

University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility

A progress report by the
Independent Reviewer on
Social Mobility and Child Poverty

October 2012

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Foreword and summary

Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn,
Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty



Like so many others of my generation I was the first in my family to go to university. It was an experience that changed my life. As a child from a council estate I was lucky enough to end up in the Cabinet. I was born at the right time. In mid-20th-century Britain

social mobility was in full swing. By 1958, when I was born, the prospect of a more classless society seemed within reach. Half a century later such optimism looks hopelessly misplaced. Intractable levels of social inequality and a flatlining in social mobility have thwarted repeated attempts to realise the post-war vision of a fair society.

Every cloud, however, has a silver lining. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis a new public – maybe even political – consensus has begun to emerge that entrenched inequality and ossified social mobility are not viable propositions for Britain. Institutions, from banks to governments, are having to answer new questions about how they will change what they do in order to change how society works. Universities are no exception.

This report asks what universities are doing to help create a Britain that is more socially mobile, and what more they could do. The answer to the first question seems to be quite a lot. The answer to the second is that they could, and should, be doing a lot more – and in a far more focused way.

We are blessed in Britain to have a world-leading higher education sector. Our universities are a great source of strength for the country and their role – in an increasingly knowledge-based economy – is becoming more and more central to our future prosperity. Universities are also becoming increasingly central to our future social prospects. Education and employability are the keys that can unlock both individual citizens' and countries' progress. Who gets into university and how they get on once they have left will have a critical role in determining whether Britain's sluggish rates of social mobility can be improved. In recent years it has become commonplace to focus on the economic good that universities bring to Britain. Today, there needs to be an equal focus on the social good they can bring.

Recent progress and new risks

The last four decades have been a period of unprecedented growth in higher education in the UK. At the start of the 1970s there were a little over 600,000 university students. Today there are 2.5 million. That expansion provided a benign backdrop for efforts to widen the social make-up of those participating in higher education. From the mid- to the late 2000s the gap between the higher education participation rates of people living in the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged areas narrowed, both in proportional terms and percentage point terms. As the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) found, it is likely that this is the first time in our country's history this has ever happened. It is a remarkable achievement.

Today, however, the most advantaged 20% of young people are still seven times more likely to attend the most selective universities than the 40% most disadvantaged. Access to university remains inequitable. There is a strong correlation between social class and the likelihood of going to university generally and to the top universities particularly. Four private schools and one college get more of their students into Oxbridge than the combined efforts of 2,000 state schools and colleges. So there is a long way to go. Worse still, the progress of recent years is now at risk.

A climate of fiscal constraint, a cap on student numbers and a big increase in tuition fees are significant new headwinds which universities now face in making further progress on widening participation and fair access. Clearly government policy is a major influence here – and I examine its role in the final chapter of this report – but universities themselves will need to redouble their efforts if a university place is to be genuinely open to all those with talent and potential. Indeed, my primary focus in this report is on what universities themselves can contribute to making Britain more socially mobile.

Of course, this is controversial terrain. The debate on universities and social mobility has become deeply polarised, between those who argue for greater equity in who gets into university and those who believe that standards will suffer unless excellence, not equity, is the guiding principle governing admissions processes.

Those who defend excellence tend to take a view that a university place should be determined by a simple principle: attainment at A-level. They recognise that universities should do more to help schools and colleges raise standards to widen the pool of students who can apply for a place at the most selective universities, but believe that altering admissions procedures to change the social mix at selective institutions would damage quality and threaten their, often global, reputations. In addition, some worry that lowering entry standards would punish schools that do exceptionally well, and reward schools that are prone to failure.

On the other side stand those who believe that universities, particularly highly selective universities, need to be doing much more to

widen access to ensure greater diversity in their student populations. Those on the equity side of the argument conclude that progress can only be made if universities take account of broader social factors, alongside academic attainment, in determining who gets into the top institutions. They argue that the most selective universities need to take more responsibility for the consequences of their admissions processes, instead of simply blaming the school system for failing to create a wider pool of talent from which they can recruit.

Both sides agree that access to university remains inequitable. They both share the goal of making access to university classless, so that those with potential, irrespective of background, get the places they deserve. The difference between them lies in how best to do so. Should the focus primarily be on schools, supported by university outreach activity? Or should university admissions also play a part? The answer in this report is that both approaches are needed if participation is to be wide and access is to be fair. It argues that every university should seek to do more to widen participation and make access fairer. Different universities, however, should be able to place different emphasis on the respective parts of this agenda.

Citing evidence from the US – where the top Ivy League universities explicitly plan their admissions each year to ensure diversity – this report argues that the distinction between equity and excellence is a false one. If we are to allow all individuals the potential to flourish, we must move beyond this type of thinking. Prosperity in an increasingly competitive global market relies on our country developing the potential of all of those with aptitude, ability and aspiration. All universities have a role to play in making sure that equity and excellence are friends, not enemies.

Stepping up to the plate

This report calls on all universities to step up to the plate. Many have already done so and there is a real appetite in the sector to do more. Given the headwinds they are facing, however, good intentions will not be enough. Universities will need a new level of dogged determination if

progress is to be made. To that end I recommend that the sector, through its various representative bodies, should set out publicly a clear ambition – in the form of statistical targets – for the progress it will make over the next five years on both widening participation and fair access.

In order to analyse the ways in which universities can take action to improve social mobility, the report breaks down the life-cycle of students into four stages:

- getting ready – the outreach activity which universities undertake to improve attainment and aspiration, and to help potential students make the right choices
- getting in – the admissions processes and criteria which universities use
- staying in – the work of student services and bursaries in improving rates of retention at university
- getting on – the steps which universities take to help students succeed in their chosen career after graduation.

Getting ready

Universities depend on schools for bringing higher education within reach of their pupils. In an ideal world, all schools would be of a uniformly high standard and universities could simply select students on the basis of prior attainment. In the real world there is no such level playing field of opportunity. The priority is to expand the pool of school leavers from which universities can recruit. So this report recommends that the overall objective for schools should be two-fold: to raise standards overall and at the same time to close the education attainment gap. It calls on the Government to make these twin objectives the explicit driving intention behind all aspects of education policy and urges it to set a five-year ambition for all schools to make progress on closing the attainment gap between their less well-off and their better-off pupils.

The pool of talent from which universities can currently recruit is more limited than it should be because of the gap in attainment between private and state schools, between better-off pupils and

worse-off ones, and between those who study the core academic subjects identified by the most selective universities as ‘facilitating’ entry and those who do not. If access to university is to genuinely become classless, there will need to be progress in closing each of these attainment gaps. Government obviously has a key role to play but so do universities.

Universities undertake a variety of activities to take information about higher education to school pupils and local communities. In recent years they have focused in particular on pupils, schools and communities which are under-represented in higher education. Over the last ten years they have spent hundreds of millions of pounds on outreach activity aimed at widening participation. Spending across the sector is predicted to reach £613 million by 2015/16. It is crucial that this money is spent in a way that delivers as much social impact as possible. This report concludes that this is not the case at present and calls on the sector to undertake urgent research to assess which outreach approaches work best.

One thing is already clear – the majority of universities’ access expenditure goes on financial support to students, primarily in the form of bursaries. When students are facing financial pressures and lower-income families fear that a place at university for their child will incur a mountain of debt, the priority which universities accord to providing financial support is understandable. The problem is that the evidence suggests that this approach is not particularly effective at widening participation or securing fair access. This report argues that the balance of expenditure needs to move more towards better focused outreach activity. It urges universities to act now to switch expenditure in this way and recommends that OFFA should report on whether they are doing so.

That could include universities switching spending from bursaries and fee waivers towards providing financial support to disadvantaged pupils to enable them to stay on at school and get good exam results, since it is these steps that have the biggest impact on getting more poorer kids into higher education. Given the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)

and the inadequacies of its replacement (discussed in Chapter 8), there is a good case for universities helping to provide financial support to promising disadvantaged pupils to help them achieve the necessary exam results to be able to successfully apply to higher education. The report recommends that the Russell Group and other higher education representative bodies should devise a scheme for doing so.

It also suggests a range of other approaches which universities should adopt to ensure that their outreach programmes have maximum social impact. Universities should offer guaranteed interviews and, where appropriate, lower offers to less-advantaged pupils in schools that they support. They should also offer guaranteed admissions interviews to those who successfully complete a university-preparation programme, such as a summer school.

Finally, the report calls for a strategic review of the total pool of public funding dedicated to widening participation – the National Scholarship Programme, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) grant and universities' own financial resources – so that it gives individual students from disadvantaged backgrounds greater certainty and consistency about what they could expect to receive in the way of financial support prior to applying to university, and gives universities an incentive to have more students from disadvantaged backgrounds by meeting the additional costs associated with recruiting and retaining them, perhaps by adopting a Pupil Premium-type funding arrangement whereby eligible applicants bring extra funding with them. The objective should be to put in place a new national funding programme by autumn 2013. If the resources currently deployed by both government and universities were directed in a more strategic and evidence-based way, there is reason for optimism that much more progress on widening participation and fair access can be made.

Getting in

What happens in schools holds the key to who can participate in higher education but universities need to ensure that their doors are open to a wider pool of talent and potential. Universities

cannot simply stand back and leave all the heavy lifting to schools. They have a dual contribution to make. First, there is a need to bring greater coherence and energy to universities' outreach work with schools, parents and pupils in order to grow the pool of pupils from which they can recruit. Second, there is a need to ensure that university admissions processes are structured in a way that allows the fairest judgements to be made on which students have the aptitude, ability and potential to benefit from higher education.

Universities, as autonomous institutions, should be able to determine their own admissions criteria. Traditionally universities in the UK have tended to rely on academic attainment at A-level as the primary criterion against which an applicant should be judged for a place, but it is not – nor has it ever been – the sole determinant for most universities. A growing evidence base suggests that over-reliance on A-level results engineers a distorted social intake to universities, and fails to meet the criteria of excellence. Research from HEFCE in 2003 and 2005, for example, suggests that children from state schools are more likely to do well at university than those from private schools with the same A-level results – provided, of course, they have been able to secure a place. The problem is that the way admissions processes work, particularly at the most selective institutions, often inadvertently excludes students who could do well at university from ever being admitted.

This report recommends a number of approaches to ensure that a broader range of students is able to get into university.

First, the sector as a whole should make the use of contextual data – such as the type of school attended by applicants, their parents' education level, and their family's income – as universal as possible in admissions processes. One survey suggests that over 40% of higher education institutions currently use contextual data and over 60% plan to in future. Ideally it should be used by all universities. To that end it would be helpful if the various bodies representing universities could agree a common statement of support for the appropriate use of contextual data. A collective effort across the sector to agree what contextual data should be used, gathered and pooled would

have clear benefits. The aim should be to have an agreed dataset in place for the 2014/15 admissions cycle. With the right approach, contextual data can become the norm, not the exception, across the sector.

Second, steps should be taken to make the admissions system less complex and easier to navigate. In particular the report recommends that the sector and the Government should share as much (suitably anonymised) student data as possible with existing organisations such as Which? and bestCourse4me to encourage a market in comparable and accessible information about courses and universities.

Third, the sector should come together to agree how online learning can be developed to broaden the range of students who are able to benefit from higher education. Across the world, leading-edge universities and other providers are developing innovative online higher education opportunities. The explosion that we are likely to see in online learning over the next decade provides an opportunity to bring people into higher education – mature students especially – who would otherwise be excluded.

Fourth, universities should take action to embed foundation year programmes into the mainstream of higher education, not least by allowing a student who completes a foundation year programme in one university to have it recognised at another as a valid level of prior attainment.

No university can exempt itself from playing a part in expanding the pool of talent from which students are drawn. It is simply not good enough if some universities exempt themselves on the basis that their entry criteria are sacrosanct and that responsibility for raising attainment levels, so that less advantaged pupils can be admitted, rests purely with schools rather than universities. The blame game – where universities blame schools, schools blame parents and everyone blames the government – has to end. Every university needs to play its part. All universities should take steps to improve the transparency of their admissions processes and consider ways in which diversifying admissions criteria could broaden their pool of potential applicants without undermining their standards.

Highly selective institutions in particular should consider running more foundation programmes and embracing the use of contextual data. This report recognises, however, that the use of contextual data is a particular challenge for the most selective universities. For those universities, there is a trade-off. Less use of contextual data has to be accompanied by more effort to increase the supply of able students from a greater diversity of backgrounds. In other words, those institutions that maintain the highest entry criteria need to do more to improve the flow of potential applicants to their institutions. It calls on them to collectively commit to close the ‘Sutton Trust gap’ – the 3,000 or so state-educated pupils who have the grades but don’t get the places – at their institutions within the next five years. It recommends that each highly selective university should agree to sponsor an Academy school in a disadvantaged area and that they should all provide foundation degree opportunities targeted at those pupils in less-advantaged areas who have the greatest potential but lower grades than their current admissions entry criteria allow. Finally, it asks them to take collective ownership of the goal of Teach First – the scheme whereby top graduates are recruited to teach in the country’s most challenging schools – to increase its graduate intake from 997 in 2012 to 2,000 by 2015. The Russell Group of universities should then consider how they can contribute to the continued impact of Teach First beyond 2015, with an ever-higher proportion of Teach First graduates coming from the most selective universities in the country.

Staying in

International evidence suggests that the UK has one of the best records in the world on student retention. There are, however, some causes for concern. In particular, improvement in retention has been too slow, the discrepancy between universities remains too high and the drop-out rate for students from poorer backgrounds is higher than for those from relatively affluent backgrounds.

More progress needs to be made. It is time that universities became more intentional about tackling retention and providing the appropriate student support services.

It is also time to assess where spending on retention can have the biggest impact. Given that university financial support to students seems to have little or no impact on widening participation and fair access, and an unknown impact on retention, it is hard to account for it consuming £333 million of access agreement expenditure a year, two-thirds of the overall total. The report calls on universities to target resources at proven initiatives that can improve retention rates.

The report also recommends that all universities need to more actively consider what support they can provide to help particular groups of under-represented students succeed in completing their studies. In some cases, this will require assessing what skills universities expect students to have in advance, and those which they can cultivate after admission.

Getting on

The question of what happens to students once they leave university and their ability to succeed in their chosen career is all too often ignored in considerations about what universities can do to enhance social mobility. Universities have a crucial role in ensuring that everyone who graduates is equipped with the tools to succeed in the workplace.

Across the higher education sector, there is a growing consensus that universities have to do more to prepare students for entering employment in addition to supporting them in achieving a good degree. Employers are looking for experiences that demonstrate communication, team work and organisational skills. The report recommends that every university should be clear about the workplace capabilities they aim to provide students with.

More than that, it would be in the interests of students and employers to have league tables that reflected how effective each particular course was in providing a range of skills, with the university ranking being an aggregation of all its courses. In other words, league tables need to better reflect educational gain. They also need to reflect outcomes in terms of the career paths that graduates achieve once they are in the labour market. Given the power of league tables in

shaping behaviour, the Government should take the lead in establishing new outcomes-focused national league tables for universities. They should be in place by autumn 2013.

Finally, the report recommends a new funding model for postgraduate degrees. Both universities and students have consistently raised this as an issue, and there are reasons to be concerned that people from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds may be struggling to take part in postgraduate study. There is a real risk that the ability to pay up front, rather than an individual's potential, will increasingly become a determining factor in who can access postgraduate education. This poses an unacceptable threat to the long-term health of the UK higher education sector. Moreover, as tuition fees rise, those from disadvantaged backgrounds may be less likely to want to take on additional debt after graduating. Lack of access to postgraduate study is in danger of becoming a social mobility time bomb. The report recommends that the Government should consider introducing a loan system for funding postgraduate students. To start this process, the Government should commission an independent report, building on the principles of the Browne Review, to come up with proposals for a loan system for all postgraduate study.

Government policy

The report examines the Government's policy on higher education and makes recommendations to ensure social mobility considerations are more central to its operation. The report welcomes the Government's extension of student loans to part-time students; the significant allocation of funding to the National Scholarship Programme; the strengthening of OFFA; and the establishment of HEFCE as a consumer champion. These are all positive developments. The decision to abolish Aimhigher rather than reform it, however, was regrettable, particularly at a time when tuition fee increases make universities' outreach work more important than ever. In addition, there are concerns about five policy areas which may have unintended consequences that damage the Government's objectives articulated in its social mobility strategy.

First is the rise in tuition fees. The decision that graduates should only pay back their student loan when they reach a certain earning threshold is welcome. Upfront fees present a clear obstacle to entry, and the decision to link the rate of repayment to earnings with a minimum threshold of £21,000 is a step in the right direction. It is also a positive move from the perspective of retention, as students do not bear the burden of fee repayment while they study. There is also some cause to believe that the doomsayers who predicted that students would be put off from applying to university in their droves have not been proved right. The total number of school leavers applying to university this year is the second highest on record. The introduction of fees does not appear to have had an impact on the courses to which people applied. People have neither moved towards, nor away from, more expensive courses. Nor have they applied in greater numbers to courses with higher graduate salary expectations.

Nonetheless, the new fees regime has induced widespread concern. For the first time since 2006 the proportion of young people applying to university has fallen. Around one young applicant in 20 who would have been expected to apply in 2012 did not do so, equating to approximately 15,000 applicants 'missing' from the system. More worryingly still, there was a fall in application rates from young people living in the most disadvantaged areas. By contrast, between 2004 and 2012 application rates from that cohort increased by over 60%. The fall in applications for the least advantaged groups in 2012/13 is disappointing and may suggest a greater deterrent effect from the fees reforms than has been previously thought. Certainly there seems to be a major difference from the last time fees were increased, in 2006. Then, applications dropped amongst all groups, except the most disadvantaged. Crucially, at that time, the narrowing of the gap between the most advantaged and most disadvantaged proved resilient to the increase in fees. The evidence suggests that this time around that is not the case. This is a real cause for concern.

There are other concerns. When the data on all applicants (not just school leavers) is broken down according to region, some areas seem to be

experiencing far sharper drops in applications to university. Both the South West and the North East saw steep falls, 12.1% and 11.7% respectively, compared with an England-wide average of 10.0%. This is particularly worrying, since both regions have participation rates below the national average, with the North East having the lowest of any region.

The drop in applications among mature students is of particular concern. There has been a proportional fall in applications amongst mature students of between 15% and 20%. The decline is consistent across all age ranges, and represents 30,000 fewer applicants than if applicant rates had remained at their 2011 levels. Seen in the context of over 50% growth in the number of mature students admitted to higher education between 2007 and 2010, this suggests that fees have had a deterrent effect on older cohorts.

One thing is already certain: the increase in student fees is a major change. It means that families who are above the breadline but by no means wealthy now fear they will incur considerable costs – and debts – if their children wish to go to university. Higher education is no longer a free good. There is a very real danger that the Government has under-estimated the extent to which fear of debt is part of the DNA of Britain's least well-off families.

The Government has struggled to successfully communicate exactly what these changes mean for students. The report recommends that the Government should now review how it is communicating with potential applicants and their families. A sustained communications campaign is needed, with messages that are delivered in a joined-up manner, using existing networks, by those in the most credible positions with the target audience.

The Government's communication effort also needs to be broadened, particularly to part-time and mature students. The Government should work with key stakeholders, including Universities UK, UCAS, the Student Loans Company, the National Careers Service and others, to come up with a new strategy for encouraging non-traditional students – especially mature and part-time students – into higher education. It should

start this work immediately, with the aim of having an effective strategy in place for the 2013/14 admissions cycle.

Second is the cap on total student numbers. The report argues that the social and economic necessity for an expanding higher education sector has never been greater. The UK's global competitors are continuing to invest heavily in expanding higher education despite their own budgetary pressures. In contrast, England has reduced the number of student places to control expenditure. That is not a sustainable position. Without a clear strategic plan to both increase the total number of graduates, and an alignment of higher education opportunities with the new employment landscape, the competitiveness and long-term prosperity of the UK will be at risk. There is a social as well as an economic reason for continuing to invest in higher education. When higher education is expanding it creates a far more conducive environment for continued progress in getting greater proportions of people from less well-off backgrounds into university. When expansion stalls, access to university becomes a zero-sum game – with a growing risk that the progress of the less well-off comes at the expense of the better-off. Such a displacement effect makes public endorsement of widening participation more challenging.

The report recommends that the Government reconsiders the total allocation of resources directed towards higher education. Whatever the short-term pressures for public spending constraints might be, the Government should make a long-term commitment to increase the proportion of national wealth being invested in education overall, with more public and private expenditure being directed into the higher education system.

Third is the proposed approach to student number controls. The report examines the Government's new core-margin or AAB policy and concludes that students from less advantaged backgrounds are much less likely to be in a position to benefit from the introduction of these new competitive incentives. Those for whom the new policy creates greatest choice are disproportionately from relatively well-off backgrounds. In order

to maintain student numbers, universities will effectively be incentivised to target this group and are more likely to keep their entry requirement at or above AAB+ if possible. This could make it less appealing for universities to give lower, contextual offers to those with potential from disadvantaged backgrounds. The proposal to focus growth on places for AAB+ students has the potential to cut across the requirements on higher education institutions to improve access for those from less advantaged backgrounds.

Such polarisation would be deeply damaging and could have undesirable consequences for social mobility if able candidates from lower socio-economic backgrounds felt constrained to choose lower-cost provision. Indeed, it could create a vicious cycle in which those universities which charge less will have less scope to invest in facilities and to enhance the student experience, with the result that they may find it increasingly difficult to attract high-achieving students or those from wealthier backgrounds, regardless of the quality of teaching on offer.

While the policy has significant risks in terms of social mobility, its actual impact will be far from clear for some time. Much depends on how the policy influences admissions decisions and which institutions choose to grow. The report therefore recommends that at this stage the threshold should remain at AAB+ for at least two full admissions cycles to allow time for detailed, independent evaluation of the policy. If the evidence shows that the policy is having a regressive impact, it will need to be fundamentally rethought, to find alternative ways to free up student numbers. If, however, the concerns are not borne out by the evidence, then the threshold could be expanded to ABB+ or below.

Fourth is the replacement of EMA, which had been introduced by the previous Labour Government as a financial incentive for poorer children to stay on at school after age 16. The report examines the Government's decision to abolish EMA and replace it with a new system of discretionary support. It finds that, overall, EMA represented good value for money and that, without improvements to the new scheme, there is a real risk to continuation rates amongst disadvantaged pupils.

The report finds that there is legitimate cause for concern that these changes may have a negative impact on widening participation. It recommends that the Commission on Social Mobility and Child Poverty should monitor the evidence on the EMA replacement closely as it becomes available. In the meantime the Government should increase the funding level and refine the targeting of the new scheme, and universities should consider providing EMA-style financial incentives for young people to stay on and succeed at school.

Fifth is the future of careers advice. My 2009 report, *Unleashing Aspiration*, identified careers advice as a critical issue for social mobility and made recommendations on how to make improvements. In particular, it recommended that schools should be given direct responsibility for providing careers advice, and that the funding for Connexions should be transferred to schools to enable them to deliver on this duty. This report concludes that the Government has delivered on half of this: it has transferred the duty, but not the funding. Given the changes to higher education, particularly around fees, the timing could hardly have been worse.

