEFCE on others does need streamlining, but not at the expense of removing important equity-related regulatory systems altogether.

However, the narrow scope of performance indicators is increasingly defining how universities view and measure 'success' in widening participation, in terms of both the targeting of outreach activities and diversity of the student body. As we have seen, McCaig (in press) has suggested that the emphasis is now on a more limited group of students. The requirements for schools to ensure that all students study a range of subjects up to GCSE level, monitor the progress and attainment of students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and report on the proportions of students progressing to higher education can provide useful institutional foci. However, the Coalition government's emphasis on rates of entry to Russell Group universities (Department for Education [DfE], 2012) from individual schools is a rather narrow and overly specific indicator and, if it is retained, needs to be complemented by other indicators of success.

*Transition, retention and success.* Although this review has focused on evidence about access, that is, of course, only part of the picture. Even when disadvantaged young people do enter higher education, they are more likely to drop out. Vignoles and Pothavee (2009) found that, even when prior attainment and other individual characteristics were taken into account, there was a significant gap in the rate of dropout by the end of the first year at university, suggesting that retention is at least as important as barriers at the point of entry to higher education in terms of equity. The new National Strategy for Access and Student Success (BIS, 2014), with its emphasis on

the student life cycle, should help to move this issue up the agenda. There has already been some research exploring why people drop out (e.g. Johns & McNabb, 2004), as well as examining the experiences of non-traditional groups at university, including the pedagogies and teaching styles used and the kinds of support and advice available to them (e.g. Crozier *et al.*, 2008). Universities need to engage fully with the issues around transition, retention and student success that affect the trajectories of those from under-represented groups. Creative approaches to learning and teaching are required that foster a sense of ownership and agency in relation to students' own learning.

In terms of employability and future careers we have to recognise that, even with wider participation in undergraduate education, social advantage may also be gained from the differential opportunities universities offer for students to have 'more than just a degree'. As Bathmaker *et al.* (2013) argue, 'when the playing field appears to have been levelled for some people . . . advantage is maintained through a shift in the rules of the game' (p. 741), an example perhaps of Effectively Maintained Inequality. It is also likely that the battleground for widening participation and fair access to elite occupations will increasingly shift to postgraduate and post-graduation experience (Whitty & Mullan, 2013).

Universities are beginning to recognise this as a real issue for poorer students who are relying on their degree to gain access to the graduate labour market. Institutions need to develop a range of targeted interventions and curriculum-related activities to ensure that undergraduate students from under-represented groups can benefit from the opportunities for placements, work experience, careers advice and links with leading employers that are available to more privileged students through their existing networks. Indicators of increases in students' social capital and social agency being piloted by HEFCE (2014b) may help to give this greater priority.

*Funding schools, colleges and universities.* While we have argued the importance of social and cultural capitals in educational interactions, funding remains an issue for institutions as well as for individuals. In 2010 the incoming government announced the introduction of additional funding for schools through a 'pupil premium'. This had the explicit aim of promoting social mobility through raising attainment among the most disadvantaged pupils, thus increasing their opportunities to access higher education and improved employment prospects (DfE, 2010). Although there is still scope for the impact of this funding to be fully realised (Ofsted, 2014), the principle of providing targeted funding for 'closing the gap' is a welcome one. Meanwhile, funding for post-16 education similarly needs to take account of differences in economic, social and cultural capital. There is clear evidence that Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) encouraged more disadvantaged young people to remain in education (Dearden *et al.*, 2011) and there is a strong case for its reintroduction.

There is not space in this review to explore in any detail the critical issue of the funding of higher education itself. Yet it is important to note that that cuts in higher education funding are likely to have a greater impact on students from under-represented groups than those from more privileged backgrounds who have better access to alternative forms of support. Reductions in funding to universities may result in cuts in support services, increased teaching and pastoral duties for academic staff and

less flexibility at the point of admission. With regard to student financial support, Dearden and Jin (2014) have reported a slight drop in university payments to disadvantaged students in recent years, something that, if it continues, could be a considerable deterrent to prospective students from poorer backgrounds who struggle with day-to-day living costs.