The report recommends that the Government should make clear to schools as a matter of urgency the importance of face-to-face careers guidance delivered by impartial accredited professionals. It also stresses the need for an ongoing evaluation of the careers approaches taken by schools, and recommends that this should form a new part of the school inspections carried out by Ofsted, with the quality and effectiveness of careers advice forming part of each Ofsted school report.

Conclusion

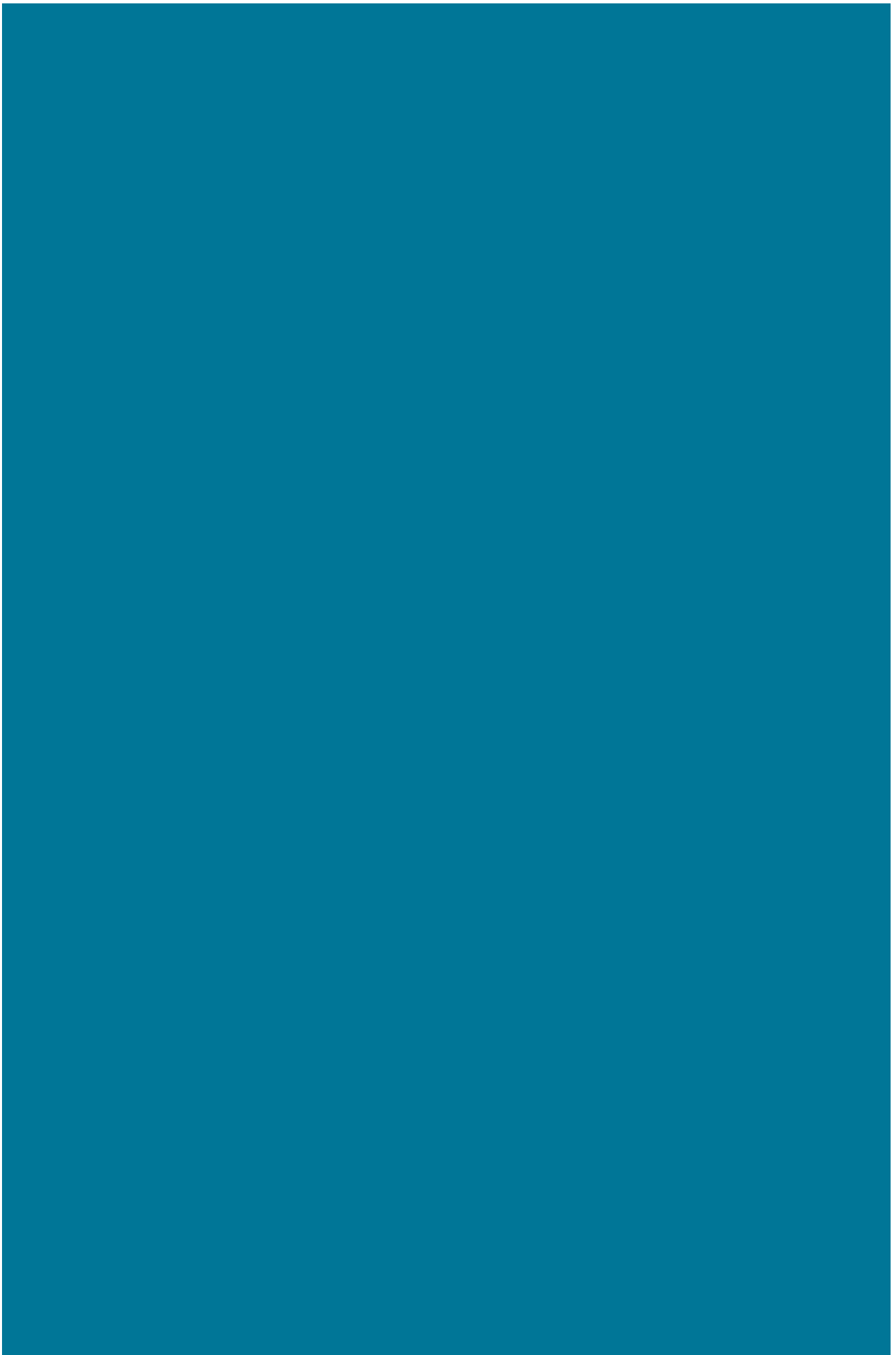
If we want to see social progress, the principle we should surely be aiming for as a country is to ensure that all those who have the ability, aptitude and potential to benefit from a university education are able to do so. That requires a genuine national effort. It requires our schools to raise standards and aspirations amongst all their pupils. It requires our careers services to provide inspiration and encourage ambition. It requires our government to pursue policies that enable people from the widest range of backgrounds to be able to go to university. It requires our country to devote more of our national wealth to higher education. And it requires our universities to pursue approaches that broaden the range of people they recruit as students.

This report is my last as Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty. My duties – and more besides – now pass to the new Commission on Social Mobility and Child Poverty which I will chair. Given the important role that higher education plays, I expect that the issues raised in this report are ones to which the Commission will wish to return.



Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn, Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty

October 2012



Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter sets out:

- The remit of this report
- The importance of universities in furthering social mobility
- Universities' value to individuals, the economy and wider society
- The methodology and contents of this report

World-leading universities

The UK is a world leader for the quality and diversity of its universities.¹ According to one prominent league table, we have four of the top six universities in the world, and 18 of the top 100² – more than any country other than the US. We are the second most popular destination for international students.³

We have strength in depth. The reputation of the UK's higher education sector depends not just on a handful of selective institutions. In the UK today there are 165 higher education institutions, of which 115 are universities.⁴ There are also a significant number of further education colleges at which higher education is taught.

All universities undertake research and teaching. All universities actively contribute towards their community. Yet the balance of these activities, as well as how they are achieved and articulated, varies enormously. This diversity is likely to increase as the sector grows, delivering higher-level qualifications and vocational skills, with new providers operating domestically, internationally and online.

Universities are in the spotlight as never before. In part this new focus is the result of changes over the last decade in public policy towards higher education. The introduction of tuition fees under the last Labour Government and their extension under the Coalition Government have brought to a head public concern about whether access to university is genuinely meritocratic and fair. In particular, the steep rise in the cap on tuition fees, which took effect in 2012, has caused widespread anxiety about whether the cost of higher education will deter people from poorer family backgrounds from applying to university. More generally, in the wake of the global financial crisis, there has been a growing public concern about inequality in our society. Like many other institutions, universities are having to answer new and profound questions about the role they play and the contribution they can make to a future that is fairer.

This new, more acute, accountability is particularly sharp when the public services – including universities – have to prove, in a climate of fiscal austerity, that they are delivering the best outcomes for the resources they receive.

Universities employ about 380,000 people, teach 2.5 million students and spend £21.4 billion.⁵ Now, more than ever, universities have to answer for what they do.

This report focuses on universities within England. It explores what universities are currently doing to ensure their doors are open to the widest possible pool of talent and it considers what more they could and should do.

The aim of this report is to suggest how universities can become part of a wider national effort to advance social mobility. Clearly, the wider public policy framework has a significant impact on universities – and the final chapter of this report looks at government policy – but the principal focus is on what universities themselves are currently doing and what more they could be doing.

The report's recommendations are highlighted in ***bold italics***.

Education and social mobility

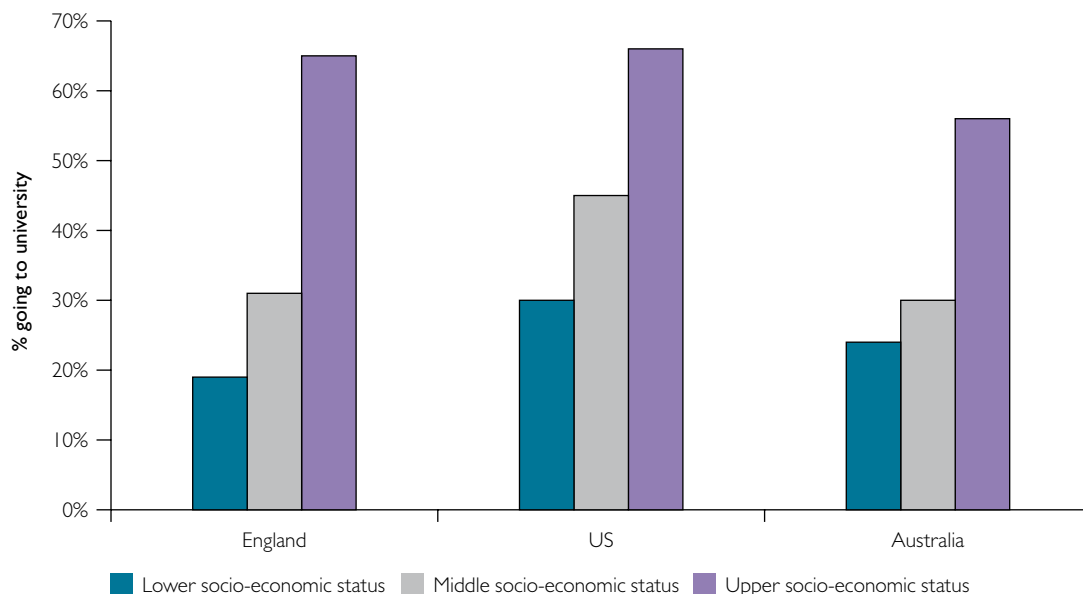
Universities exist to provide high-quality education. But they have a broader economic and social role. They are the gatekeepers of opportunity and the main pathway into careers in the professions. As the British economy becomes ever more

knowledge-based and professionalised, the role universities play will assume greater importance. Who gets into university, and how they get on once they have left, will have a critical role in determining whether Britain's sluggish rates of social mobility can be improved. At present, as Figure 1.1 below suggests, the UK's universities seem to be less open to people from lower and middle income groups in society than those in countries such as the US or Australia.

Social mobility is about ensuring that every person – and, in particular, every child – regardless of their background, their circumstances, or their social class, has an equal opportunity to get on in life. That entails breaking the transmission of disadvantage from one generation to the next.⁶ Britain seems to have lower levels of social mobility than other comparable countries and our society has become more ossified, not less, over time. The evidence suggests that education and employability are at the core of making progress in creating a level playing field of opportunity.

For education to be a leveller of opportunity, all those with ability, aptitude and potential need to have equal access to what it can offer. For example, one recent report found that, because of inequalities in access to higher education and

Figure 1.1: Higher education participation rates by social class



Source: Jerrim, J. and Vignoles, A., *University Access for Socio-economically Disadvantaged Children: A Comparison Across Anglophone Countries*, forthcoming

the increasing importance of higher education in getting on in the modern labour market, universities have actually contributed towards making society less mobile over the last 40 years.⁷ Equally, as we will see later in this report, there is good evidence that, over recent years, universities have made some progress in narrowing the social gap in higher education participation. The crucial questions are whether that progress is sufficient given changes in the structure of the British economy and labour market, and whether recent improvements can be accelerated.

Social mobility took off in the 1950s thanks to big changes in the structure of the labour market. The shift from a manufacturing to a service economy drove demand for new skills and opened up more opportunities for professional and white-collar employment. More 'room at the top' enabled millions of women and men to step up. Social mobility has slowed down in the decades since, primarily because of another big change in the labour market: the emergence of a knowledge-based economy. Over recent decades, people with higher skills have seen large increases in productivity and pay, while those with low skills have experienced reduced demand for their labour and lower average earnings.

Today we have a segregated labour market. Those with skills and qualifications enjoy greater job security, higher levels of prosperity and better prospects of social advance. Those without skills find it hard to escape a world of constant insecurity, endemic low pay and little prospect of social progress. Bridging this divide is at the heart of making our society fairer.

Of course there will be many people for whom university is not appealing. For those who do not aspire to higher education new solutions need to be found to provide better opportunities to progress. A higher priority on vocational education and easier routes into a professional career will be among the answers policy-makers need to consider. But overall it is likely that many more people will want, and need, to access higher education in the future. There are two principal reasons for that.

The first is economic. The British economy is becoming ever more service-based and the

labour market ever more professionalised. In the next decade alone, the total number of jobs in managerial, professional and associate professional occupations is projected to increase by 2 million while the total number of jobs in other occupations is projected to decrease by over 400,000.⁸ Access to these professional jobs overwhelmingly depends on having a university degree.

The second reason is social. Learning is increasingly a lifetime journey. The traditional image of a student as an 18 year old who has just finished A-levels and has left the family home to live and study full-time at university is outdated. This is one pathway to university, but it is certainly not the only one. In England, approximately 34% of students are studying part time.⁹ Nearly two-thirds of all UK-domiciled students, including almost half of first degree undergraduate students, are over the age of 21.¹⁰ The middle-class baby-boomer generation, who are beginning to enter retirement, has a huge appetite for learning and will represent a significant new market for universities.

Value of higher education

While there is great diversity in today's student population, we can break the benefits into three categories:

- benefits to the individuals who attend
- benefits to the overall economy
- wider benefits to society.

Benefits to individuals

Those who go to university in the UK derive great benefits in their lives. The Browne Review into the future of university funding found that graduates are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next. Higher education enables individuals from low-income backgrounds to enter higher status jobs and increase their earnings. Graduates also enjoy substantial health benefits – a reduced likelihood of smoking, and lower incidence of obesity and depression. They are less likely to be involved in crime, more likely to be engaged with their children's education and more likely to be

active in their communities. In short, graduates are wealthier, healthier and happier.¹¹

Prior to recent funding reforms, the lifetime benefits of a degree to the average graduate – even after taking into account earnings foregone while studying, the costs of a degree and additional tax payments – were over £100,000 in net present value terms.¹² There has recently been some debate as to exactly what this graduate premium is, but the evidence clearly suggests that graduates continue to earn more and are less likely to be out of work.¹³

The question from the social mobility perspective is whether these opportunities are evenly distributed throughout society. Are these opportunities going to a relatively narrow group of people, or are they being distributed to all those with potential across society? This can be broken down in various ways. Who is getting into university? Which university are they getting into? Once in, do undergraduates from all segments of society have an equal chance of completing their degree? If those from under-represented groups do complete their degree, are they as likely to do as well as others? And where they do match the attainment of others, are their labour market outcomes as good? If not, why not? These are issues that will be explored later on in this report.

Benefits to the economy

Universities are also critical to the vibrancy of our economy. In a competitive global market, the best way for the UK to make the most of emerging global opportunities – especially the growth of a huge global middle class – is to move towards high-value goods, services and industries. Our future lies in competing at the top of the value chain.¹⁴ The UK's world-leading higher education sector is one of the most important ways we can maintain our competitive edge in this race.

In the UK, between 2000 and 2007, the increase in employed university graduates accounted for 6% of growth in the private sector, or £4.2 billion of extra output. Employing graduates creates innovation, enabling firms to identify and make more effective use of knowledge, ideas and technologies.¹⁵ Innovative countries tend to have higher proportions of graduates. According to

the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), graduates account for 37% of the overall population in high-innovation countries, compared with 26% in low-innovation countries.¹⁶ This trend is likely to continue into the future, with innovation associated with increasing graduate numbers. The competition for jobs at the top end of the value chain is leading countries to invest in higher education (see figure 1.2). For example, by 2020 China is projected to produce more graduates than the US and Europe combined.¹⁷

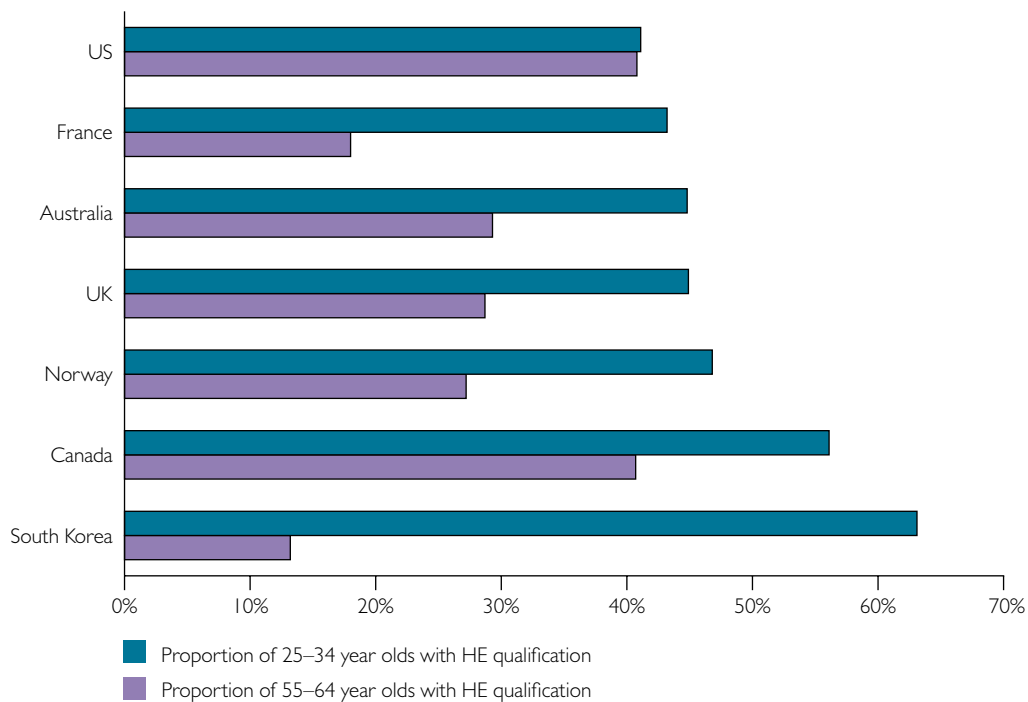
From the social mobility perspective, the question to answer is who is participating in the knowledge economy? Are there routes available through universities to people from all backgrounds, bringing a diversity of experiences that foster greater creativity, or are there barriers that obstruct mobility? Will prosperity be shared, or will there be an excluded under-class? As the growth of higher education in emerging economies makes clear, ensuring we make the most of all potential in the country is not just in the interests of the excluded; it is essential for our continued prosperity as a nation.

Benefits to society

The economic dividend from universities, both to individual citizens and the British economy at large, has been at the heart of the debate on their role over recent years. There is a risk that as we move to a new funding model, where those who go to university foot more of the bill when they start to earn, we come to see higher education purely as a transactional good for individuals and narrow our evaluation criteria to an economic calculus. Universities offer far more than economic benefits. They are a public good. In recent years it has become commonplace to focus on the economic good that universities bring to Britain. Today, there needs to be an equal focus on the social good they can bring.

There are various types of social activity which universities perform. First, many universities contribute to society via local community outreach. For example, in 2009/10 almost 1 million members of the public attended free university lectures and just over 7 million attended free

Figure I.2: Room for growth in higher education



Source: Universities UK, *Driving economic growth*, 2011

exhibitions in university galleries.¹⁸ The Manifesto for Public Engagement, which has been signed by nearly 50 universities, states that universities have “a major responsibility to contribute to society through their public engagement”.¹⁹

The second type of social value that universities create is in the outcomes for graduates which benefit wider society. The university experience helps cultivate a range of capabilities, such as confidence, independent thought, open-mindedness and the ability to work with others. These capabilities provide collective benefits to the country, for example by increasing the level of democratic engagement in society.²⁰ Some attempts have been made to monetise the social benefits of universities. One analysis found that universities contribute £1.3 billion to the UK economy through improved outcomes in terms of health, political engagement and the building of trust.²¹

The question from a social mobility perspective is whether there is an equal distribution of these capabilities and outcomes. Social mobility is not just about moving people up the earnings ladder. It is also about ensuring that access to social and educational capital is open to all, so that people from all walks of life can contribute to the flourishing of the nation. That is not the case today. As Professor Martin Hall, vice-chancellor of Salford University, has pointed out: “There is nothing ‘level’ about opportunity in Britain today, where the length of time a person spends in education, and their measured attainment, correlates strongly with the occupations of their parents and the income level of the household into which they were born”.²² This report focuses on what steps universities can take – with others – in helping to create more of a level playing field of opportunity in our country.

Methodology

In compiling this report I took evidence from a range of sources. A list of the organisations consulted is in the Annex.

Desk work

The Secretariat to the Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty conducted a thorough and comprehensive desk-based review of available data and analysis on social mobility in higher education. The Secretariat reviewed government research and statistics, think-tank publications, university publications and academic journals in order to construct an informed picture of the current situation and the key issues.

National call for evidence

A national call for evidence was issued in August 2011. Universities, mission groups, think-tanks, civil society organisations and others were invited to send submissions to the Secretariat. The Secretariat received over 100 submissions to the call for evidence. The results were analysed and fed into the report.

University deep dives

The Secretariat conducted in-depth visits to 14 universities across England. At each visit, a range of staff was consulted, including the vice-chancellor and other members of the senior management team, the head of admissions, widening participation teams and student services teams, including the head of careers advice. In addition, the Secretariat held roundtable discussions with undergraduates at each university visited. The full list of universities visited is as follows: Aston University; Birkbeck, University of London; King's College London; Oxford Brookes University; the University of Bristol; the University of Cambridge; University College London; Durham University; the University of Exeter; the University of Middlesex; the University of Nottingham; the University of Oxford; the University of Salford; and the University of Winchester. I would like to thank all these institutions for their time and support.

Roundtable discussions

I chaired a series of roundtable discussions with university vice-chancellors, sector leaders and experts on widening participation. In addition, I chaired a discussion with undergraduates (arranged with the help of the National Union of Students) and a roundtable with young people

considering applying to university (arranged with the help of the British Youth Council).

Survey of young people

On behalf of the Independent Review, b-live conducted a survey exploring the aspirations of young people and what shapes those aspirations. The survey was completed by over 1,000 young people, and the analysis was conducted by the Education and Employers Taskforce and Dr Deirdre Hughes.

Bilateral evidence

The Secretariat held a series of bilateral meetings with important organisations and actors in the field of social mobility and higher education.

Outline of the report

Chapter 2 looks at the remarkable growth that has taken place in our higher education sector, and analyses who has benefited from this expansion. It does so through the lens of both widening participation and fair access, to see which groups of people are getting on, and which groups are being left behind, identifying where there has been progress and where more needs to be done. It also evaluates the indicators the Government has chosen to mark progress.

Having set the scene, Chapter 3 explores some of the key barriers and evaluates the scope of universities' responsibility in knocking them down. In particular, it looks at the impact of the attainment gap in primary and secondary school education, and the inequalities that are built in by the time people come to apply to university.

The following four chapters look in turn at stages of the student life-cycle and the steps that can be taken in each. These stages are:

- getting ready – reaching out to potential applicants
- getting in – university admissions
- staying in – student retention
- getting on – student outcomes.

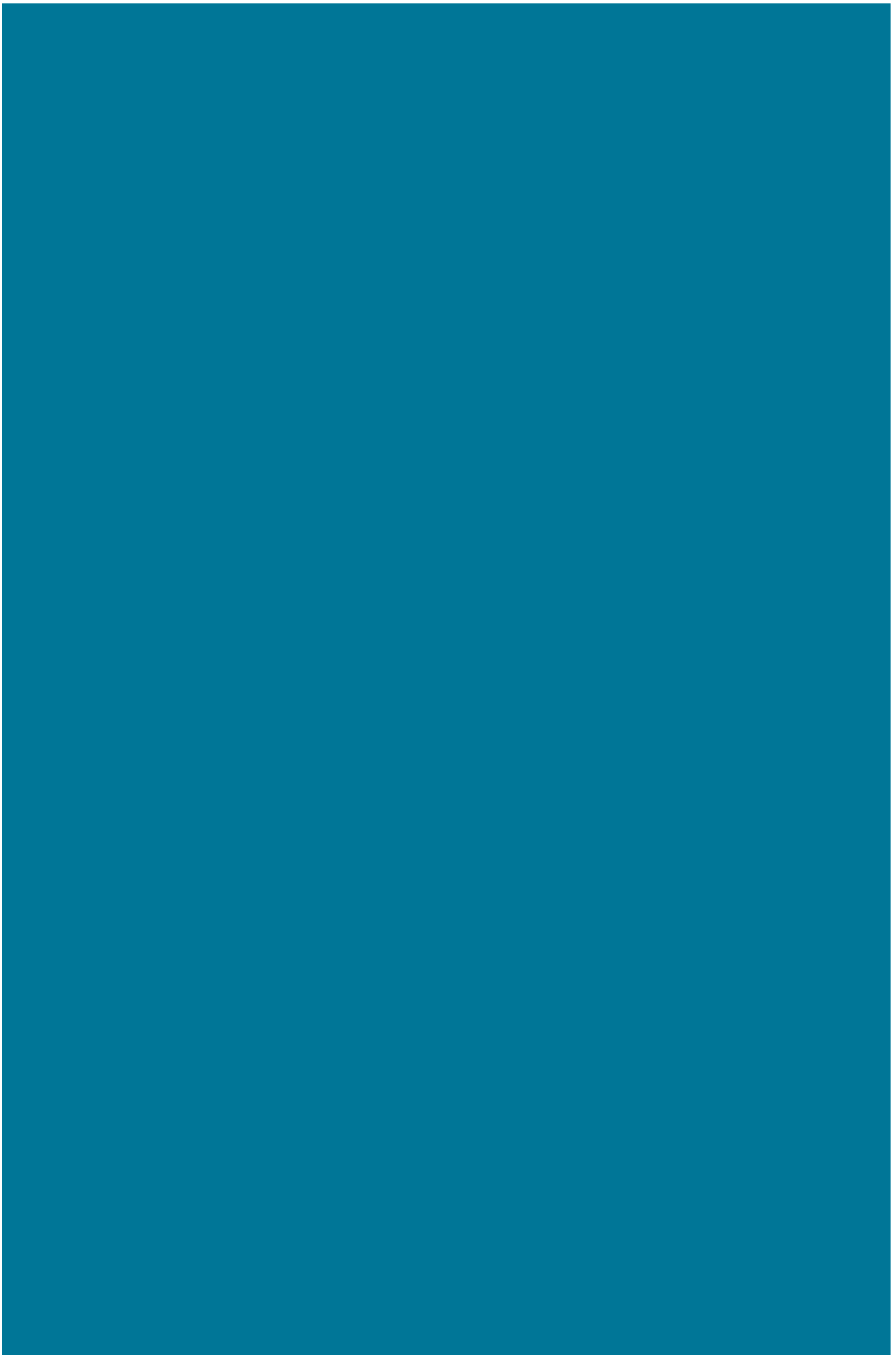
All four steps are crucial from the perspective of social mobility. If they can be aligned, universities will be able to achieve more in giving people with ability and potential, from all backgrounds, a fairer shot at being admitted to university; a better, more equal chance of completing their degree; and a bigger opportunity to progress in their careers on the basis of their skills rather than their connections.

The final chapter examines whether the Government's higher education policy is helping or hindering the prospect of Britain becoming more socially mobile.

Conclusion

These issues are complex and interwoven, and it is important that progress in one area does not come at the cost of falling back in another. For example, it would be counter-productive if people from disadvantaged backgrounds were getting greater access to university but were dropping out in ever-higher numbers.

Equally, the higher education sector is not a monolithic entity. Different universities have different strengths and face different challenges in different areas. The report's recommendations are structured to reflect the particular issues confronting various parts of the sector. Special attention is paid to the challenges facing those universities which have the highest entry requirements. These highly selective universities enjoy global reputations for excellence and compete in a global market for students. In general, these universities have some of the best outcomes for students but the lowest rate of attendees from disadvantaged backgrounds. Legally, it is for these universities – not any outside body – to determine their own admissions criteria, since this is a central pillar of institutional autonomy. They do, however, have a particular responsibility in terms of social mobility as they, more than other institutions, provide pathways into many of the most powerful and lucrative roles in society. The report pays particular attention to what they are doing and what more they could do.



Chapter 2

Access all areas

This chapter sets out:

- How access to university has increased over recent decades
- How progress both on fair access and widening participation to university are important to generating greater levels of social mobility
- The progress made over the last 15 years and the progress that still needs to be made
- The threats that exist to further progress
- How best progress can be evaluated

Growing universities

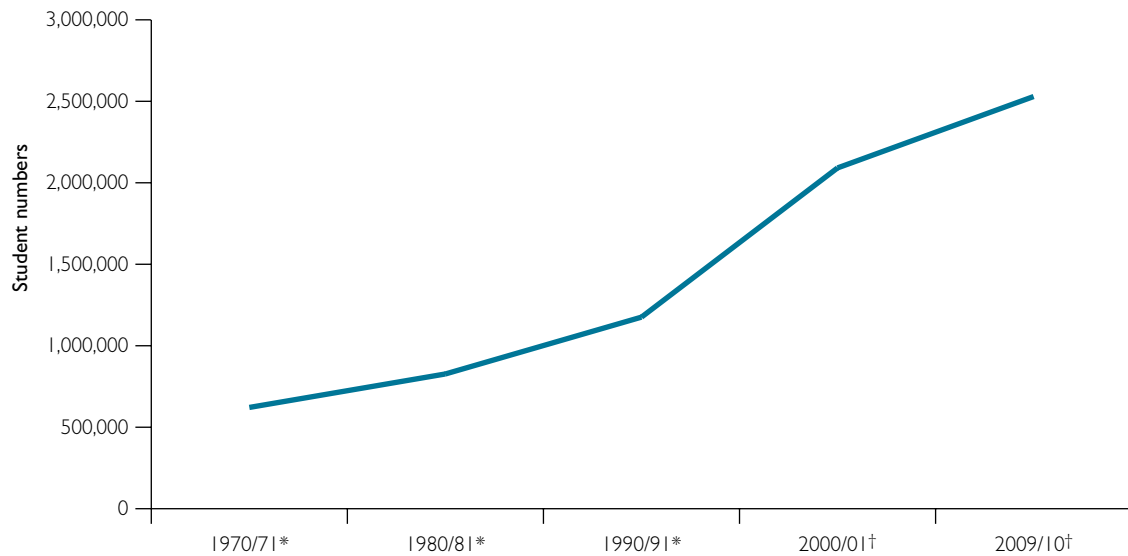
The last four decades have witnessed a remarkable growth in higher education in the UK. At the start of the 1970s there were a little over 600,000 university students. Today there are 2.5 million.¹ The UK is seventh in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in terms of the number of 25–34 year olds who have a higher education degree.² Figure 2.1 charts the extent of the change.

The question is whether this growth in higher education participation has been accompanied by a more even social distribution of these opportunities. To answer that question, two concepts are key: widening participation and fair access. Widening participation means increasing the total number of people who progress to higher education, in particular those from under-represented backgrounds. Fair access refers to who gets accepted on those courses – typically at the most selective universities – which have the best outcomes for students.³

Divisive debate

One of the consistent themes that emerged from the call for evidence was a frustration at what is seen as an excessive focus on the issue of fair access, which many believe to be a peripheral issue compared with widening participation. This argument was clearly articulated by the Open University:

“Our major concerns centre around what seems to us to be a significant narrowing of the whole concept of ‘widening participation’. The Government’s focus on getting some marginalised students into elite universities is not in our opinion the same as widening participation. Whether or not the ‘life chances’ of this relatively small number of students will be improved might be a moot point (for the most part, these are people who would almost certainly have become students anyway). However, such a narrow focus will do nothing to bring into higher education the significant numbers of people from disadvantaged

Figure 2.1: Growth in UK higher education**Source:**

* Higher Education Statistics Agency Student Record and Individualised Learner Record

† Further Education Statistical Record; Higher Education Statistical Record; Education Statistics for the United Kingdom; Northern Ireland Higher Education Statistics

communities whose engagement would carry the prospect of transformative change for whole families and communities.”⁴

A number of arguments were made against focusing on fair access. First, a relatively low number of people are affected. One analysis, dating from 2004, estimated that the ‘fair access gap’ – the extent to which disadvantaged groups are under-represented at highly selective universities once subject and qualifications are taken into account – is about 3,000 people.⁵ While this number may well be higher today, it is dwarfed by the numbers affected by the widening participation agenda. The higher education participation rate for the most advantaged 40% in society is approximately 50%, while for the least advantaged 60% it is approximately 25%. This means that there is a ‘widening participation gap’ of about 100,000 amongst 18 year olds alone.⁶ So purely on the grounds of the total number of people involved, widening participation is a bigger issue.

Second, talking about universities in terms of an ‘elite’ or ‘most prestigious institutions’ promotes the few universities at the expense of the majority of institutions. There is a diversity of excellence in the sector.

Third, some argue that any choice to go to university is a good choice. People apply to a university on the basis of a variety of criteria. A well-informed applicant may select a course on the grounds that it offers them the right opportunities in the job market for their chosen career. Equally, an individual may have personal ties to a particular region and this may influence their choice of where to study. Arguably, the greatest transformation in people’s life chances often occurs outside the highly selective institutions. For example, somebody from a disadvantaged background, with no family history of going to university, who works hard to get a degree in nursing may radically transform their own life, and often that of their family.

On the other hand, the fair access agenda is important, not least because of its impact on aspiration. If certain groups are not represented at a university, this can create a self-perpetuating cycle where people feel that a particular institution is ‘not for the likes of me’. In my conversations with undergraduates, it was clear that these beliefs are driven by a perceived student profile at particular universities, rather than fear of the content of the course. These perceptions obstruct the flow of talent into the most selective universities.

In addition, the financial returns for those who attend the most selective institutions are higher. The perceived value of degrees at some institutions has a significant impact on the hiring practices of many employers. For example, the five most popular universities among professional graduate-recruiting employers are:

- the University of Oxford
- the University of Cambridge
- the University of Manchester
- University College London
- the University of Nottingham.⁷

On average the UK's top employers target their graduate recruitment efforts on only 19 of 115 universities.⁸ These narrow recruitment practices for Britain's top jobs are bad for social mobility, since they assume ability is lodged in only a few universities, which happen to be amongst the most socially exclusive in the country, and overlook the potential of graduates from many others. Unsurprisingly, access to a professional career – a key determinant of social mobility – remains unfair as a consequence.

So in this report I start from the assumption that bringing about improvements to both widening participation and fair access in higher education are important if social mobility is to improve.

I urge all universities to make it an explicit priority to deliver improvements in both fair access and widening participation.

Recent progress

Over the last 15 years or so, there has been remarkable progress in widening participation. Between 1994/95 and 2009/10, participation rates in higher education among young people increased from 30% to 36%. The likelihood of those from the lowest participation areas in the country (which tend to be the most disadvantaged communities) going to university increased by 30% between 2004/05 and 2009/10 and by 50% between 1994/95 and 2009/10.⁹ From the mid- to the late 2000s the gap between the participation rates of the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged areas narrowed, both in proportional terms and percentage point terms.

As the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) found, it is likely that this is the first time in our country's history this has ever happened.¹⁰ It is a remarkable achievement.

This impressive improvement was driven by changes in public policy and by universities' determination to grip the widening participation agenda. Fifteen years ago, some institutions were doing good work, but this was generally only where it was driven by the strong beliefs in widening participation of a vice-chancellor or a head of admissions, or a small committed team working on outreach. This work tended to go on quietly, behind closed doors. Today, that has changed. All institutions have to play their part. Every university charging over £6,000 a year in tuition fees has to prepare an access agreement, which is negotiated with OFFA and open to external scrutiny. In 2010/11, higher education institutions spent £402 million on access agreements. This is predicted to rise to £613 million by 2015/16.¹¹ In addition, all universities are required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to produce Widening Participation Strategic Assessments which outline the institution's overarching commitment to widening participation. In short, widening participation has moved from the margins to the mainstream within universities as a whole.¹²

A long way to go

There is, however, a very long way to go before access to university can be said to be truly classless. Today:

- the most advantaged 20% of young people are seven times more likely to attend the most selective universities than the 40% most disadvantaged¹³
- there are more young men from black backgrounds in prison in the UK than there are UK-domiciled undergraduate black male students attending Russell Group institutions¹⁴
- the odds of a child at a state secondary school who is eligible for free school meals (FSM) in Year 11 being admitted to Oxbridge by the age of 19 are almost 2,000 to 1 against. By contrast, the odds of a privately educated child being admitted to Oxbridge are 20 to 1.¹⁵

Of course, much of the reason for these uneven higher education participation rates lies in what happens in schools rather than in universities. These issues will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3. Nonetheless, universities cannot be exempted from their responsibility to ensure that their doors are fully open to talent, regardless of social background. While universities have made progress in terms of widening participation, this has not been matched by progress on fair access. For example, the latest data shows that 87% of A-level students in private schools progress to university compared with 71% of those in state schools and colleges. But when it comes to fair access, students in private schools are two and a half times more likely to attend the most selective institutions – 65% compared with 26%.¹⁶

Participation at the most selective universities from the least advantaged 40% of young people has remained, at best, flat since the mid-1990s.¹⁷ Emblematic of this, research has found that four schools and one college get more of their students into Oxbridge than the combined efforts of 2,000 state schools (see Figure 2.2).¹⁸

But this is not just an Oxbridge phenomenon. A Sutton Trust study looked at university enrolment of children on FSM in 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2008/09.¹⁹ It found that 5.5% of the students admitted to English universities were eligible for FSM at age 15, compared with 13% who were from private schools. At highly selective universities, students from private schools are over 22 times more likely to get a place than state school pupils eligible for FSM. In 28 of the 88 universities in the Sutton Trust report, those who had been eligible for FSM at age 15 formed less than 3% of their intake. By contrast, pupils eligible for FSM at age 15 made up more than 10% of the intake at only 15 of the 88 universities.

Access to university remains inequitable. There is a strong correlation between social class and the likelihood of going to university in general and to the top universities in particular. So there is a long way to go (see Figure 2.3). Worse still, the progress of recent years is now at risk.

Figure 2.2: Oxbridge entrants in 2009

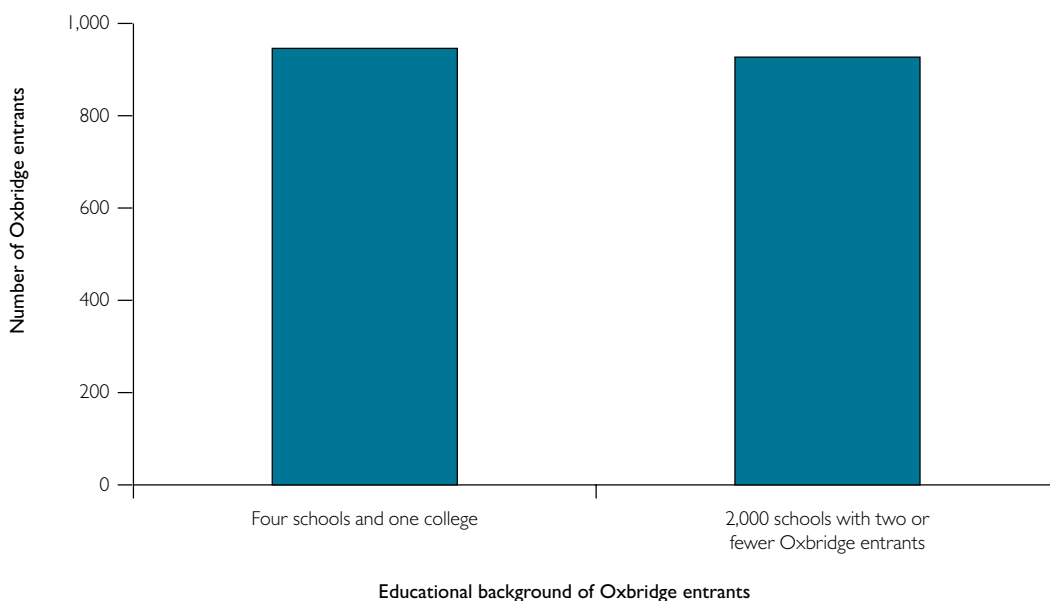
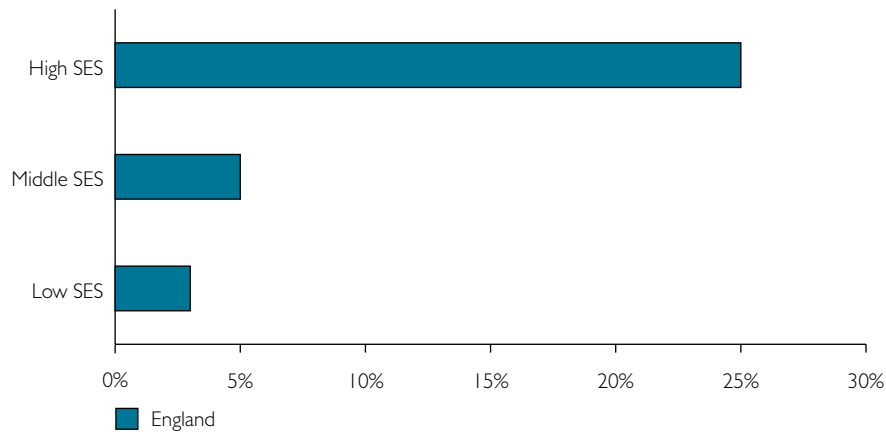


Figure 2.3: Young people's participation at Russell Group institutions by socio-economic status (SES)



Source: Jerrim, J. and Vignoles, A., *University Access for Socio-economically Disadvantaged Children: A Comparison Across Anglophone Countries*, forthcoming

Risks to progress

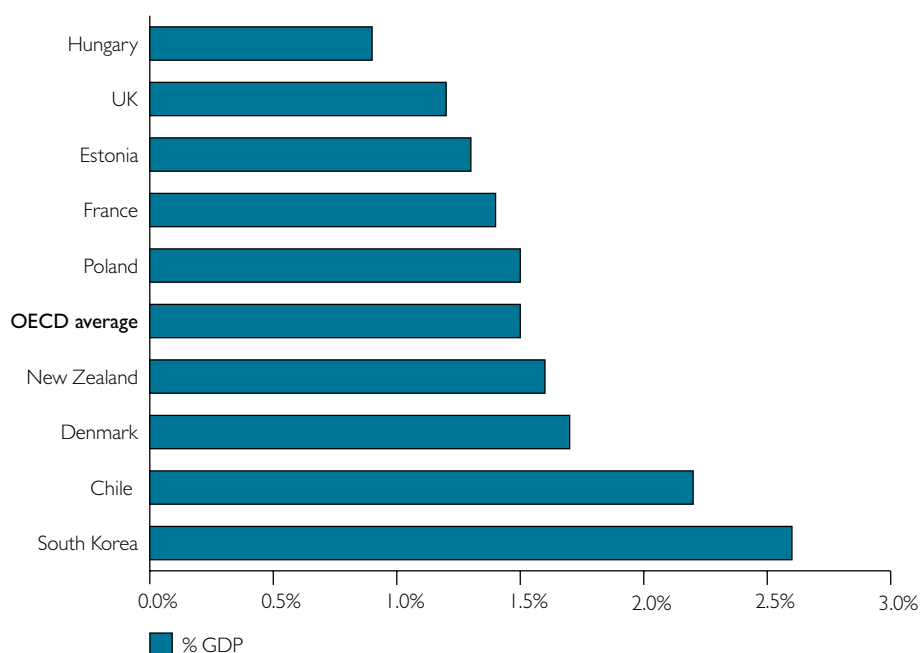
There are three structural risks that threaten progress:

- fiscal constraints
- slowing expansion
- policy framework.

At a time of public expenditure constraint, universities are facing profound changes in how they are funded, with a declining proportion

of their income coming from the public purse. Between 1997 and 2010, public funding for higher education doubled, from £6.1 billion to £13.1 billion.²⁰ Despite this substantial growth, the UK spends a significantly lower proportion of its national wealth on higher education than the OECD average (see Figure 2.4). Of the 31 OECD countries for which data is available, only six spend a lower proportion of their national wealth on higher education than the UK.²¹

Figure 2.4: Relative expenditure on higher education



The advent of higher tuition fees – and, prior to that, of student loans – was designed to change the mix of public and private funding for higher education. In future the public subsidy for teaching will fall, partially offset by increased public expenditure on student loans. Overall, total public expenditure on higher education, excluding research, is expected to decline by 23% in real terms between 2010/11 and 2014/15.²²

The fall in public expenditure on universities and the increasing share of private funding, alongside other public policy changes, will impact some universities more than others. Those that are adversely affected will most likely be unable to expand their student numbers. Some may end up with fewer students than they have today. This is a major change. The expansion of student places over recent years provided a benign environment for universities to progress their widening participation agenda. Today, there are more than twice as many students enrolled at English higher education institutions than there were in the late 1980s.²³ This has meant that higher proportions of people from disadvantaged backgrounds have been able to access university courses, without adverse impacts on access for those from other backgrounds.

Today the climate is far less conducive to making progress. For 2011/12, student numbers were capped at 364,325. In 2012/13 that number will fall to 353,415. The increase in tuition fees, as discussed in Chapter 8, may also deter potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds from applying for a university place. These are both significant new challenges which universities now face in making further progress on widening participation and fair access. Clearly, government policy is a major influence here – and I return to its role in the final chapter – but universities themselves will need to redouble their efforts if a university place is to be genuinely open to all those with talent and potential. Given the headwinds universities are facing, good intentions will not be enough. They will need a new level of dogged determination if progress is to be made. To that end ***I look to the sector, through its various representative bodies, to set out publicly a clear ambition – in the form of statistical targets – for the progress it will make over the next five years on both widening participation and fair access.***

Monitoring progress

Ensuring that this is the case requires the right measurement of the right data. The Government's Social Mobility Strategy has introduced two indicators which aim to track progress at the national level on fair access and widening participation.²⁴ These are:

- progression of pupils aged 15 to higher education at age 19 (FSM at age 15, non-FSM at age 15 and gap)
- percentage of young people who go on to the 33% most selective higher education institutions (gap between students educated at state school and private school).

Both FSM and school type are fairly blunt measures of disadvantage. For example, there may be pupils who are eligible for FSM but do not claim for a number of reasons or who claimed FSM in earlier school years, but not at age 15. Nor do universities have access to FSM data, which makes this a challenging metric for them to use in driving forward progress. Similarly, the school type indicator does not take full account of the fact that some pupils who attend private schools come from poor backgrounds, while many wealthy people attend state schools. In my consultations with universities it became apparent that there may be unintended consequences if the Government and universities focus purely on these indicators.

Nonetheless, when FSM and school type data is analysed it is consistent with other research on widening participation and fair access, suggesting it may provide effective proxy measurements to provide a high-level estimate of the progress being made nationally. But it needs to continue to be supplemented by other metrics of the progress being made in widening participation and ensuring fair access.