Well-funded universities and student support seem to be a pre-requisite for widening participation and continuing student success. There is a strong case for the continuation of the HEFCE Student Opportunity Fund, which universities receive based on the number of enrolled students from under-represented groups. The fund, first introduced in 1999 as the Widening Participation Premium (HEFCE, 1999), provides a much needed additional financial resource for universities to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Like the pupil premium in schools, it requires a more rigorous reporting framework to ensure financial transparency, provide a focus for institutional activity to support student success and facilitate effective monitoring and evaluation.

### *Research priorities*

Understanding patterns of participation in higher education needs to involve academics from a range of disciplines and employ a range of approaches. For example, while economics has useful theories to explain why individuals and societies decide to invest in higher education, sociological theories of cultural and social capital are crucial to an understanding of prevailing patterns of attainment, selection and choice.

It is also clear from the evidence presented here that research into higher education participation requires the involvement of researchers who are interested in schools as well as higher education. Given that, at the point of entry to higher education, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are principally disadvantaged by lower prior attainment, understanding the nature of class differences in achievement at school is vital to an understanding of inequalities in higher education (Whitty & Anders, 2014; Reay *et al.*, 2013). Work on understanding school effects on higher education participation is also important and Donnelly (2014, in press) has recently proposed combining school effectiveness approaches with sociological insights from theorists like Bernstein (1977). Similarly, higher education research needs to be more closely linked to research on the labour market, as global labour market changes, for example, impact on the significance of attendance at selective universities (Brown, 2013).

We now have much more data than we have ever had before to help understand issues of widening participation and fair access. Schools collect a range of information about pupils, including their destinations post-school (DfE, 2013). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects information on social class, school type, neighbourhood and ethnicity and gender, while UCAS reports on broad trends in admissions patterns. However, we still need to clarify whether particular groups of pupils are not applying to university, or whether they are applying but are not able to secure a place, and how choices of course and institution vary across different groups. UCAS data, which deals only with applicants, is of limited use in building this broader picture.

The creation of large datasets based on government administrative records is one of the most promising areas of growth in social statistics, but raises new methodological questions about, for example, how we can successfully match census and survey data. The current quantitative evidence base for widening participation is far from perfect even in its own terms. As Gorard and See (2013) point out, there is a particularly challenging issue for tracking progression to higher education among disadvantaged groups, as schools and higher education use different indicators of disadvantage. The measures of socio-economic status used in these datasets are still relatively crude, and very little data is available on pupils in the private schools sector.

Another longstanding issue has been the lack of a system to assess the impact of outreach activities on progression rates. In this connection, recent HEFCE funding for a national roll-out of the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) database is to be welcomed. HEAT enables universities to record an individual's engagement with outreach activities and track their progression route through to higher education, and should provide a large enough dataset to assess the relative effectiveness of interventions and inform future activity.

However, not only is quantitative data limited in its own terms, it needs to be complemented by qualitative data if we are to understand the complexities involved in decisions about participation. Researchers using qualitative data have been able to illustrate the lived experiences of individuals from disadvantaged groups and develop theoretical frameworks to help us to understand the complexity of the issues. Currently, some of the most promising work is using quantitative or qualitative research to interrogate, test or develop theoretical frameworks. For example, Demack *et al.* (2012) and Davies *et al.* (2014), whose work we cited earlier, both use Bourdieusian concepts in the analysis of large datasets. Although we have focused here on work that has used the theories of Bourdieu and employed his concepts of capitals and habitus, other researchers have adopted different theoretical frameworks.

So far, though, these various analyses have provided only very partial accounts of the issues leading to differential participation in higher education and have been even less successful in identifying effective solutions. As the demand for more rigorous evaluation of the impact of widening participation gathers momentum we need to ensure that it is informed by academic research and is not reduced to a management information exercise. In turn, academic research, both qualitative and quantitative, should not be confined to describing the problems but should start contributing to solutions. It is encouraging that HEFCE (2014b) is now planning to pilot indicators on students' social capital and social agency. Indicators that would facilitate the collection of more fine-grained data on cultural capital, as proposed by Davies *et al.* (2014), and thereby inform better targeted interventions in the future, might also be developed. As we enter a new phase for widening participation we need to adopt an approach to research and evaluation that encompasses the insights that different theories and methods can bring to this complex and multi-dimensional field and point us towards future strategies that will result in more substantial changes than those reported here.