At present, huge amounts of data are gathered by various organisations, but they are not always shared or linked. The Student Loans Company, for example, has family income data on all those applying for a student loan, linked to their institutions. Universities have data on the parental occupation of applicants. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) publishes performance

indicators for the sector which include benchmarks, adjusted for individual universities, on factors such as the proportion of students from state schools, low socio-economic class, and low participation neighbourhoods. Other relevant data is also collected by several government departments – in particular Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the Department for Education, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

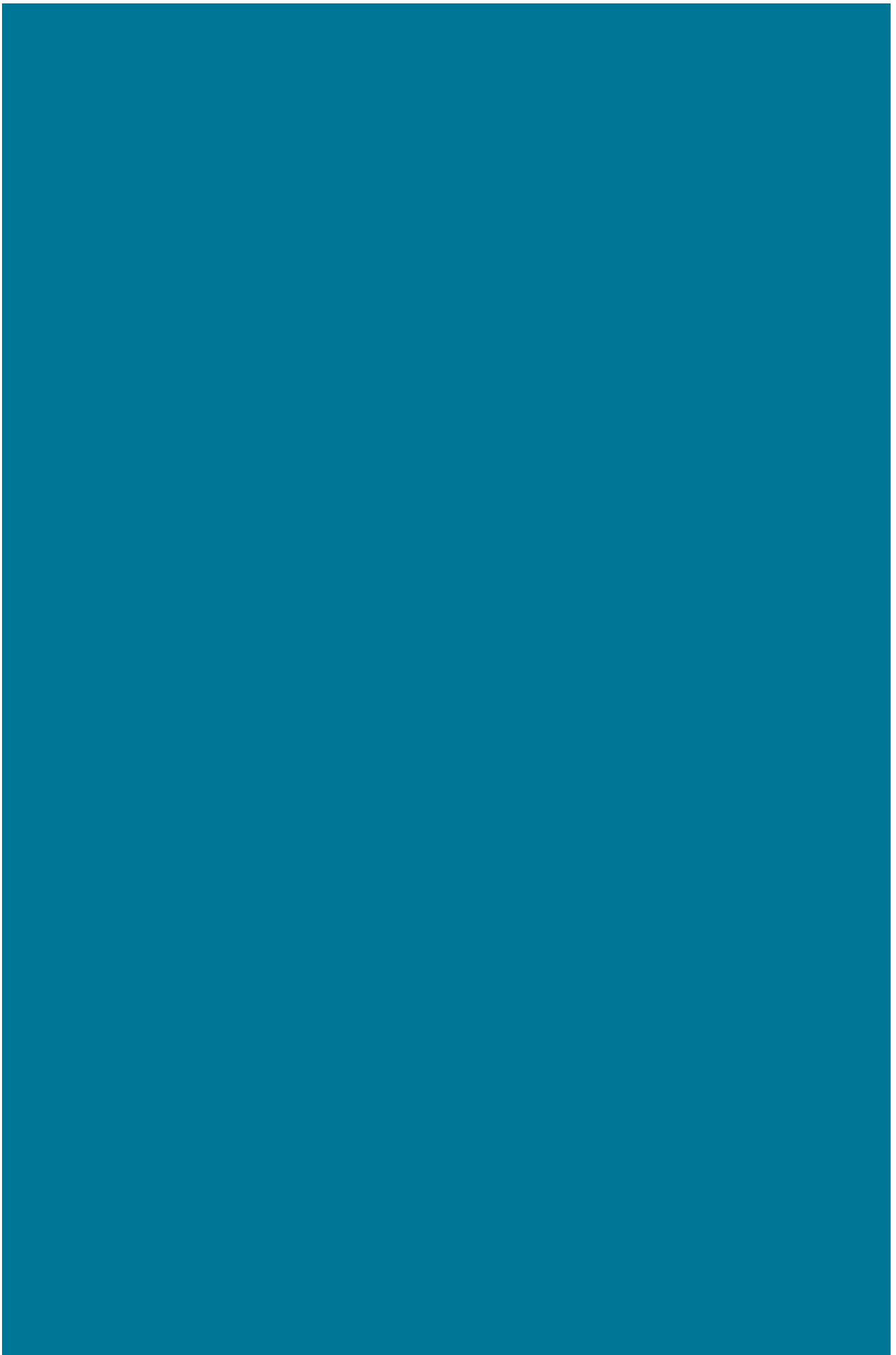
UCAS is currently working with government departments and OFFA to link the National Pupil Database with its own data to provide a unified series of higher education entry measures. HEFCE and HESA have been working together on the 'data landscape project', and the Government has established a Social Mobility Transparency Board to link up and make better use of official data.

All of these efforts need to be pooled in order that a new dataset and new indicators can be in place for autumn 2013. The aim should be for data that is able to track the progress of people from particular backgrounds through school, into university and then on into the workplace.

The suggestion of developing a Unique Learner Number, which would act as a universal lifetime learner identifier, analogous to the NHS number, is an idea that should be pursued. It would provide the means of tracking whether universities are being successful in widening participation and ensuring fair access. It would also allow schools and universities to be assessed against the outcomes they achieve.

Conclusion

Our country's universities have done much in recent years to open their doors to a wider pool of talent. It is commendable that these efforts have narrowed inequality in access. Nonetheless, the gap remains far too wide. There remains a strong correlation between social background and higher education participation: the more selective the university, the greater the inequalities in access. Within the sector there is broad agreement that more progress needs to be made. The climate for doing so is inauspicious. Constraints on public funding and student places mean that, if progress is to be made, universities will need to increase their efforts both to widen participation and improve fair access. The sector as a whole should set out a clear five-year plan – underpinned by better data and explicit targets – for doing so.



Chapter 3

Making the grade

This chapter sets out:

- The critical role that the educational attainment gap between pupils with different social backgrounds plays in limiting efforts to widen participation and fair access to university
- What schools and government can do to help close this attainment gap and so increase the pool of potential university students
- The case for universities also having a responsibility to close the attainment gap

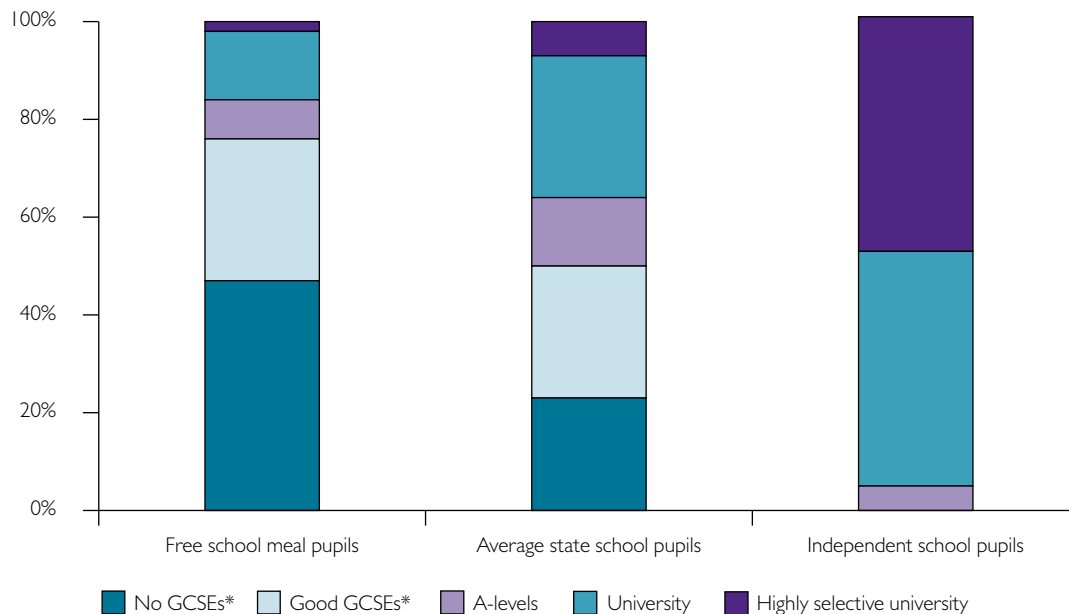
Mind the attainment gap

Universities depend on schools for bringing higher education within reach of their pupils. In an ideal world, all schools would be of a uniformly high standard and universities could simply select students on the basis of prior attainment. In the real world there is no such level playing field of opportunity. Educational, economic, and social capital are not evenly distributed. Highly selective universities in particular argue that the most important reason why too few students from disadvantaged backgrounds even apply to them is that they are not achieving the right grades at school in the right subjects. As organisations such as the Russell Group have pointed out, “many children from poorer backgrounds are significantly underperforming at school and this is the key reason why so few of them are gaining a place at a leading university”.¹ They argue that the answer to the university access problem lies not in universities but in schools. There is much truth in this argument, although it is not sufficient in itself to explain why access remains

unfair and participation less wide than it should be. Universities cannot simply blame schools for inequities in access.

Nonetheless there are substantial attainment gaps at school level (see Figure 3.1).

Attainment at age 16 is key to children's future educational – and employment – chances. Approximately nine in ten of all students who get two or more A-levels go on to university. The problem is that currently about half of 16 year olds do not achieve the minimum standards at GCSE to be able to study for A-levels. The chances of a child who is eligible for free school meals (FSM) getting good qualifications at age 16 are just over half those for better-off classmates: only about one-third of children eligible for FSM get five good GCSEs compared with about two-thirds of other children. This is reflected in the post-16 attainment gap, where 32% of pupils who were eligible for FSM at age 15 attain Level 3 qualifications by age 19, compared with 57% of those who were not.²

Figure 3.1: Educational attainment by background

* 'Good GCSEs' defined as five grades A–C, 'No GCSEs' if this was not attained

Source: Sutton Trust, *Mobility Manifesto*, 2010

There are also wide gaps in attainment of the high grades at A-level necessary to enter the most selective institutions. Only 11% of A-level candidates are privately educated but they make up 32% of students achieving at least AAA at A-level and 39% of students achieving at least A*A*A*.³ And of 11,700 pupils eligible for FSM in year 11 who went on to take A-levels in 2011, just over 500 secured AAA or above – less than half the rate of state school students not eligible for FSM.⁴

In addition, there is uneven attainment in particular subjects. Highly selective universities often require grades in specific subjects, and people from poorer backgrounds are far less likely to study these. In particular, the Russell Group has emphasised the importance of 'facilitating' subjects, such as maths, English, history, sciences and languages.⁵ These subjects are studied far more commonly by pupils educated in the private and selective sectors. For example, of the 124,846 pupils taking A-levels at comprehensive schools, only 40% sat examinations in one or more of biology, chemistry or physics, as opposed to 74% of the 22,006 pupils at selective state schools and 63% of the 35,245 at private

schools.⁶ State-educated students we spoke to were often unaware that their subject choices were closing down options, and were provided with poor advice by their schools on the impact of their decisions.

In short, the pool of talent from which universities can recruit is more limited than it should be because of the gap in attainment between private and state schools, between better-off pupils and worse-off ones, and between those who study key subjects and those who do not. If access to university is genuinely to become classless, there will need to be progress in closing each of these attainment gaps. Government obviously has a key role to play, but so do universities.

Taking class out of the classroom

In the last decade or so good progress was made in narrowing the educational attainment gap. Children who received FSM had more rapidly improving GCSE results than those who did not. Similarly, some ethnic minority groups, such as Afro-Caribbean boys, began to close the attainment gap. Primary schools in the poorest areas improved almost twice as fast as

those in the most affluent. In secondary schools, Academies improved results at four times the national rate, despite having twice the number of pupils on FSM. The Equality and Human Rights Commission argues that “educational attainment has been transformed in recent years” with huge improvements in GCSE and A-level results, rising university admission rates and a new focus through Surestart on improving life chances for a whole generation of children.⁷

While this is good progress, it is not nearly enough. The priority remains expanding the pool of school leavers from which universities can recruit. Increasing the pass rate for five GCSEs including English and maths for lower socio-economic groups is the most important factor when it comes to widening participation and ensuring fair access in higher education. Clearly there is no silver bullet that, on its own, can bring this about. Teaching quality, careers advice and school leadership all have a part to play. The key is to ensure that the overall objective for schools is two-fold: to raise standards overall and at the same time to close the education attainment gap.⁸ ***These twin objectives should be the explicit driving intention behind all aspects of education policy. The Government should set a five-year ambition for each and every school to make progress on closing the attainment gap between its less well-off pupils and its better-off pupils. Similarly, it should make the creation of individual Free Schools conditional upon increasing the proportion of their pupils, especially those from less well-off backgrounds, who get a place at a leading university. The new Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission should assess whether schools policy, across the waterfront, is both raising the bar and closing the gap.***

The Pupil Premium and increased funding for Teach First are good examples of policies that are already aligned to these objectives, but all aspects of education policy need to follow.

Case Study: Teach First

Teach First is a charity whose vision is that no child's educational success is limited by their socio-economic background. It has set itself a specific goal to narrow the graduation gap between the most advantaged and disadvantaged groups in society.

At the centre of Teach First's approach is a drive to recruit bright graduates who are passionate about helping students fulfil their potential, and place them in schools that have a high proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2013, it is set to become the largest graduate recruiter in the country. Ofsted has found the training that participants receive to be outstanding, leading to inspirational teachers who have a real impact on the lives of their pupils.

Those who have completed Teach First training become part of an ambassador community – a movement of leaders aiming to raise the achievement, aspiration and access to opportunity of children from low socio-economic backgrounds. A flagship ambassador initiative is the Higher Education Access Programme for Schools (HEAPS). HEAPS has had great success by using teachers to identify disadvantaged young people with potential, and providing a range of support such as mentoring and university visits to increase the number of university applications, particularly to highly selective institutions. In the last year, more than 80% of HEAPS pupils successfully progressed to university while, compared to a control group, HEAPS students were 20% more likely to receive offers from Russell Group institutions.

However, Teach First recognises that it cannot transform access to higher education alone. Teach First is aiming to work collaboratively with universities, businesses and civil society organisations to ensure that every child has the opportunity to realise their academic potential. This collaboration would provide an ideal opportunity for those who share the values of Teach First to work together on serious, long-term solutions to university access.

Research conducted by McKinsey⁹ found that in order to close the gap in access to higher education, as set out in Teach First's impact goal, the 450 Teach First partner schools would each need to get 23 more pupils to university every year, including 19 more pupils to highly selective universities. This ambitious target cannot be achieved by any one organisation and will require a joined-up, long-term approach. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has explicitly endorsed the work of Teach First as a proven means of widening access. Oxford, Cambridge and York universities have already taken a lead by offering bursaries to those who join Teach First to support them on their journey to address educational inequality. In Chapter 5 this report recommends ways in which selective universities could particularly contribute to building Teach First, but I also believe that ***the sector as a whole should collaborate with Teach First to provide funding, bursaries and in-kind support to help make these ambitions a reality.***

Universities' responsibility

The principal responsibility for expanding the pool of potential applicants to higher education rests with government and with schools. But universities also have a role to play. Most universities have embodied a commitment to social mobility in the hard work of their widening participation teams and in their mission statements. For example:

- the University of Bradford aims "to promote equality and diversity and social justice, and change people's lives for the better through higher education"
- the University of Birmingham says "diversity is a source of strength that underpins the exchange of ideas, innovation and debate at the heart of our academic mission"
- Birkbeck, University of London has as one of its principal aims "to enable adult students from diverse social and educational backgrounds to participate in our courses"
- the University of Wolverhampton is "committed to being an agent for social inclusion and change".

Universities are, of course, autonomous organisations with the right to set their own agendas, but it would be welcome if all universities felt able to make similar commitments. After all, they are all subject to duties embedded in access agreement targets, agreed with the Office for Fair Access, to ensure that they have as diverse a student body as is possible.

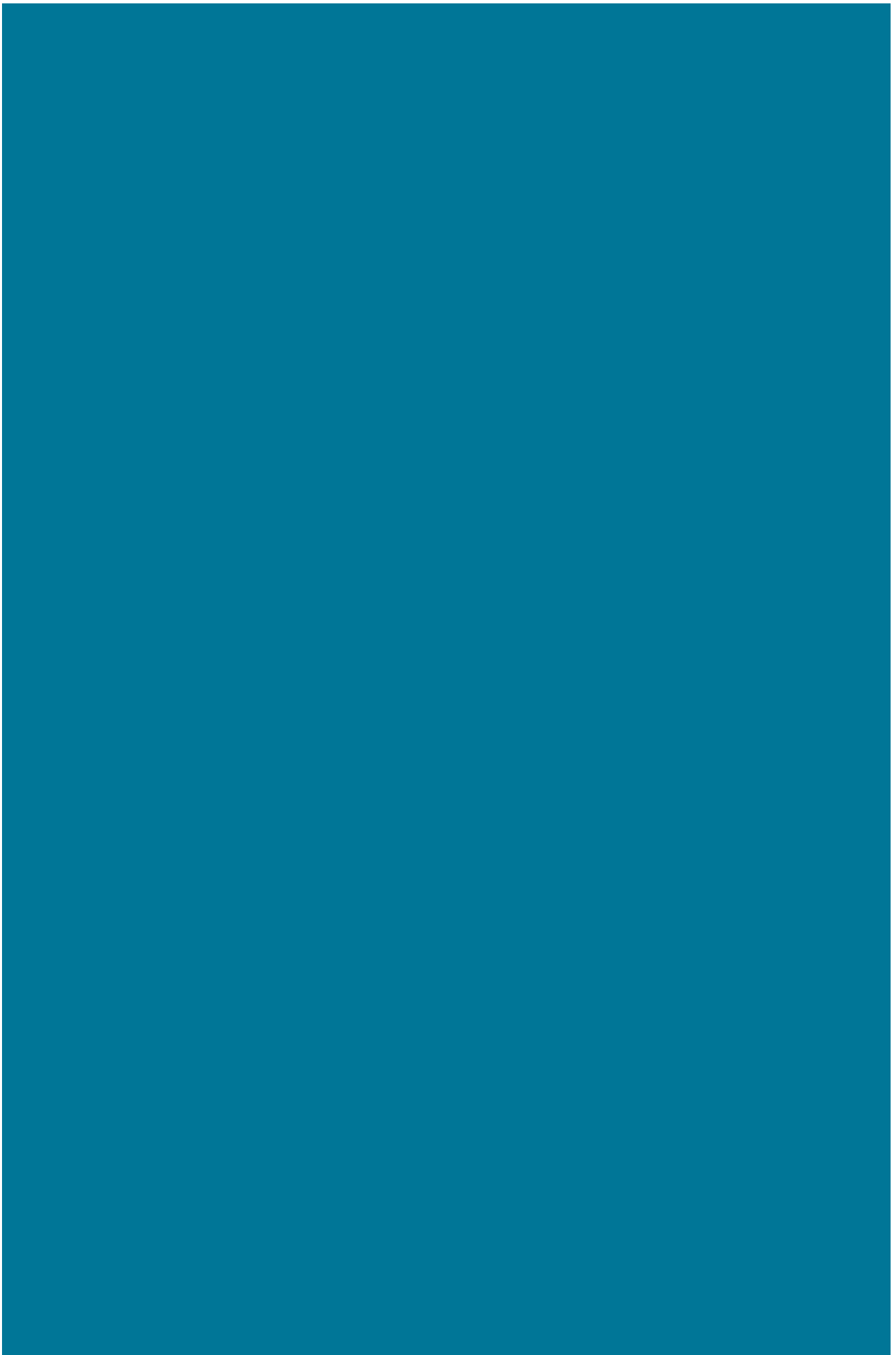
In order to analyse the ways in which universities can take action to improve social mobility, the life-cycle of students has been broken down into four stages:

- getting ready – the outreach activity which universities undertake to improve attainment and aspiration, and to help potential students make the right choices
- getting in – the admissions process and criteria which universities use
- staying in – the work of student services and bursaries in improving rates of retention at university
- getting on – the steps which universities take to help students succeed in their chosen career after graduation.

Over the next four chapters, I will look at each of these stages in turn to assess the ways universities can make the maximum impact on life chances in our country.

Conclusion

Schools create the pool of applicants from which universities recruit. That pool has been expanded over recent years as efforts to address inequality in educational attainment have had a positive impact. But the gaps in attainment remain too wide and much more needs to be done. Government should focus all schools on closing these gaps, and all universities should make it their explicit objective to do the same.



Chapter 4

Getting ready – reaching out to potential applicants

This chapter sets out:

- An assessment of the outreach work that universities are doing
- The role of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), and how it can have a productive impact on university outreach activity
- Recommendations for how government spending on university access could be targeted more effectively

Outreach

Universities undertake a variety of activities to take information about higher education to school pupils and local communities. In recent years they have focused in particular on pupils, schools and communities which are under-represented in higher education. Over the last ten years they have spent hundreds of millions of pounds on outreach activity aimed at widening participation. Spending across the sector is predicted to reach £613 million by 2015/16. It is crucial that this money is spent in a way that delivers as much social impact as possible. That is not the case at present.

The Aimhigher National Evidence Report identified the “core underlying factors” which outreach aimed to address as:

- raising aspirations towards higher education progression
- improving awareness and knowledge about progression
- driving up attainment at GCSE or A-level
- evidence of actual progression.¹

Universities currently run a wide range of outreach programmes. Common patterns of activity which they undertake include:

- raising aspiration, attainment and awareness of higher education, for example through pupils' campus visits and mentoring programmes
- providing special entry pathways into higher education, for example through foundation years courses (we look at this in Chapter 5)
- curriculum and staff development, for example through subject-focused intensive training for teachers to re-energise their love for the subject
- developing partnerships, for example by sponsoring Academies.²

Case Study: Villiers Park Scholars Programme

The Villiers Park Scholars Programme, based in Cambridgeshire, aims to level the playing field for those from disadvantaged backgrounds by helping students, families, schools and universities to work in partnership. Over a dozen schools, three universities and several social enterprises are involved in the scheme. The objective is to provide comprehensive and cohesive support for able students from less advantaged backgrounds. Each scholar develops a personal progression plan, and is provided with a programme of outreach activity and a learning mentor. This support lasts for four years. The programme explicitly aims to raise attainment and strengthen university applications. Evaluations of the programme have found that it drives up attainment, the likelihood of students applying to a selective university, and increases the chances of participants gaining a place at the university of their choice.

The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions found that partnerships between universities and schools provide an innovative means of widening access to professional careers, and recommended that such efforts should become universal.³ In particular, it recommended that:

- sustainable, concrete links should be established between individual schools and local universities. All universities should offer a representative to join the governing bodies of such schools
- all universities should work with schools to ensure that outreach programmes are provided from primary school level onwards.

There has been some progress on these recommendations, but it remains too slow and too patchy. For example, University College London (UCL) is sponsoring an Academy that opened in September 2012. The University aims to leverage its expertise and facilities in order to have a deep and lasting impact. They will be sharing laboratory, library and other facilities, as well as running summer schools and seminars for pupils. Furthermore, the Academy will be a

base from which UCL can enhance the support which it provides to its other partner schools. This kind of engaged partnership is a model for educational transformation. At present, 11 universities are the lead sponsors for Academies, with ten universities co-sponsoring Academies. A further five universities have plans to be the lead sponsor for an Academy in the pipeline.⁴ This is an excellent way in which universities can use their educational capital to transform the life chances of young people.

A genuine national effort is needed to ensure that no school is left behind and that every university is playing its part.

I recommend that any university that has not developed concrete links with individual schools should now do so. In particular, I urge more universities to follow the lead of those that have chosen to sponsor Academies.

Case Study: Nottingham Potential

The University of Nottingham's Nottingham Potential programme provides ongoing academic and pastoral support to young people from age seven to 18. Education Centres, developed with the charity IntoUniversity, are located within Nottingham's most educationally and socially disadvantaged communities and provide after-school homework support, as well as a base for raising aspiration and attainment. By offering a physical presence in the community, it allows closer collaboration and consultation with community partners. The Centres work with young people and their families to raise aspiration and support high achievement. For example, trained tutors will help with literacy and numeracy, as well as career advice. In addition, the programme includes work with primary school classes to support and enhance the school curriculum and introduce the concept of higher education; sessions with pre-16 pupils that offer academic tasters, as well as more intensive information and advice about the steps needed to progress to university; and summer schools. Nottingham Potential students entering the University of Nottingham receive additional financial and pastoral support.

Better evaluation

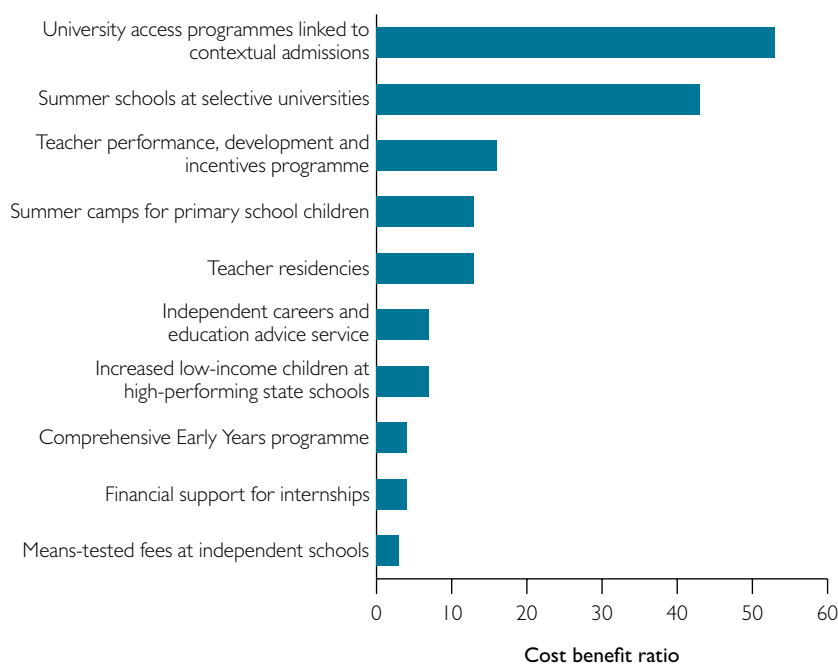
At a time when university budgets are under significant pressure and when there are severe constraints on public expenditure, it is particularly important that all outreach activity is evaluated for its effectiveness, otherwise efforts and resources are both wasted and universities miss the chance to put their efforts behind proven activities. Although some university outreach activities have been evaluated for their effectiveness, most have not been. To date, the amount of money invested has not been matched by efforts to better understand what really works. This is unacceptable and must change. Overall, it is unclear what impact the significant expenditure on outreach has had and some research has suggested that much of the progress of recent years in broadening the social intake of higher education has been driven by improving GCSE results rather than the efforts of universities.⁵

There are some exceptions to this. For example, recent work on Sutton Trust summer schools found strong evidence that they were effective in improving social mobility.⁶ Another evaluation, conducted by the Boston Consulting Group,

aimed to quantify the relative value of various outreach activities (see Figure 4.1).⁷ Although the precise methodology in this evaluation has been questioned, it provides a snapshot of the impact of different types of intervention.

Some forms of activity are relatively easy to measure, for example those which target young people just before they apply to university. Others are more difficult, in particular those which target younger children and aim to raise their aspirations. But given the unique research capabilities of universities, with sufficient time and thought, proxy measures can be identified to provide forms of evidence as to what is working best. **Universities, working with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and OFFA, should establish as a matter of urgency a collaborative research programme to establish which forms of outreach activity have the biggest impact on widening participation and fair access. The results of this research should inform how universities deploy their access budgets. As part of this work, an agreed set of outreach objectives should be established. This should form the foundation of evaluation to enable comparison between programmes. It will be up to**

Figure 4.1: Relative impact of outreach activity



Note: For each programme the total benefit per cohort was divided by the cost per cohort. The result is the cost benefit ratio. These range from 53:1 for university access programmes linked to contextual admissions, down to 3:1 for means-tested fees at independent schools.

Source: Sutton Trust, *Mobility Manifesto*, 2010

universities to decide which of the menu of outreach objectives is their priority and how best to work towards their goals, given their particular context. OFFA should require universities to demonstrate the impact of what they do through this framework.

In the meantime, the evidence I have seen suggests that universities' work with schools should have the following features:

- an early start, ideally before GCSE choices are made
- a structured and sustained programme of relatively intense engagement, rather than a series of disparate and superficial interventions
- a summer school, to allow students to experience higher education rather than just hear about it
- an impartial approach that puts the interests of the student first, situating the choice of if and where to study at university in the context of the long-term aspirations of the individual
- a range of options for students, rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach
- a link between a pupil's participation in an outreach programme and being offered a place at university
- a focus on both driving up attainment, as well as broadening the horizons of students, and providing clear guidance on pathways towards achieving specific ambitions.

Universities should align their outreach programmes behind these approaches to ensure that they have maximum social impact. In particular, universities should consider incentivising less advantaged school pupils to engage with these programmes by:

- **offering guaranteed interviews and, where appropriate, lower offers to pupils in schools that they support**
- **offering guaranteed admissions interviews to those who successfully complete a university-preparation programme, such as a summer school**
- **recognising successful completion of such programmes with UCAS tariff points.**

Case Study: Realising Opportunities

Realising Opportunities is a collaboration of 12 highly selective universities, led by Newcastle University, working together to improve aspiration and access to research-intensive institutions. The programme identifies about 500 bright students from disadvantaged backgrounds each year, and provides them with a package of support including summer schools, academic tutors, and e-mentoring by current undergraduates.

Unlike many other schemes, Realising Opportunities offers a clear pathway to admission to a highly selective university. The scheme has a strong academic component which is recognised by most participating universities as counting towards UCAS tariff points. This enables lower A-level offers to be offered to successful Realising Opportunities students.

About 95% of Year 13 students on the programme applied for university in 2011 and 58% of those applications were made to research-intensive institutions. The evaluation of the scheme has also found benefits in the partnership working between institutions, with increased common purpose and willingness to contribute resources to a shared endeavour.

Collaboration

At present there is insufficient evidence of universities working together to pool knowledge and effort about what works. Following the Government's decision to abolish Aimhigher, there is added urgency for universities themselves to take the lead in building networks of collaboration both regionally and nationally.

Aimhigher was co-funded by HEFCE and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills with the intention of supporting progression to higher education for young people from disadvantaged groups. It began in 2004 and ended in July 2011. Its major focus was on those aged 14 to 19. It was

delivered via 42 partnerships of schools, colleges, higher education institutions and local authorities. Budgets for these partnerships ranged from £600,000 to over £3.5 million, and they delivered a range of activities such as summer schools, careers advice and mentoring programmes.

The National Evidence Report summarised Aimhigher as a “national programme that holds the needs of the individual learner (and not those of particular sectors or institutions) at its heart; a cross country agenda that has the flexibility and sensitivity to respond to local conditions while being accountable to national standards; and a ready made local, regional and national ‘rapid response’ structure with the management and delivery expertise to adapt quickly to new government imperatives and to deliver them in ways that strengthen local provision through regional and national collaboration.”⁸ Under the banner of Aimhigher a huge number of activities were delivered. For example, in the 2009/10 academic year there were a total of 54,544 events and approximately 2,226,580 individual contacts (although many people were contacted more than once).

Aimhigher was, however, criticised because its activities were not systematically and robustly evaluated, so there was not a clear evidence base about which forms of outreach provided the best value for money. The quality of its partnerships varied significantly, with some areas delivering inferior activities, and its administrative costs were too high. The Government decided to abolish Aimhigher from summer 2011.

The abolition of Aimhigher rather than its reform was regrettable, particularly at a time when tuition fee increases make outreach work more important than ever. Universities have expressed concerns that the networks and infrastructure which built up through Aimhigher will fade, and levels of collaboration will fall. It has forced universities’ widening participation teams to spend significant amounts of time trying to find ways into schools, and schools are now trying to navigate a confusing blizzard of offers. In this situation, universities need to step up to the plate to fill the vacuum that Aimhigher’s abolition has created.

I endorse the recommendation in the Hughes Report that all universities should collaborate at a regional level on access initiatives.⁹ Some steps have already been taken, such as AccessHE in London or the collaboration amongst Birmingham’s universities. ***The Government should work with HEFCE, OFFA and higher education bodies to ensure that every school in the country has a relationship either with an individual university or with one of these regional networks.*** The National Education Opportunities Network is helping to move this agenda forward by forging collaboration and helping to drive up professional standards in the outreach community. The well-researched topic briefings of Action on Access also highlight important themes and issues for universities to consider.¹⁰ ***But every part of the country needs to be covered, and the existing regional forums need to come together in a national forum. The organisation that is best placed to drive forward a national programme of outreach activity – including the pooling of knowledge, research and evaluation of specific types of activity – is Universities UK. It should adopt a leadership role.***

Dux Awards Scheme

It is important that all school–university efforts are designed to have maximum impact and bring youngsters into higher education who would not otherwise participate. Not all initiatives work towards these outcomes. We are concerned, for example, about the Dux Awards Scheme, which was developed in partnership between the Department for Education and the Russell Group. This award is open to all maintained secondary schools. Each participating school will nominate one Year 9 student with outstanding potential to visit a Russell Group institution for a day, and the costs will be covered by the Government. This nominee, accompanied by a teacher, will be nominated the 'Dux', which is Latin for leader. The scheme aims to champion success and raise aspiration. I am concerned that this scheme is not sufficiently evidence based, and directs resources and attention away from the serious long-term work that is more likely to make a difference. The scheme has also been accused by some, such as million+, as being tokenistic.

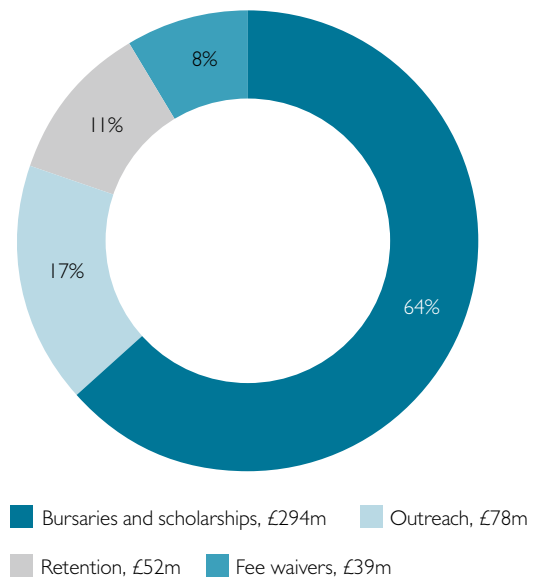
Bursaries

By far the majority of universities' access expenditure goes on financial support to students, primarily in the form of bursaries. When students are facing financial pressures and lower-income families fear that a place at university for their child will incur a mountain of debt, the priority which universities accord to providing financial support is understandable. The problem is that the evidence suggests that this approach is not particularly effective at widening participation or securing fair access. An OFFA report into the impact of bursaries¹¹ found that:

- bursaries have not influenced the choice of university of disadvantaged young people
- applications from disadvantaged young people have not changed in favour of universities offering higher bursaries

- since bursaries were introduced most of the increase in participation of disadvantaged young people has been in universities offering lower bursaries.

Figure 4.2: Higher education institutions' access agreement expenditure, excluding the National Scholarship Programme



Source: Office for Fair Access, Access Agreement Data 2012/13, 2011

This suggests that if real progress is to be made on widening participation and fair access, the balance of expenditure needs to move more towards outreach activity. That is what OFFA has recommended and it is a view that this report endorses.¹² **Universities should now act to switch expenditure in this way and OFFA should report on whether they are doing so.**

This activity could include universities switching spending from bursaries and fee waivers to instead providing financial support to disadvantaged pupils to enable them to stay on at school and get good exam results. As we saw in the previous chapter, it is school attainment that is the key to university participation and the social gap in attainment that is the biggest factor explaining why not enough children from lower-income families progress to higher education. Part of the reason why poorer children do not stay on at school past age 16 is the cost associated with doing so. That is the reason the last Labour Government introduced the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and why

the current Coalition Government has maintained some financial support to students through the 16–19 Bursary Fund. **Given the abolition of EMA and the inadequacies of its replacement (see Chapter 8), there is a good case for universities helping to provide financial support to promising disadvantaged pupils so they can achieve the necessary exam results to be able to successfully apply to higher education. The Russell Group and other higher education representative bodies should devise a scheme for doing so.**

Role of the Office for Fair Access

This brings us to the role of OFFA, and the need for external scrutiny of outreach activity to incentivise programmes that deliver meaningful, and lasting, impact. OFFA is the regulatory body with responsibility for safeguarding and promoting fair access to higher education. A robust, suitably resourced and focused OFFA is critical in driving good practice.

Every university wishing to charge over £6,000 a year in fees now needs to submit an access agreement, explaining the action it is taking on improving access to higher education. OFFA has responsibility for approving and monitoring this process, and its guidance influences the whole sector. By shining a light on university activity, OFFA brings a transparency to the process which helps to drive progress. In order to discharge these functions effectively, OFFA should be evaluating universities' efforts, both in terms of the steps they are taking to improve the diversity of their particular institution and also in terms of how they are helping to expand the overall pool of higher education applicants.

OFFA and HEFCE have been asked by Ministers to pool resources and expertise to provide robust scrutiny, save on administrative costs and reduce the bureaucratic burden on universities. At present, HEFCE sends teams to monitor universities and, through Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (WPSAs), evaluate the progress being made by universities. WPSAs have a three-year life-cycle, while access agreements are now required annually. Access agreements are generally included as an annex to WPSAs. **This system needs to be rationalised. Universities should**

have one document which brings together all their work on effective participation, including outreach, admissions and retention. This will enable greater strategic focus, transparency and accountability. The process for making this happen has started but it needs to be resolved by the end of 2012.

OFFA produces two types of guidance: formal access agreement guidance and research on good practice. OFFA research provides a key channel for highlighting what works, directing future activity and moving the evidence base forward. For example, it provided an excellent evaluation which showed the limited impact of bursaries, and consequently advised universities to direct more of their resources towards outreach activity.¹³ **More of this type of research needs to be undertaken by OFFA, and this guidance needs to play a stronger role in setting common standards for how universities direct their resources and evaluate their impact.**

But it is OFFA's formal guidance, and the negotiation process that leads to an access agreement, that has the most teeth. A crucial part of this process is evaluating the targets for improved access set by universities. In the current round of access agreements, these targets varied considerably in their quality. Some universities set ambitious and meaningful targets for the number of disadvantaged students they aimed to admit. Other universities have more simplistic output targets, which could in theory be met while having little impact on actual outcomes. Given the importance these targets have in driving institutional behaviour, it is important that far more careful consideration is given to them in future.

Many members of university staff who work on widening participation highlighted their concern that poorly constructed targets were leading to a pursuit of short-term gains at the expense of the serious, long-term work that makes the biggest difference. It would be regrettable, for example, if universities simply targeted sixth form students at high-performing state schools for short-term recruitment gains, instead of building long-term relationships with schools in a way that could transform lives. Many universities have expressed their frustration at being evaluated primarily on inputs – how much money they are spending on

outreach – rather than on the impact their efforts are having. I therefore welcome the Government's request that OFFA "shift away from assessment of inputs and processes, to a focus on clear outputs from access activities and measurable progress against appropriate measures and targets".¹⁴

OFFA's mindset needs to change. It should analyse both the likely short- and long-term impacts of the work universities are doing, and make a more holistic assessment of what progress is being made.

There has been much discussion around the possibility that OFFA could decide not to approve an access agreement in the future, and the impact that this could have on a university. In such a situation the university would not be able to charge more than £6,000 a year in tuition fees, which could seriously damage its financial viability. This sanction has never been used and I would hope it never has to be. Nonetheless it is an important tool for OFFA to have at its disposal as a very final resort in the event that any university consistently ignored OFFA's guidance or failed to engage constructively with the access agenda.

It is, however, too blunt an instrument to be truly effective on its own in challenging universities to broaden participation. ***OFFA needs a graduated range of powers at its disposal. The Government's commitment to review the powers of OFFA based on the views of the new OFFA director is welcome but that needs to happen in short order. OFFA needs to have new powers at its disposal by spring 2013 to inform its guidance on how to produce an access agreement for 2014/15.***

OFFA also needs to be properly resourced. When it was established, OFFA had just four full-time equivalent staff to undertake these tasks. That has risen to ten today. It is welcome that the Government has already increased the resources available to OFFA, and agreed to revisit the size and structure of OFFA with the new director. ***A more nuanced and meaningful engagement between OFFA and universities requires better resourcing. That can be achieved by secondments into OFFA from universities and government departments and by sharing resources with HEFCE.***

Government funding for access

The Government has made some positive decisions in funding widening participation activity. The two primary sources of funding are the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) and the HEFCE grant. There is a need for a strategic review of this total pool of funding to identify how best to target public resources to get the greatest social mobility impact.

Current expenditure

The Government has provided an allocation of £368 million in 2012/13 through the HEFCE grant to meet the additional costs associated with attracting and retaining students from non-traditional backgrounds and disabled students.¹⁵ This includes widening participation work, as well as efforts aimed at driving up retention rates. In the past, this funding has been awarded as a block grant, and as a result there was insufficient accountability as to how the money was spent. HEFCE is currently revising its evaluation mechanism to ensure that resources are directed towards the activities which have the greatest impact on widening participation and improving retention. This is a positive step.

The NSP will provide extra financial support for eligible students from families with low incomes to support living costs while studying. The Government has committed £50 million to the NSP in the financial year 2012/13, £100 million in 2013/14 and £150 million in 2014/15. This will be match funded, pound for pound, by those universities charging fees of over £6,000 a year. Each eligible full-time student will receive a benefit of not less than £3,000, with pro-rata awards for part-time students.

Case for reform

For the NSP to be effective in improving social mobility, it needs to fulfil the following criteria:

- the money should be directed at forms of support that have as much impact as possible
- the resources should go to those who need it most
- the scheme should be easily understood
- the scheme should be easy to administer.

The call for evidence, and consultations with staff implementing the scheme, suggest that it is not delivering on any of these criteria.

First, too much NSP expenditure goes on fee waivers for which, as we will see in Chapter 6, there is little clear evidence of a positive social mobility impact. It was this that led both the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee and the Hughes Report to say that NSP money should be focused on supporting the living costs of students. **NSP support for fee waivers should cease.**

Second, NSP funding is allocated according to the total number of students at an institution, rather than the number of disadvantaged students. As a result the universities that have had the least success in diversifying their student body proportionally get the most NSP funding. Unsurprisingly, universities with a high proportion of widening participation students feel they are effectively punished as they cannot afford to give them all bursaries, but those with few can. **The criteria for distributing the NSP need to be adjusted to strike a better balance between incentivising those universities that have not made much progress on the widening participation agenda and not disadvantaging those who have done well.**

Third, the call for evidence and discussions with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds found that potential students are not clear about eligibility for the NSP. There is little public recognition of the scheme, and not a single student of the dozens spoken to was aware of their own eligibility prior to starting at university. Each university is free to implement the NSP in its own way and students generally do not know if they are eligible until they are accepted. Some universities take steps to ensure that their students, pre-application, are aware of their likely eligibility for certain bursaries, but this is rare. **All universities providing NSP support should make clear to potential students whether they will be eligible for financial support prior to their applications.**

Finally, the scheme is confusing to administer. While universities have a lot of freedom in how they direct the resources, there are also various limitations. Balancing these alongside the other bursaries and forms of support universities already

have on offer has proved an administrative burden. For example, Government NSP funding cannot be used for support beyond the first year of a degree, but the matched funding from the university can be used for retention activity. **These anomalies need to be sorted out to simplify the operation of the NSP.**

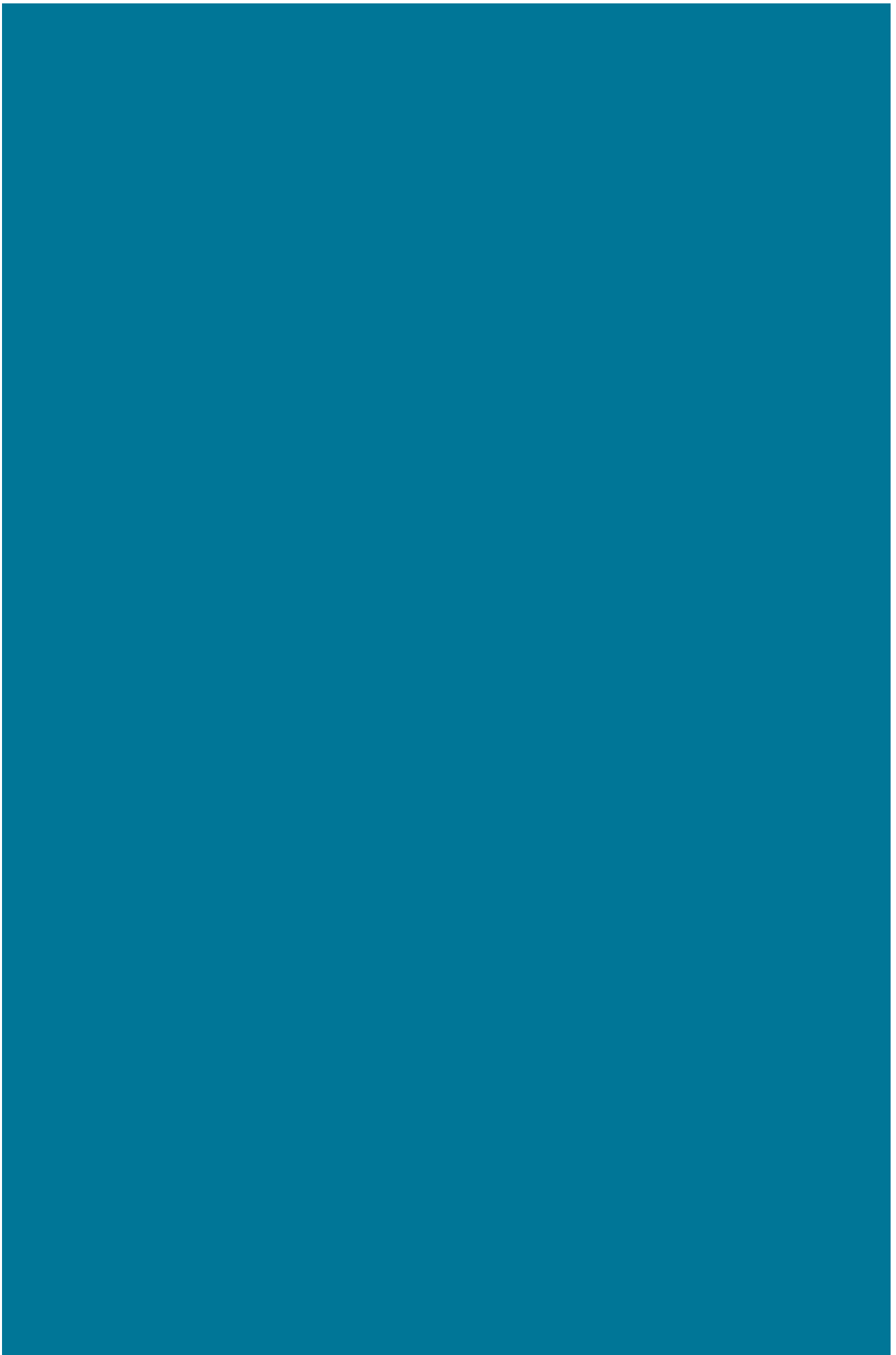
In the short term, these are urgently needed reforms to the NSP. There is, however, a clear case for a more fundamental re-evaluation of funding in this area to better align it behind three objectives:

- giving individual students from disadvantaged backgrounds greater certainty and consistency about what they could expect to receive in the way of financial support prior to applying to university
- giving universities an incentive to have more students from disadvantaged backgrounds by meeting the additional costs associated with recruiting and retaining them, perhaps by adopting a Pupil Premium-type funding arrangement whereby eligible applicants bring extra funding with them
- giving universities the means to switch resources from fee waivers and bursaries to school outreach activity and financial support for disadvantaged school pupils to enable them to stay on at age 16 and get good GCSEs and A-levels, since it is these steps that have the biggest impact on getting more children from poorer backgrounds into higher education.