Finally, we need to encourage alternative and critical perspectives on widening participation. In addition to the work of Burke (2012) and McCaig (in press) that we



have cited in our review, there is relevant work in Australia that explicitly critiques UK policy alongside the similar policies adopted in that country. For example, Sellar and Gale (2012) argue that the widening participation agenda is a fusion of social democratic and human capital ideologies that produces a neoliberal version of social justice, which needs to be challenged. In a similar vein, Southgate and Bennett (2014) suggest that widening participation discourse constructs ‘two subject positions, the cap(able) individual and the proper aspirant, representing a quintessential neo-liberal subject who possesses “natural” ability, hope for social mobility and has a highly individualised and entrepreneurial disposition’ (p. 26). Such work encourages professionals and academic researchers in this field to challenge such limiting assumptions and resist the ‘redemptive pull’ of prevailing widening participation discourse.

## Conclusion

In this context, we recognise that our own discussion here addresses only what Gale and Hodge (2014) (after Ball, 1993) call first order effects. In other words, we (like most of the policies discussed here) have focused on changing current practice without directly transforming prevailing relations of dominance (second order effects). However, while incremental progress is necessarily compromised and partial, reflexive engagements with policies and practices in contested fields such as widening participation have the potential to illuminate underlying cultural and economic inequalities, which can then be challenged. Furthermore, having a wider cross-section of the population engaged in higher education with the capacity to contest prevailing discourses is itself a significant driver of cultural change. The alternative is that universities, and especially elite universities, continue to serve only those from higher socio-economic groups to the detriment of the academy, society as whole and especially those from under-represented groups who will remain excluded from higher education and the opportunities it offers.

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## NOTES

- 1 These classes are derived from the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC). Class 4 is Small employers and own account workers, 5 is Lower supervisory and technical occupations, 6 is Semi-routine occupations, 7 is Routine occupations. For more information see: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/classifications/current-standard-classifications/soc2010/soc2010-volume-3-ns-sec--rebased-on-soc2010--user-manual/index.html>
- 2 For a review that covers evidence on widening participation for a variety of target groups and explores retention and progression beyond higher education, see Moore *et al.* (2013).
- 3 See for example comments from the vice-chancellors of Oxford and Cambridge Universities at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/6266319/Oxford-should-resist-social-engineering.html>
- 4 The previous measure, based on the Age Participation Index (API), showed the number of UK young entrants to higher education in Great Britain expressed as a percentage of the relevant population. However,

the social class breakdown of the British population over the 1990s was obtained from the 1991 census and assumed to be static. The updated methodology used the annual Labour Force Survey to capture changes in the socio-economic make-up of the underlying population (for more detailed explanation, see Kelly & Cook, 2007; Ramsden, 2005).

- 5 'Old' universities are those that were part of the university sector prior to 1992, while 'new' universities refers to those higher education institutions that received university status after 1992. The pattern is reversed for those from lower social classes, with 21% of entrants to new universities and 14% of entrants to old universities coming from 'skilled manual' families. These percentages are calculated from UCAS data of all full-time entrants to higher education in 2001/2 (Boliver, 2008).
- 6 The 'Sutton 13' list of universities identified those HEIs ranked the highest in an average of published university league tables: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College, London School of Economics, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, University College London, Warwick and York (BIS, 2009d).
- 7 In this study, 'high-status' universities were defined as the (then) 20 members of the Russell Group together with 21 other institutions whose score in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise matched or exceeded that of the lowest scoring member of the Russell Group.
- 8 Social relationships and networks are also key features of other sociological conceptualisations of social capital, even though they are grounded in different theoretical traditions and empirical circumstances (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001).
- 9 Extended Project AS Level (EPQ), equivalent to half an A-level, based on an independent project of the student's choice.

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