The Deputy Prime Minister has announced that the Government is conducting a review of how to maximise the impact of the NSP. **This review should take a holistic look at the NSP and the HEFCE grant alongside the financial resources that universities commit through their access agreements, with a view to meeting the three objectives above. The aim should be to find ways of pooling as many of these resources as possible and agreeing means of managing them strategically to have the greatest social mobility impact. The objective should be to put in place a national programme by autumn 2013.**

Conclusion

Hundreds of millions of pounds are spent each year on access initiatives, and there are some outstanding examples of good practice. It is unacceptable, however, that a more robust evidence base on what works has not been developed. Developing this must be a priority. In addition, the balance of expenditure needs to shift away from financial support towards outreach activity. A properly resourced OFFA has a critical role in making this happen. It is ideally placed to help ensure that university activity is directed at serious, long-term efforts that have a meaningful impact on social mobility. Current programmes need to be reviewed, and replaced by a new programme. If the resources currently deployed by both government and universities were directed in a strategic and evidence-based way, there is reason for optimism that much more progress on widening participation and fair access can be made.



Chapter 5

Getting in – university admissions

This chapter sets out:

- How identifying prospective students with the most potential requires more holistic assessment by universities
- The evidence for the use of contextual data and a recommendation that its use becomes the norm across the sector
- Why there is a need for greater transparency in admissions procedures
- Ways that admissions criteria, and routes of entry, can be diversified to broaden the pool of potential applicants

Fair admissions

Universities, as autonomous institutions, should be able to determine their own admissions criteria. This report endorses the principles outlined in the Schwartz Report:

“Admissions are the responsibility of universities and colleges themselves, and rightly so. Institutions should be able to set their own criteria, choose their own assessment methods, and select their own students. But it is important that everyone has confidence in the integrity of the admissions process. Access to higher education matters to many people, and so do fair admissions.”¹

The Schwartz Steering Group identified five principles that form the basis of fair admissions:

- be transparent
- enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course, as judged by their achievements and their potential
- strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
- seek to minimise barriers to applicants
- be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.²

While these principles should form the basis of any admissions process, the particular mission of a university may lead to different strategies or criteria for entry. Academics at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Oxford identified three possible principles for higher education access:³

- excellence – academic merit should be the sole standard of access
- fair equality of opportunity – access mechanisms should correct for background social inequalities
- social benefit – access should depend on what the students are likely to do with the education they get.

Many UK universities are clear that, for them, excellence is the primary driver of admissions. Often, particularly in public debate, an emphasis on excellence is confused with a sole focus on prior attainment. While it is true that traditionally universities in the UK have tended to rely on academic attainment at A-level as the primary criterion against which an applicant should be judged for a place, it is not – nor has it ever been – the sole determinant for most universities. Of course, no single indicator provides better evidence of how a young person will do at university than their A-level results. But they are not foolproof in predicting future performance or guaranteeing that admission to university is genuinely meritocratic. A growing evidence base suggests that over-reliance on A-level results engineers a distorted intake to universities, and fails to meet the criteria of excellence.

Research from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2003 and 2005, for example, suggests that students who attended state schools are more likely to achieve an upper second degree than children who attended private schools who had similar A-level results – provided, of course, they have been able to secure a place.⁴ This finding has been reinforced by other research. A 2009 study found that the same average GCSE grades for a private school and a state school student do not represent the same potential to achieve a first-class degree.⁵ It identified the importance of ‘teaching effects’, in which teachers in the private sector temporarily bolster students’ performance, which wear off before university finals. A 2011 study found privately educated pupils at Bristol University performed less well at finals compared with state-educated pupils with the same A-level scores.⁶ As the president of Universities UK points out: “Everyone should be pleased about this. For the selective schools in any sector, this shows that they have educated their pupils to their full potential and that trajectory continues at university. For the other students it shows that when they are put in an enriched educational environment with an excellent peer group, they flourish.”⁷

The problem is that the way admissions processes work, particularly at the most selective institutions, often inadvertently excludes students who could do well at university from ever being admitted. We can see this by examining how the three hurdles that face any potential university applicant can end up being barriers to entry:

- whether they have the necessary level of skills and prior attainment to submit a viable application
- whether a viable applicant actually applies to university
- whether the applicant gets offered a place.

A recent analysis examined how important each of these hurdles was for people from different types of school as they sought to secure a place at the University of Oxford.⁸ It found that pupils at private schools were over seven times as likely to get strong GCSE grades as those from the most deprived state schools. Pupils at the most deprived schools who did get the requisite grades were only just over half as likely to apply to Oxford as a private school pupil. Finally, among those who got the requisite grades and who did apply, those from the most deprived state schools were nearly three times less likely to be offered a place as those from private schools. In short, at all three stages the hurdles became higher the more disadvantaged the background of the pupil and lower for the most advantaged. Indeed, this research argued that the admissions process favours those from private schools.

Nor is it alone in suggesting that there is a proportional over-representation of students from private schools at highly selective universities and that this is not purely due to different levels of attainment. Research by the Sutton Trust has found that there are approximately 3,000 people who attend state schools and sixth form colleges who do not get admitted to our dozen or so leading universities, despite achieving grades as good as, or better than, the entry requirements to courses in those universities.⁹ It concludes that university admission systems act in favour of private school students.

Excellence and equity

Many have argued for a greater emphasis on equity in the admissions processes of the most selective universities. In turn, those universities have often responded by emphasising the need to protect their excellence. This stand-off has created an unhealthy polarisation between equity and excellence.

Those who defend excellence tend to take the view that a university place should be determined by a simple principle: attainment at A-level or an equivalent Level 3 qualification. They recognise that universities should do more to help schools and colleges raise standards to widen the pool of students who can apply for a place at the most selective universities, but believe that altering admissions procedures to change the social mix at selective institutions would damage quality and threaten their, often global, reputations. In addition, some worry that lowering entry standards would punish schools that do exceptionally well, and reward failure.

On the other side stand those who believe that universities, particularly highly selective ones, need to be doing much more to widen access to ensure greater diversity in their student populations.

Those on the equity side of the argument conclude that progress can only be made if universities take account of broader social factors, alongside academic attainment, in determining who gets into the top institutions. They argue that the most selective universities need to take more responsibility for the consequences of their admissions processes instead of simply blaming the school system for failing to create a wider pool of talent from which they can recruit.

Both sides agree that access to university remains inequitable. They both share the goal of making access to university classless, so that those with potential, irrespective of background, get the places they deserve. The difference between them lies in how best to do so. Should the focus primarily be on schools, supported by university outreach activity? Or should university admissions also play a part? The answer in this report is that both approaches are needed if participation is to be wide and access is to be fair. ***Every university should seek to do more to widen participation and make access fairer. Different universities, however, should be able to place different emphasis on the respective parts of this agenda.***

US and them

In the United States, leading universities regard diversity not as an obstacle to academic excellence, but as a prerequisite for it. This is supported by a clear evidence base and mission statements that recognise universities' responsibility to prepare people for an increasingly pluralistic global economy. Research has found that actively pursuing a diverse student body is justified in two key ways.¹⁰ First, it leads to more thoughtful participation in the learning environment. Students tend to learn better, and engage more deeply with the curriculum, in an environment with a range of people with different perspectives and backgrounds. Second, the experience of diversity at university better equips students to participate meaningfully in democratic society. Engaging with people who have a range of values and assumptions helps students to consider multiple perspectives and deal with conflict.

This understanding is reflected in how Ivy League universities tend to structure their admissions processes.¹¹ Universities such as Harvard emphasise that the people with whom students learn are a critical part of their university experience. As a result, they take great care to actively craft a cohort each year that has a diverse mix of students with different backgrounds and a range of talents. Rather than simply making a series of individual admissions decisions, they intentionally shape the overall composition of the intake to ensure greater diversity.

The principles that underpin these practices have been challenged in the Supreme Court.¹² When they were, a collection of prominent universities, including Harvard, Princeton and Yale, produced a robust argument in favour of their policies.¹³ By drawing on a wealth of evidence, they showed how explicitly seeking a diverse cross-section of students was essential if they were to pursue academic rigour and fulfil their mission in modern society. They argued it is “entirely legitimate for universities to concern themselves with ensuring that student bodies are educationally diverse and broadly representative of the public” and adopt policies that “seek to promote experiential, geographical, political or economic diversity”.

The Supreme Court ruled in their favour, finding there is a “compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body”.¹⁴ A decade later, there is a fresh legal challenge and the debate is about to be reignited. The leading US universities are expected to vigorously defend their approach. The president of Columbia University argues that “higher education must not lose the practical and political battles to maintain racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse student bodies”. He is clear that “it is far less important to reward past performance – and impossible to isolate an applicant’s objective talent from the contextual realities shaping that performance – than to make the best judgment about which applicants can contribute to help form the strongest class that will study and live together.”¹⁵

In short, the leading US universities subscribe to an educational philosophy in which greater social diversity amongst their students augments rather than undermines academic excellence. They have embedded that philosophy in their progressive admissions procedures, and are in the vanguard of publicly winning this argument. The fact that these universities are in the top 10 in the world¹⁶ suggests that there need be no tension between excellence and equality. They can be friends, rather than enemies.

Access initiatives in the United States

Texas top 10% rule

Students in the top 10% of their graduating high school classes are admitted automatically to any Texas state university without consideration of their standardised test scores or any other criteria. Other states, such as Florida and California, run similar schemes.

California ‘Save me a spot in college’ pledge

By signing a pledge to take steps to meet the graduation requirements for high school, participants gain access to Californian state higher education institutions if they meet the eligibility requirements. They are also guaranteed financial support.

QuestBridge National College Match

A centrally coordinated applications process aimed at high school seniors who have achieved academic excellence in the face of economic challenges. Successful candidates gain a full four-year scholarship. In 2010, QuestBridge’s partner colleges offered admission and more than \$100 million in financial aid to over 1,000 students. It has 32 top-ranked partner colleges including Stanford, Princeton and Yale.

Indiana, 21st Century Scholars Program

An early commitment of financial aid, equivalent to in-state tuition fees, is guaranteed to students who finish high school and fulfil a pledge of good citizenship, such as by abstaining from drugs, alcohol and crime. Twenty-first Century Scholars get help finding free tutoring, a mentor and a part-time job once at college. It is targeted at low-income 7th and 8th graders (12–14 year olds).

TRIO programs

TRIO programs are federally-funded outreach initiatives designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. In particular, it is targeted at those from low-income households, first-generation students and individuals with disabilities. Universities, charities and others bid for funding, and develop and deliver activities that help students through the academic pipeline.

It is worth repeating that the biggest contribution towards making university education genuinely classless can be made by schools. But universities cannot simply stand back and leave all the heavy lifting to schools. They have a dual contribution to make. First, as Chapter 4 outlined, there is a need to bring greater coherence and energy to universities’ outreach work with schools, parents and pupils, in order to grow the pool of pupils from which they can recruit. Second, there is a need to ensure that universities’ admissions processes are structured in a way that allows the fairest judgements to be made about which students have the aptitude, ability and potential to benefit from higher education.

In the remainder of this chapter I focus on how universities could seek to improve their admissions processes in pursuit of a more diverse student intake. There is a menu of options available:

- contextual data
- transparency of admissions criteria
- diversifying admissions criteria
- diversifying entry routes, such as through more foundation programmes.

Contextual data

In the UK, one method that universities use to maintain excellence whilst furthering equality is using information that sets an application in its educational or socio-economic context. This information is called contextual data.¹⁷

In an ideal world, all schools would be of a uniformly high standard and universities could simply select students on the basis of actual academic achievement. Sadly, for all the progress of the last decade or so, this is not the case. When some pupils attend consistently high-achieving schools but others low-achieving ones, the issue becomes how best to judge what each pupil has achieved. Universities have been using contextual data to address this problem in various ways for some time. It can be used at different points in the admissions cycle, such as in the initial sift, when applicants are short-listed for interview and when deciding what offer to give an applicant. Research conducted by Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) found that 41% of higher

education institutions responding to their survey used contextual data in their admissions processes, while 63% indicated that they planned to in future.¹⁸

As we saw above with the evidence from HEFCE and the University of Bristol, the same level of attainment does not necessarily equate to an equivalent likelihood of succeeding at university. A range of contextual factors – such as the type of school attended, parental education level and income – may be relevant for universities to consider at different stages in the admissions cycle. Having analysed all the available evidence, SPA found that “applied robustly and within a holistic process, the use of contextual data in admissions can be an effective tool in identifying the applicants with greatest potential”.¹⁹ In short, there is now a clear evidence base that supports the use of contextual data. Government has also endorsed the use of contextual data, so long as individuals are considered on their merits, and institutions’ procedures are fair, transparent and evidence-based.²⁰ The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has recognised it as good practice and a valid and appropriate way to broaden access.²¹ And the independent SPA programme offers expertise and support for those institutions that wish to engage.²²

In order to mainstream the use of contextual data, however, progress needs to be made in three areas:

- making it universal
- using better data
- sharing good practice.

Making it universal

Over the years, some universities have shown great leadership in championing the use of contextual data. Universities such as Bristol, Durham and Exeter have faced significant media pressure, and often found a lack of support from politicians, their peers and other authorities when they have used contextual data in their admissions processes. It is striking that many universities say they use contextual data to inform whether or not an applicant gets an offer, but only a few clearly state on their website that they will make a lower offer to those from poor-performing schools. For example, the University of Exeter website says:

“As part of our decision making process, we may take into account the educational context in which academic achievements have been gained, particularly if there is evidence that the applicant’s current or most recently attended school or college performs below a defined threshold. [...] This performance indicator may be taken into consideration alongside all other contextual information to provide insight into an applicant’s ability, achievements and potential to succeed. We will not use school performance data in isolation in the offer-making process, but may take account of it in deciding the appropriate level of offer within the published offer range.”²³

From conversations with vice-chancellors, admissions staff and others, it seems that there is a clear will amongst many leaders in the sector to make the use of contextual data far more systematic and universal, as they recognise that the evidence supports its use. But there is hesitation about doing so. Some of the most selective universities worry about their standing in international league tables if they are seen to soften entry requirements. Many are afraid of being charged with social engineering or positive discrimination. Others are concerned that they will not receive any political support if they are challenged on using contextual data.

The best safeguard against these concerns is for the sector as a whole to make contextual data as universal as possible. Ideally it should be used by all universities. To that end it would be helpful if the various bodies representing universities could agree a common statement of support for the appropriate use of contextual data.

Better data

Making contextual data more universal relies on the science underpinning it being robust. The beauty of the A-level result is that it is a very clear piece of data which universities can feel confident about in reaching admissions decisions on applicants. Determining which data to use – and how to use it – to accurately judge the context in which A-level results were achieved is an altogether more complex job. There are a variety of possible metrics available – the school attended, the nature of the local community, the parental

educational level, the relative family wealth, or some combination of these factors.

This in turn requires that the right data is gathered and made available to admissions staff in a usable format and a timely fashion. UCAS, SPA and Universities UK are working together to make this happen. There are many obstacles, such as gathering consistent high-quality data from the education departments of the different countries within the UK. This is something government can help with.

A collective effort across the sector to agree what contextual data should be used, gathered and pooled would have clear benefits. It would allow more universities to make more evidence-based decisions. It would avoid duplication of effort and resources. It would enable greater clarity and transparency for students. And it would provide a uniform dataset on the context that applicants come from to match the uniformity of the A-level results in delineating their academic achievements.

The Government's Social Mobility Transparency Board should work with the higher education sector to help unlock the necessary data. It would be helpful if all universities could engage constructively with this process. The aim should be to have an agreed dataset in place for the 2014/15 admissions cycle.

Sharing good practice

There is clearly a growing momentum around the use of contextual data, but one of the challenges is that universities are using different data in different ways. In part this is due to the different challenges particular universities face. It is also because teaching and learning strategies vary across institutions. This is understandable but more could be done to identify where there are genuinely unique challenges, and where there is scope for common learning. SPA is ideally placed to lead research on what methodologies are transferable and to support the work of individual universities.

The sector should collaborate to produce a definitive best practice guide to what works when it comes to using contextual data.

The use of contextual information is not about pursuing diversity at the expense of academic excellence. Rather, it is about recognising that the link between potential and prior achievement requires more than looking at an applicant's A-level grades. This is especially important for highly selective institutions, which, as we have seen, have a particular challenge in making progress on fair access. Some of them have already taken leadership in this area. With the right approach, contextual data can become the norm, not the exception, across the sector.

Transparency in admissions

Whatever criteria universities use in admissions, including contextual data, it is crucial that they are open and transparent about what they expect from their students. In consultations with A-level students, the overwhelming majority said that they did not know what universities were looking for in their application. The admissions system to UK universities is too complex and difficult to navigate. For potential applicants without experience of the higher education system in particular, information is scattered and it can be difficult to compare different universities' admissions criteria.

Systemic clarity

The fact that UCAS has to publish a 368-page book explaining how the admissions process works suggests that it is in dire need of simplification.²⁴ The decision by UCAS to conduct the first comprehensive review of the admissions system in 50 years was welcome and long overdue.²⁵ The consultation has produced a range of recommendations which are a constructive step forward. In particular, the decision to reform the clearing process, which currently causes a great amount of confusion and stress, is a positive development. UCAS has also recognised, and prioritised, using simpler, non-technical language that is more readily understood by students.

Of course, not all potential students apply through UCAS. For example, part-time students apply directly to institutions. ***It is important that all admissions processes, whether through UCAS or direct to the university, are based on the same***

principles: transparency, fairness and holistic assessment. The sector needs to work collaboratively to ensure that this is the case.

Institutional clarity

While reforming how students apply will help, universities need to do more to bring greater transparency and coherence to the criteria they use in determining applications. The *Informed Choices* publication by the Russell Group is one helpful step forward in this regard.²⁶ It provides clear advice on the best A-level subject combinations for a range of university courses, and helps to ensure that young people do not inadvertently close down options for themselves by making the wrong A-level choices.

Many individual institutions are also taking steps to ensure that their criteria are as clear as possible and, whilst this is welcome, the sector needs to work together to make it easier for students, teachers and advisers to access the right information. Research has found that applicants primarily look for information in two places: the UCAS website and individual university websites.²⁷ The Government has said it will ensure that every university will now make the most requested items of information available on university websites, on an easily comparable basis.²⁸ These are the Key Information Sets, which include information on courses, costs and outcomes. For example, new data will show the actual qualifications held by previously successful applicants. The new Course Finder service on the UCAS website helps applicants to navigate this information, but it will be important to monitor the Key Information Sets as they are implemented to ensure that they are providing information in the most effective format possible – for example providing data at the level of individual courses, rather than at an aggregated institutional level. The aim should be to have an authoritative, easy-to-use website that allows applicants to understand what they need for, and what they will most likely get from, a particular course.

The aim of helping applicants to make better-informed choices will be significantly easier to achieve if student feedback data on their subjective experience of a particular course and university can be integrated with objective data on criteria for admission and outcomes achieved. ***The sector and the Government should share as much student data as possible (suitably anonymised) with existing organisations such as Which? and BestCourse4Me to encourage a market in comparable and accessible information about courses and universities. HEFCE, as the student champion, should ensure that such information is as equally accessible to disadvantaged students as to better-off ones.***

Diversifying admissions criteria

As discussed earlier, the idea of the typical student is something of a myth. Admissions processes should match the reality of the changing student profile. Universities need to be able to tell that potential applicants have the skills and competencies to succeed on a given course. So what types of prior experience demonstrate these competencies? Different universities, and different courses, will look for different strengths but the UCAS personal statement is the primary way most students do this. There is a real variety among universities as to the relative weight that they place on personal statements. Some universities said that they place little to no emphasis on them, partly because they do not know whether the applicant actually wrote the statement themselves. Other universities use it as one of the principal tools for sifting applicants, often in conjunction with references, to build a picture of the individual. To what extent, then, do personal statements provide an opportunity for all students, whatever their background, to display their suitability for a particular course?

A recent study looked at the extent to which school type correlates with the quality of writing (spelling, punctuation and grammar), the quantity and quality of work experience, and the other evidence cited in personal statements.²⁹ It found that, when compared with private school

applicants, state school applicants' personal statements contained five times as many linguistic errors and eight times as many punctuation errors. Private school applicants referred to far more work experiences in their personal statements overall and, in particular, more high-skill, high-prestige placements – an average of four as opposed to only one for comprehensive school applicants.

For more disadvantaged students, research has found that the information provided has largely no influence and, at times, is actively unhelpful.³⁰ They are, as one commentator starkly put it, “staggering around in what amounts to a game of educational blind man’s bluff”.³¹ This is supported by other research which has found that work experience in schools at present tends to reflect and reproduce existing patterns of social class inequality.³²

Students from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to:

- know what assessors are looking for
- have opportunities to gain experiences that may help with their application
- be supported in expressing what they have learned in a way that may increase their likelihood of acceptance.

Of course, state schools need to be focusing on how they can address this gap in extra-curricular experiences and universities can help them do so by improving their school outreach programmes. But universities also need to be more holistic in the assessment methodologies that they use for judging applicants. Just as contextual data can help to identify potential as well as academic achievement, so too can a contextual approach help in evaluating work experience.

Accreditation of prior learning

One way in which institutions can take a more holistic view of whether potential applicants have the necessary competencies to succeed is through the accreditation of prior learning. This is a generic term for the process which evaluates, recognises and assigns credit to both certified and experiential learning – for example through work-based learning. At present, only 5% of institutions mention accreditation of prior learning as a tool for widening participation.³³

The University of Salford has taken steps to embed the accrediting of prior learning across the university. It has done this by designing a guide to help admissions staff find the best ways to implement the accreditation of prior learning in their department. This guide is underpinned by an institution-wide policy framework, clearly spelling out the values and purpose of the practice in the university. This allows a common commitment which is sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of different courses and applications.

Whatever the competencies a university is looking for, they need to assess the relative opportunities that candidates had to develop them, and take steps to ensure that the assessment processes they use do not inadvertently create barriers which unnecessarily narrow their pool of successful applicants.

The balance that universities need to strike is between flexibility in recognising competencies demonstrated in a range of contexts and being clear to potential applicants about exactly what they are after. At present, there is often insufficient clarity and not enough flexibility. As a result, the application process is too often skewed in favour of students from a relatively narrow range of backgrounds. More needs to be done to both standardise and normalise admissions from other types of applicants.

Diversifying entry routes

The 2009 report *Unleashing Aspiration* argued that the silos that divide vocational and higher education must be swept away if a broader spectrum of society was to be able to access higher education.³⁴ That remains the case today. The pathways that lead from education into the workplace are still segregated. Of course, the skills acquired through, for example, BTECs may not prepare students for the academic rigour of certain university courses but, at present, too many people hit a dead end because of the choices that they make in a flawed and divided education system.³⁵

There has, however, been some positive movement in this area. Government has been working with UCAS on its Qualification Information Review consultation, the findings of which were published in July 2012.³⁶ It proposed a way to provide admissions staff with detailed, searchable information about different kinds of qualifications, including vocational qualifications and apprenticeships, in order to facilitate easier comparisons between different qualifications for admissions purposes. Clear progression routes are currently being developed from Level 3 apprenticeships to higher level skills and the Higher Apprenticeship Fund is creating 19,000 degree-level apprenticeships. These are welcome developments. In 2008/09, 7% of advanced-level apprentices moved straight into higher education.³⁷ If these approaches are successful, this percentage should increase in the coming years.

The Government should set itself a clear target for increasing the proportion of apprentices who enter higher education and universities should set out how they plan to accept more students who have completed apprenticeships onto their courses.

Case Study: St George's adjusted criteria scheme

The medical school St George's, University of London, uses 'adjusted criteria' to assess the academic qualifications of some applicants. This allows it to consider medical applicants in relation to the average performance of the school in which they study, rather than the national average. In this way, St George's aims to identify students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed. The scheme is open to students from schools whose A-level average is CDD equivalent or below. The research carried out on the programme suggests that those who gain admittance through this route are just as successful as other applicants in their progression through university education.

Foundation year programmes

Foundation year courses provide the essential skills and knowledge for students who do not have the required levels of prior attainment to progress to a mainstream degree course. They are particularly helpful in equipping students from non-traditional backgrounds with the skills necessary to succeed at university. There are many superb examples of foundation year programmes in the higher education sector today. For example, the Foundation Centre at Durham University, which has been running since 1997, offers a wide range of courses. Their Direct Progression Programmes count as year zero of an undergraduate degree course, and those who successfully complete the foundation year move on to the first year of the mainstream degree. The completion rate is over 75%. This offers a route into a highly selective university for local, mature, and non-traditional entrants. To date, just under 1,000 students have successfully 'graduated' from a foundation year, and the majority have gone on to study a mainstream degree course at Durham.

Action now needs to be taken to recognise, and embed into the mainstream, foundation year programmes more widely. There are several ways of doing so.

Firstly, at the moment, most foundation programmes allow students to progress to courses within the same university, but do not necessarily allow students to apply to other universities' courses. ***If a student completes a foundation year programme in one university, it should enable him/her to access a similar degree at any university. Universities should consider successful completion of a foundation degree as a valid level of prior attainment.***

Secondly, there is no single portal for information on foundation programmes, which makes it difficult for potential students to compare options. ***A section of the UCAS website should be devoted to foundation programmes to enable a single point of comparison, and universities should adopt the same tools that they use for the Key Information Sets for their foundation programmes.***

Thirdly, ***highly selective universities should put in place more foundation programmes.*** They provide an ideal opportunity to tap into a more diverse pool of potential applicants, whilst simultaneously maintaining academic standards, as only those who meet the universities' own criteria will progress.

Access to Higher Education Diplomas

The history of Access to Higher Education Diplomas provides a useful model for foundation programmes.³⁸ These are courses designed for people who want to take a university level course, but who did not gain the qualifications they needed while at school. Access courses first emerged in the 1970s. Gradually, similar awards emerged in different subjects and in 1989 a national framework was put in place. Today, the Quality Assurance Agency has responsibility for this framework to ensure standards. In 2010, over 26,000 Access to Higher Education Diplomas were awarded, providing a route into higher education for many who otherwise would have been excluded.

HE within FE

Further education colleges also have a major role to play in enhancing the diversity of the higher education sector. As *Unleashing Aspiration* highlighted, the concept of Higher Education within Further Education (HE within FE) must become a more universal part of university provision.³⁹ Short-cycle courses, in other words courses below the level of a first degree, are an area where further education colleges have a particularly valuable role to play. Research conducted by Policy Exchange reinforced the idea that short-cycle courses should be considered the missing link between secondary and traditional higher education and found that there is a genuine need for students with short-cycle qualifications.⁴⁰ The expansion of higher education in further education could bring more diversity and dynamism to the sector, so it is welcome that the Government has committed to introduce fee loans to those doing intermediate and higher-level training in further education from 2013/14.

In order for HE within FE to develop, there needs to be a partnership approach with universities and employers. In this way, efforts will be joined up and deliver the skills that will help students to get on in life. Colleges tend to have close working relationships with local employers, strengthening the links between universities and the labour market, with benefits for both. Partnerships between universities and higher education colleges have begun to develop across the country but coverage is still far from universal. ***Wherever somebody lives, they should be able to find a local further education institution that provides higher education. Together with the Government, HEFCE should map what needs to be done to bring this about.*** If this can be achieved, it will enable more people to access higher education – particularly mature students, who are more likely to have commitments that make it impossible to move in order to study.

Case Study: Plymouth University foundation degrees

Plymouth University has a network of partner colleges delivering HE within FE across the region. The aim is to enable alternative routes into higher education for non-traditional students, in particular through foundation degrees with an optional 'top-up' progression to bachelor's degree study. The university has found that a foundation degree at a local college tends to be seen as a low-risk option for students who may see themselves as 'not clever enough' for university. Through the course, they absorb vital skills that prepare them for higher education, such as self-directed learning and presentation, which transform that early lack of confidence into a sense of mission and belonging. Plymouth University has found that the benefits are greatest for mature students without recent experience of education. The approach has led to a higher proportion of Plymouth foundation degree students continuing with their studies, by topping up to a bachelor's degree, than the national average.

Off-site learning

An analysis of university Widening Participation Strategic Assessments has shown that institutions are establishing more flexibility in where education is provided.⁴¹ For example, the University of Middlesex has developed the Institute for Work Based Learning, which won a Queen's Anniversary Prize for its work integrating formal education and employment. This institute has developed courses such as Journey in Practice, a partnership with Halifax Community Bank to develop professional branch management teams. It has delivered measurable improvements in performance as well as receiving a 98% net positive approval rating from managers who attended the training. This type of programme challenges traditional preconceptions of what higher education looks like.

Across the world, leading-edge universities and other providers are developing innovative online higher education opportunities. The explosion that we are likely to see in online learning over the next decade provides an opportunity to bring people into higher education – mature students especially – who would otherwise be excluded. Our country's higher education sector is particularly well-placed to play a leading role here. ***The sector should come together to agree how online learning can be developed to broaden the range of students who are able to benefit from higher education.***

Implications for selective universities

All universities should take steps to improve the transparency of their admissions processes and consider ways in which diversifying admissions criteria could broaden their pool of potential applicants without undermining their standards. Highly selective institutions in particular should consider running more foundation programmes and embracing the use of contextual data. This report recognises, however, that the use of contextual data is a particular challenge for the most selective universities. For those universities, there is a trade-off. Less use of contextual data has to be accompanied by more effort to increase the supply of able students from a greater diversity of backgrounds. In other words, those institutions that maintain the highest entry criteria need to do more to improve the flow of potential applicants to their institutions. This is a long-term project that will require focus, effort and resource. It is welcome, for example, that the University of Oxford has recently unveiled a generous scheme to attract more students from poorer backgrounds. In the US, philanthropy plays a critical role in funding universities, and their ability to provide generous financial support. This suggests that there may be a developing appetite amongst successful graduates in this country to contribute towards the future of the institutions from which they benefited by helping to recruit future students on the basis of their ability to learn, not their ability to pay.

Case Study: Moritz-Heyman Scholarships

The University of Oxford has announced a £300 million programme to provide financial support, reduced fees and internship opportunities to students from low-income backgrounds. This scheme, the largest of its kind in the UK, has been made possible by a £75 million philanthropic contribution from an alumnus, Michael Moritz, and his wife, Harriet Heyman.

At present, just under 1,000 Oxford undergraduates – about 10% – are from families with incomes below £16,000. Within three years, half of these students could benefit from the scheme. This involves financial support of £11,000 per year, as well as reducing fees to £3,500 per year, only repayable in line with future earnings.

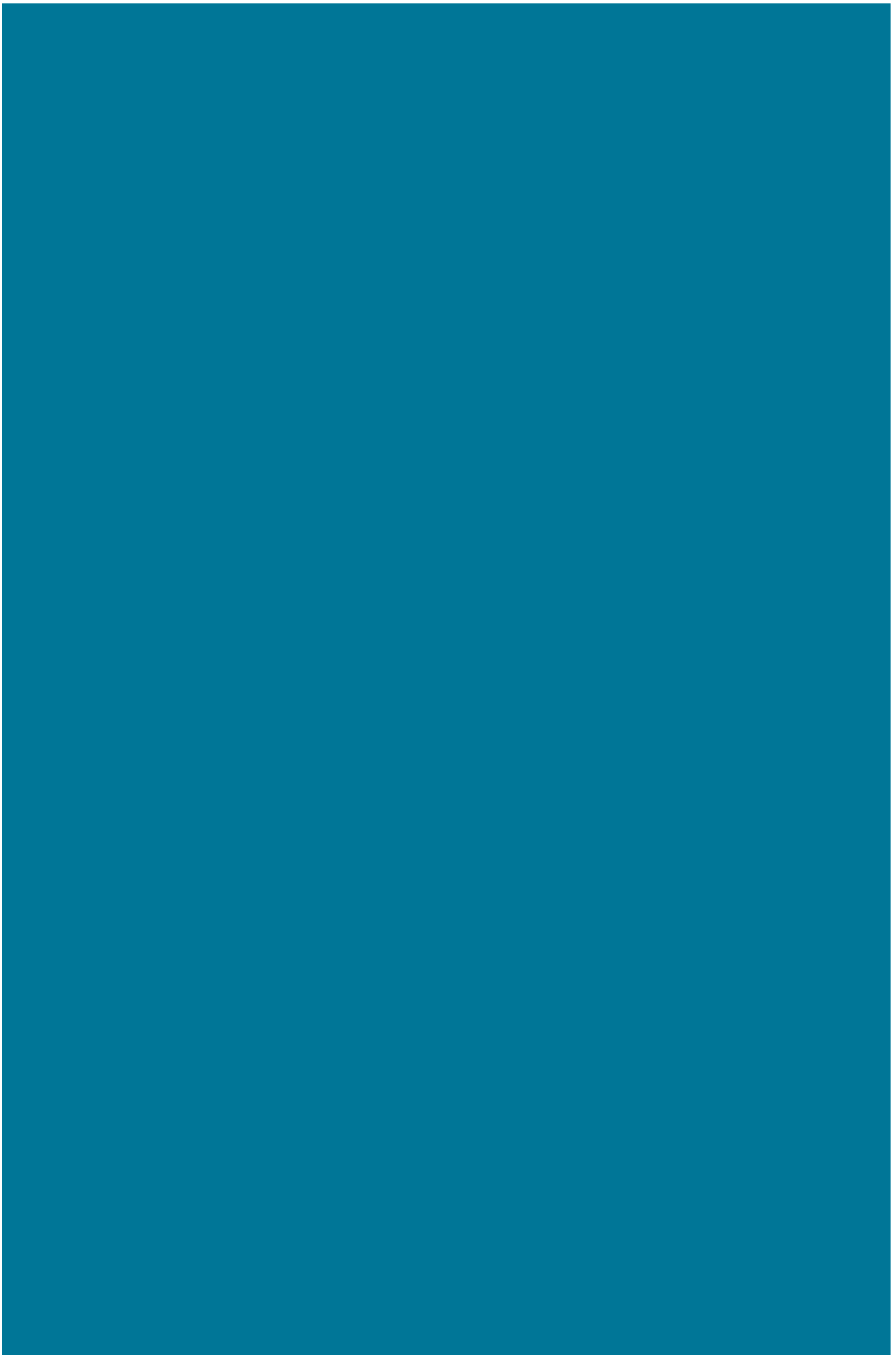
- *each provide foundation degree opportunities targeted at those pupils in less advantaged areas who have the greatest potential but lower grades than the current admissions entry criteria allow.*

Conclusion

No university can exempt itself from playing a part in expanding the pool of talent from which students are drawn. It is simply not good enough if some universities exempt themselves on the basis that their entry criteria are sacrosanct and that responsibility for raising attainment levels, so that less advantaged pupils can be admitted, rests purely with schools rather than universities. The blame game – where universities blame schools, schools blame parents and everyone blames the government – has to end. Every university needs to play its part.

Many selective universities are engaged in similar work. These efforts are important and are welcome – but they need to be grown further and driven harder. So, in addition to the approaches outlined in this chapter on the use of contextual data and those in the previous chapter on school outreach, **this report recommends that the most selective universities:**

- *collectively commit to close the ‘Sutton Trust gap’ – the 3,000 or so state-educated pupils who have the grades but do not get the places – at their institutions within the next five years*
- *each agree to sponsor a City Academy school in a disadvantaged area*
- *take collective ownership of Teach First’s goal to increase its graduate intake from 997 in 2012 to 2,000 by 2015. The Russell Group of universities should then consider how they can contribute to the continued impact of Teach First beyond 2015 so that progress on its impact goals continues to be made with an ever-higher proportion of Teach First graduates coming from the most selective universities in the country*



Chapter 6

Staying in – student retention

This chapter sets out:

- Why retention is an important issue in terms of social mobility
- What effective student support looks like
- The role of financial support in improving retention, and the relative value of fee waivers and bursaries
- The importance of student charters
- The argument for why universities should make it easier to transfer between courses

Retention rates

Getting into university is not the end of the story. In order to realise the benefits of higher education, students need to successfully complete their degree. This is particularly important in the new fee regime, as students who do not complete their degree will have built up a higher debt without accruing the benefits. Clearly, higher retention rates should not come at the cost of lowering quality, but there is a wider benefit in universities supporting students so that they do not drop out – not least because those who are currently most liable to do so are more likely to come from less advantaged backgrounds.

Overall, UK universities have a good record on retention.¹ In 2009/10, the latest year for which figures are available, 92% of full-time students starting a degree entered a second year of study. International evidence suggests that the UK has one of the best records on retention in the world.² There are, however, some causes for concern and in particular:

- the rate of improvement in retention has been too slow
- the variation between different universities remains too high.

Slow progress

The House of Commons' Public Accounts Committee, when it examined university progress on retention in 2008, found that despite receiving £800 million to improve retention, universities had made little progress in the previous five years.³ In particular, there had been no reduction in the percentage of students in England not completing their higher education course at their original institution, with the figure stuck at 22%. Since the publication of that report, new data, covering 2004/05 to 2009/10, has become available.⁴ In that time, there has been no change in the number of people who drop out of university after their first year. The figure for England has stayed at 8.4% but the number of higher education institutions in England with first year completion rates of over

90% for full-time students has risen from 50 to 61. Overall the latest figures show that the percentage of students in England not completing their higher education course at their original institution has dropped slightly, to a little over 21%.⁵ More progress needs to be made.

Sector divide

Highly selective institutions tend to have the best retention rates. For example, at Oxbridge the continuation rate is over 97%. No single factor explains this discrepancy in the sector. Research suggests that both the level of support provided and the nature of the student body play a part.⁶ The reasons for people dropping out are numerous, complex and individualised. Sometimes a decision is driven by financial, health or personal reasons. For other students it is because they realise the course is not for them.

There are, however, some clear patterns. Retention rates are not uniform across different segments of the student population. The factor most affecting a student's chance of continuing is whether they are studying full time or part time, with part-time students 3.3 times more likely to drop out.⁷ For full-time students, the single biggest factor is the level of their educational attainment prior to university. Also, the drop-out rate for students from poorer backgrounds is higher than that for those from relatively affluent backgrounds.⁸

It is clear that universities with high proportions of students from less advantaged backgrounds face a more difficult challenge in improving retention rates. Where universities devote commitment and resources, however, they can do so.

Case Study: Birkbeck retention

Birkbeck, University of London has one of the most diverse mixes of students, and has traditionally had one of the lower retention rates. Following a strategic review, it put in place a retention strategy that focused on the undergraduate degree student journey from first point of contact to the transition to year two. It introduced a range of measures, such as a website and a series of workshops which aimed to improve study skills and explain the nature of the degree programme at Birkbeck. Through this and other measures it managed to drive up retention rates by 5 percentage points, from 77% to 82% in the course of three years. It achieved this at a time when it increased its undergraduate numbers by 31%, with a large proportion of students from non-traditional backgrounds.

There are five areas that help universities make progress on improving retention:

- student services
- financial support
- student charters
- equalising skills
- the ability for students to transfer between courses.

Student services

Driving up retention rates requires a range of support, including financial, pastoral and academic services. Student services departments differ between universities, but generally lead in providing the support that drives up retention. They tend to have direct managerial responsibility for areas such as counselling, dyslexia support, financial advice, general advice, hardship funding, student union liaison, study skills, careers and health promotion.⁹

The evidence suggests that across the sector, the level of professionalism in student services has improved greatly in recent years. Analysis conducted by the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education has found that student services are “increasingly valued in their institution” and are a “central plank of the student experience”. In addition, there are numerous forums for student services staff to share good practice and the various university mission groups are pooling their operational expertise to improve student services. The ‘What works?’ research collaboration between the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Higher Education Academy and Action on Access has provided an excellent evidence base about what the most effective forms of support to improve retention are.¹⁰

Increased professionalism in student services has helped to identify clear patterns in the risk points in the student life-cycle where people are most likely to drop out. The majority of those who drop out do so during the first few weeks after arrival at university, or during the first formal assessment. By gathering clear data on these particular moments of risk, and sharing expertise on which forms of support are most effective, universities can target resources to minimise the risk of people dropping out. In addition, institutions are recognising the benefit of enhanced student support at key transition points throughout the whole student journey, and its impact on retention. Traditionally this focused on induction and orientation for newly starting students, but it has moved into innovative support services, such as helping students to manage the transition into the second year and supporting students before going on work placements.

In order to better target resources at particular groups, universities are using market research techniques, such as customer segmentation, to enable them to provide teaching and support services which appropriately reflect students’ different cultural, social and economic backgrounds.¹¹ This was a recommendation of the House of Commons’ Public Account Committee but not all universities are yet doing so.¹² It is time they did.

Holistic support

While it is important for universities to monitor drop-out rates and target resources at risk points, isolated interventions are not always enough to transform retention rates. A holistic approach is needed, both across services and across the period spent at university. Student support services need to be joined up within the institution, and lessons learned and information shared. This includes the teams who work on recruitment and admissions, as valuable information may come up at both these stages regarding the kinds of support that students need.

A holistic approach also involves recognising that retention work starts when students first contact a university, for example when applying, rather than when they start their degree. Effective information and guidance are important, so that people apply to courses which suit their aspirations and on which they can succeed. Discussions with universities suggest that, with the rise in tuition fees, student expectations are also rising. Active preparatory work will become increasingly vital, both in letting prospective students know what to expect, and in ensuring that they are aware of the support which is available. The University of Oxford conducted an evaluation which found that around 10% of widening participation students who were given offers either declined their offer or did not meet their conditions for entry. As a result, Oxford has developed a pilot scheme that offers a number of interventions to support these students, including mentoring and a pilot week-long free residential scheme.¹³

Many universities are also collecting data that highlights the specific retention challenges they face, and implementing targeted measures as part of a holistic programme of student support. ***This type of evidence-based intervention, taking account of the full student life-cycle from first point of contact through to further study or the workplace, should become embedded in every institution.***

Equalising skills

Universities can do more to ensure that students have the essential skills they require to complete their degrees. Applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have developed certain skills, such as essay writing. Clearly some

university courses will rightly require a high level of prior knowledge, for example, some science subjects require students to have a high degree of mathematical knowledge on day one in order to succeed. Other courses will have far fewer direct constraints and more flexibility, such as some humanities subjects. Many universities accept that international students may need support in developing their language skills in order to thrive on a course and so offer language classes. Similarly, some universities which admit a high number of mature students recognise that their students may not have written an essay in many years and so provide teaching in how to do so.

Case Study: Flying Start at the University of Central Lancashire

Flying Start is a programme to support retention and reduce levels of attrition amongst University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) students. It has an early intervention strategy, which aims to cultivate a sense of belonging at the university and to develop understanding of the nature of the course and wider university experience. This in turn leads to students becoming more involved in university life when they start their degree, encouraging a sense of collegiality, enhancing their motivation and commitment, and thus having an effect on non-completion rates. It has built up over ten years from a successful pilot, and in 2011 offered three-day residential events to 600 people, and three-day non-residential events to 75 people. Evaluation of the programme shows that on average at least 80% of participants have no family experience of higher education. The institution's overall non-completion rate for first years has decreased significantly over recent years, and the attrition rate for Flying Start students continues to consistently average around half that of UCLan students as a whole.

The university is now trying to embed the key principles of Flying Start events across UCLan, within the induction process and throughout the student journey.

The new head of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), Professor Les Ebdon, has argued that universities should do more to 'equalise' students who require various types of support.¹⁴ This report supports this argument. **Universities should consider what support they can provide to help particular groups of under-represented students succeed in completing their studies. In some cases, this will require assessing what skills universities require students to have in advance and which ones they can develop after admission.**

Student charters

Student charters have proved to be a helpful tool in retention. A government report found that "there are clear benefits in providing short, clear statements – of student rights and responsibilities – so students know broadly what they should be able to expect, what is required of them, and what to do if things do not meet expected standards".¹⁵ It found that they are useful for current students and also found that a "secondary benefit is that they may help prospective students to get a 'feel' for the institution". By providing students with a clearer sense of what they can expect from a university, charters help to dispel the myths around universities, thereby encouraging people to apply who might otherwise have been put off. **At present, approximately 60% of universities have student charters in place.¹⁶ I believe that the remaining 40% would benefit from introducing them, but their format and content should be a matter for individual institutions, in partnership with students and the student union, to determine.**

Credit transfer

Of course, despite the many steps described above that could prevent students dropping out of university, some will inevitably do so. What is important is that the higher education system is flexible enough to enable students to switch paths while studying, in the event that new aspirations or unexpected life circumstances interrupt their study.

Earlier we saw that the number of people who do not complete their degree has remained relatively constant. There is, however, another way of looking at retention. Many of the students who start a course will transfer to another institution or obtain a different award. As the higher education sector becomes more flexible, this provides a

useful measure of whether a student actually drops out of higher education or not. Between 2001/02, and 2009/10 the number of students transferring to a different institution actually fell slightly, from 6.3% to 5.1%. Over the same period, the percentage of students completing a different award to that which they started has increased from 1.2% to 3.1%.¹⁷ This is a cause for concern. It suggests a growing flexibility in moving within an institution, but no greater flexibility in moving between institutions.

In part this is because of the structure of the honours degree classification system, which a report found was “no longer fit for purpose” and recommended introducing a Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) to supplement it in the short to medium term with the aim of moving from a summative judgement at the end of a student’s education, to a system which recognises the skills developed over the course of a degree as part of an ongoing process of learning.¹⁸ The current summative evaluation framework makes it more difficult to transfer credits from one course to another, making it more challenging for those who do drop out to continue their studies elsewhere. As we will see when we look at the need for greater focus on outcomes in the next chapter, a move to ongoing assessment would be welcome. While most institutions do use some form of credit system, and the Quality Assurance Agency provides guidance on credit transfer arrangements, more clarity and consistency would be a positive development.¹⁹

The fact that enrolment for most courses takes place only once a year – in the autumn – compounds the problem. That was why the *Unleashing Aspiration* report recommended a shift to a more modular-based system that would be supported by credit-transfer arrangements.²⁰

Since 2009 there has been some limited progress in this regard. For example, nursing programmes now often have two entry points throughout the year. Across the sector as a whole, however, this is still the exception rather than the norm, and more needs to be done to respond to the differing needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Progress on credit transfer has also been slow. All universities will have experience of enabling students, in some circumstances, to transfer both within and between institutions. This needs to go further to standardise and formalise arrangements, to simplify the process of transferring and make the options for students more transparent. In consultations, I was told that the current system seems to offer no second chances. Under the new fee regime, students may become more risk averse and this may damage social mobility if universities do not embed a credit transfer system. ***The Hughes Report recommended that government should work with the sector to implement a system where all higher education institutions can recognise credit for coursework completed in a different higher education institution to allow students to transfer between institutions.***²¹ ***I support this recommendation.***

The HEAR is one means of achieving this. To date, 30 institutions have been involved in trials to develop the HEAR, and the findings have helped to refine and build support for it. There are now plans for a national roll-out later in 2012. ***So far, a total of 75 higher education institutions have committed to implementing the HEAR and I would urge all institutions to follow their lead.***²²

Financial support

A major determining factor for many people in choosing higher education is its cost. Student life costs more than it once did. On average it is estimated that the annual living costs for students are around £16,500 for students in London and £15,500 outside of London.²³ The furore generated by increases in tuition fees has put the cost of student life in the spotlight. It risks deterring some people from ever applying to university. As we will see in Chapter 8, despite the action the Government and universities have taken to mitigate these effects, fear of debt is a major issue in many communities.

Of the total budget which universities spend on measures that broadly support social mobility, the largest part goes on financial support to students.²⁴ Of the £517 million projected access agreement expenditure, approximately two-thirds is spent on bursaries and fee waivers, excluding funds

from the National Scholarship Programme.²⁵ The majority goes on bursaries, but £38.7 million is going towards fee waivers which reduce the level of fees that a student has to pay, effectively reducing their future burden of debt.

At present, however, there is no clear evidence on the efficacy of fee waivers. Robust and urgent evaluation is needed and OFFA is currently leading a review into their effectiveness. The National Union of Students argues that fee waivers “do not actually give the student anything at all unless that student goes on to be successful in a well-paid job, by which time they will not need a retrospective discount on their higher education degree”.²⁶ This is why, in Chapter 4, this report argued that fee waivers should not be funded.

Bursaries, by contrast, help to support students while they study, and so may impact on retention. Different universities use different criteria to determine who is eligible for a bursary, and how much they get. The minimum allowance is £347 per year to students who come from households with an income below £25,000 but most universities make considerably more generous offers. In addition, government provides financial support to disadvantaged students, an issue returned to in Chapter 8.

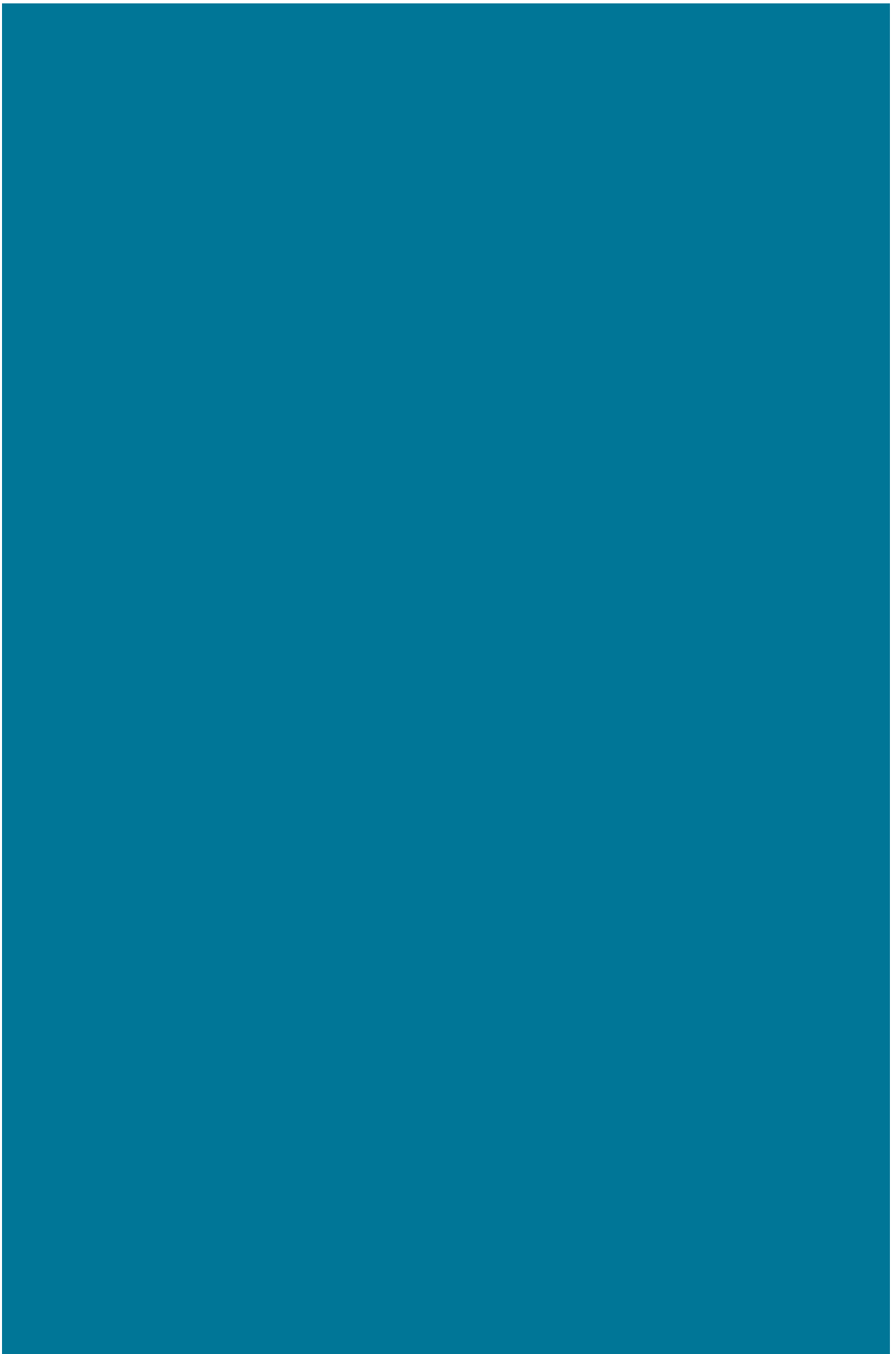
Both the Hughes Report and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee argued that where financial support is offered by universities, bursaries were preferable to fee waivers.²⁷ But as we saw in Chapter 4, bursaries do not guarantee either wider participation or fairer access. Given the amount of public money that has been spent on them, it is remarkable that there has not been a more robust evaluation of the impact that bursaries have had on retention rates. ***As a matter of priority all universities, either individually or collectively, should subject their bursary schemes to proper evaluation to establish exactly how much financial support makes a difference to retention rates, and amongst which groups.*** In this way, resources can be targeted strategically and proportionally.

Case Study: University of East London progress bursary

Students at the University of East London (UEL) are eligible for a progress bursary. This is provided as credit for students to spend on products and services that the university has identified as aiding the learning process, such as books and campus accommodation. The scheme was developed with John Smith & Son, who ran bookshops on the UEL campuses. Rather than getting the credit in one lump sum, students get more credit as they complete their degree. Evidence on the scheme suggests that students using the scheme have bought more books, and there is a correlation between book-buying and progression – with students who progress purchasing on average twice as many books. Since introducing the scheme in 2006/07 the university has seen a significant improvement in retention, cutting its drop-out rate in half to 7.3%.

Conclusion

English universities overall have an excellent record on retention but, over recent years, there has been little progress on improving retention rates and there remain significant differences between parts of the sector. It is time that universities became more intentional about tackling retention and providing the appropriate student support services. It is also time to assess where spending on retention can have the biggest impact.



Chapter 7

Getting on – student outcomes

This chapter sets out:

- The need for universities to focus on graduate outcomes to improve social mobility
- How universities can help to identify and provide the skills employers are looking for
- The steps careers services can take to improve outcomes for students
- How league tables can be reformed to focus on student outcomes
- The need to reform postgraduate funding

Transition to the workforce

Widening access to university and ensuring retention are both important in driving forward social mobility, but they are not enough in themselves. Recent research has highlighted the fact that while widening participation may be a precursor to upward social mobility, it does not automatically create it.¹ The question of what happens to students once they leave university and their ability to succeed in their chosen career is all too often ignored in considerations about what universities can do to enhance social mobility. As a recent study noted, “The issue of widening participation in higher education is only part of the story: what happens to students from poorer backgrounds once they enter higher education and what effects their student lifestyle choices have on their future prospects is the other important part of the debate.”²

As my recent report on access to the professions highlighted, students from under-represented groups are often at a disadvantage in the labour

market.³ Universities have a crucial role in ensuring that everyone who graduates is equally equipped with the tools to succeed in the workplace.

Employable skills

Universities are increasingly recognising their role in preparing graduates for the labour market once they finish higher education. In order to help formalise and clarify this responsibility, the Government has required all universities to provide a short employability statement, which is supposed to explain to students what action they are taking to enhance employability prospects.⁴ Many universities are already doing this, as can be seen from their Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (WPSAs), 87% of which mention employability.⁵ There is, however, a long way to go before universities are focusing sufficient attention on helping students to acquire the broad range of skills that are nowadays needed to succeed in the professional labour market.

Many universities have developed strong local partnerships with business. As summarised in the Wilson review, this collaboration takes many forms:

- from future-oriented research in advanced technologies, to in-house upskilling of employees
- from university science park developments, to support for entrepreneurial research students finding their way in the business world
- from providing progression routes to higher-level apprenticeships, to enhancing the skills of post-doctoral staff for their transition into the business world
- from improving enterprise skills amongst undergraduates, to enabling small companies to recognise the value of employing a first graduate
- from supporting spin-out companies from research teams, to helping government agencies attract major employers to invest in the UK.⁶

In some cases, businesses co-locate and form long-term strategic partnerships with universities. For example, Siemens and the University of Lincoln have developed a partnership which gives the company access to a pool of industry-ready students. Other collaborations are less direct, but can be equally effective. For example, 'Silicon Fen', the high-tech hub that has emerged around Cambridge, draws on the scientific research expertise of the University of Cambridge. This is a thriving ecosystem of research, innovation, and business which has developed over 1,600 firms that employ more than 30,000 people.⁷

The Government is also encouraging more universities to actively engage with employers to kitemark certain courses, in order to recognise their value. For example, the computer gaming sector has worked in collaboration with a number of higher education institutions to accredit courses which provide the knowledge and skills required to pursue a career in the video games industry. Those who graduate from the ten accredited courses are almost three times more likely to have gained employment in the video games industry six months after graduation than those from non-accredited courses.⁸

The evidence suggests that employers are looking for a range of skills, which are developed through:

- academic study
- work experience
- extra-curricular activity.

In other words, graduate prospects rely on the overall student experience, not on academic credentials alone.⁹ Employers are looking for candidates who demonstrate communication, team work and organisational skills. Across the higher education sector, there is a growing consensus that universities have to do more to prepare students for the workforce and not just support them to achieve a good degree.

Some universities are already taking action to embed this type of holistic focus on the development of skills and capabilities. For example, the University of Oxford invited the Confederation of British Industry to perform a skills audit of Oxford graduates. It identified areas for improvement, which the university took on board and took steps to address. Other universities are placing this type of skills evaluation at the core of their work. Durham University has introduced a skills audit that helps students to identify areas for development, and find ways to make use of the student experience to develop these skills.

These types of initiative are welcome, and we would urge more universities to develop similar programmes. Every university should develop a clear picture of the capabilities with which they aim to equip students.

Careers services

Careers services are crucial in connecting students with work opportunities. Universities structure their careers services in different ways depending on the nature of their student population, their budget, and the employers they target. It is important that all careers services are embedded across both their local community and the university.

One way in which careers services can embed themselves in the local community is through collaboration with local enterprise partnerships.

Local enterprise partnerships are business-led organisations with an economic growth objective. The Wilson Review, which examined in detail the links between universities and businesses, analysed this area.¹⁰ It recommended that university careers services and their local enterprise partnership should work together to establish a skills supply chain between universities and local business. That is a sensible proposal.

Today, there are many examples of universities which have rethought how they structure their careers services, as they try to prioritise outcomes for their students. Some of the best examples are where the careers service actively engages with academic departments and becomes embedded across the university, rather than existing separately to it. Traditionally, there was a sharp divide between the work of careers services and academics, and the staff in each area worked entirely separately. Today, that is less often the case. Durham University and University College London have both successfully made this transition. For example, they have built links between academics and employers, and included lectures on possible career routes within courses. This encourages more students to consider their career options early on and enables them to find ways to make the most of the opportunities available while at university to improve their employment prospects. **More universities should follow their lead.**

Work experience

Building work experience opportunities into courses is another way to improve outcomes for students. There is strong evidence that work placements improve employment rates.¹¹ **At present, a small number of universities in the UK provide the majority of sandwich placements. More should do so.**

Many universities take great care to ensure that their students have access to work experience. There is a range of methods used to help ensure that these opportunities are as productive as possible for students. For example, the University of Salford prepares students with two weeks of support before going on work placements to ensure that they are confident and ready to add value. This improves the university's reputation with employers, and helps students to get the most from the opportunity.

While universities should find more ways to allow students to get work experience, we are concerned by the number of universities whose careers services advertise unpaid internships. This is an area where we believe universities should show collective leadership. Unpaid internships unfairly advantage those from wealthier backgrounds who can afford to work without pay. **I recommend that there should be a sector-wide agreement that no university will facilitate any exploitative work placements of any kind. Where universities identify exceptional opportunities which are unpaid, universities should allocate a bursary fund and offer these opportunities via fair and open competition.**

Extra-curricular activity

Extra-curricular activity emerged strongly from the call for evidence as a way to develop the skills that employers are seeking. The 1994 Group identified the use of co-curricular activities, developed in partnership with employers, as a particularly valuable tool in developing the employability of graduates.¹² However, the evidence as to which activities provide the best outcomes is not as robust as it could be. Universities tend to act in relative isolation, rather than cooperating to identify activity that provides the greatest impact. This is an area where more work can be done. Businesses can help universities to identify the skills they are looking for, and suggest the types of experience that best develop them. Universities can then create opportunities and programmes that enable students to gain exposure to these types of experience, and evaluate their impact. University Alliance, which represents 23 universities, has shown great leadership in this area. These universities have twice as many students from low-income and under-represented groups as the rest of the sector, and yet also have some of the best employment outcomes.¹³ **Both employers and universities have an interest in forming these kinds of partnerships, and this should become the norm across the higher education sector.**

Opportunities for all

The evidence suggests that the likelihood of students from different backgrounds taking advantage of the non-academic opportunities

in university is determined in part by a range of social, cultural and economic factors.¹⁴ Of particular concern is the fact that some of the groups who are already at much higher risk of low labour market outcomes are least likely to take up these opportunities. For example, students who live at home while studying are disproportionately from less advantaged backgrounds and are less likely to take up extra-curricular opportunities.

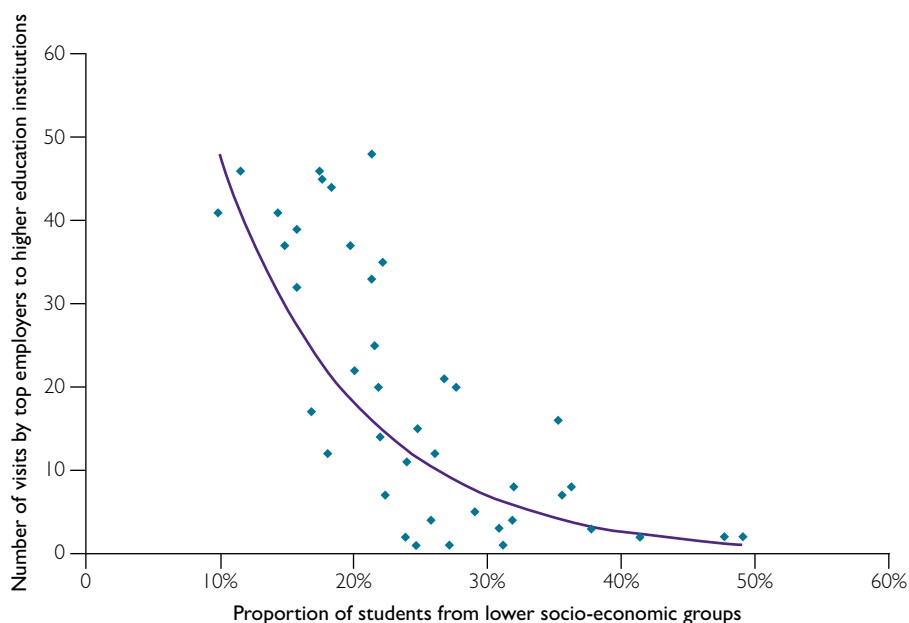
At the moment, the opportunities that increase the chances of employability after graduation are rarely targeted at the groups of students likely to benefit the most.¹⁵ ***As with their work on retention, universities need to do more to identify those groups who could benefit most, and find ways to help them take advantage of the opportunities on offer.*** This requires more targeted communications activity and greater flexibility in the provision of opportunities. However, student service providers identified two concerns with this type of approach: first, that opportunities should be available to all students; and second, that no particular group of students should be stigmatised, and care must be taken to ensure that opportunities are not seen as remedial measures. These are both valid concerns, yet with a careful approach they can be addressed. This requires a joined-up strategy, bringing together student unions, student services and careers services.

Employers

While universities need to play a part, so too do employers. Even if universities across the board make great progress on developing the employability of their students, the students will only benefit if they are considered by employers. A vivid demonstration of the current situation can be seen in data gathered by the University of Leicester. This shows how most employers target the universities with the highest proportion of relatively well-off students (see Figure 7.1).

My recent report on access to the professions found that too many employers continue to recruit from too narrow a range of universities. The most targeted universities tend to have the lowest proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁶ When employers target the most selective institutions, the opportunities for social mobility diminish. At present there is a vicious cycle as many employers target a relatively narrow pool of universities, increasing the chance of applicants from those universities, which in turn leads to better outcomes for those students. This reinforces the reputation of the university, and perpetuates the status quo. As Professor Sir Deian Hopkin writes, this drives “the thinking of those major employers who quite unashamedly confine their graduate recruitment to a few ‘top’

Figure 7.1: Socio-economic background of universities targeted by The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers



Source: University of Leicester; Submission to Call for Evidence, 2011

universities while ignoring the rest’.¹⁷ **Employers have a crucial role to play in ensuring that ability and potential, not brand or status, become the determining factors in who they recruit. The top employers in particular need to broaden the range of universities from which they recruit.**

One particular concern is the use of the UCAS tariff points as a sifting criterion for access to graduate recruitment programmes. The tariff was not designed for this purpose and using it in this way disadvantages older learners who may have taken their qualifications before 2001, as well as those who may have taken less traditional routes into university, studying qualifications not covered by the tariff. **All employers should stop this practice immediately, as it is both discriminatory and unlikely to be effective as a tool for identifying potential.**

League tables

Employers are more likely to target those universities with the best academic reputations. League tables are one of the main sources of evidence used to assess the relative quality, or strength of the brand, of different institutions. Every year, several newspapers, including *The Times* and *The Guardian*, publish league tables ranking universities. Clearly any league table is a simplification of the overall quality of a university, both because it brings together all courses into one measurement and because there is no single variable to compare. The call for evidence revealed a broad view that league tables are unhelpfully reductive, and often fail to reflect the true value of institutions. Yet they are extremely powerful in shaping the behaviour of students, both here and overseas, and of universities. If a university wishes to attract more international students, a high position in the league table is essential to bolster their marketing.

The main area of concern in terms of social mobility is that the league tables do not take account of the socio-economic background of the intake of a university: as one vice-chancellor has observed, ‘the primary determinant of a university’s position in a league table is the class profile of its students’.¹⁸ League table positions seem to be primarily driven by the average grades on admittance of a university cohort, rather than

the experience on offer whilst at university. They are driven by input, not output or outcome. It would be in the interests of students and employers to have league tables that also reflect how effective each particular course is in providing a range of skills, with the university ranking being an aggregation of all its courses. In other words, **league tables need to better reflect educational gain.¹⁹ They also need to reflect outcomes in terms of the career paths that graduates achieve once they are in the labour market.**

To this end, the introduction of Key Information Sets, and a new focus on outcomes and data, is an excellent step forward by the Government. It has asked the main organisations that hold student data to make it publicly available, including data on employment and earnings outcomes, so it can be analysed and presented by private organisations in a variety of formats to meet the needs of students, their parents and other advisers. While this transparency is a positive step, it is not clear that it will in itself be sufficient to transform the league tables in a way that better reflects educational gain and serves the long-term interests of employers and students.

Given the power of league tables in shaping behaviour, government should take the lead in establishing new outcomes-focused national league tables. They should be in place by autumn 2013.

Postgraduate study

One area of particular concern relating to undergraduate outcomes, which was raised repeatedly by universities, was the opportunity students have to move on to postgraduate study. Overall, the UK delivers 6.4% of world research output,²⁰ and is second only to the US in a number of research disciplines and first amongst the G8 countries for research productivity.²¹ This is a great success story, as postgraduate education contributes enormously to the economy of the UK. In addition, there are social and cultural benefits attached to a strong postgraduate sector, not least the fact that it promotes a culture of open and intelligent debate, which in turn stimulates innovation.

At present, around 100,000 British students undertake a master's degree every year. Increasingly, some jobs require a postgraduate qualification, and it is one of the routes into numerous professions such as journalism, accountancy and academia. The lifetime earnings of an individual who has completed a master's degree are 9% higher than someone who has a bachelor's degree.²² Since 1997, the number of people undertaking postgraduate education in the UK has grown by 36%, faster than the 30% growth in the undergraduate sector over the same period.²³ Much of the growth in postgraduate placements has come from international students. Only 19% of the growth comes from UK students, with 8% from the EU and 73% from the rest of the world.²⁴

Of postgraduate students from the UK, we have relatively little data on who has been participating in this expansion. Nor is there robust evidence as to who is being put off postgraduate study. A 2005 study found large differences by background, but noted that these were set up by undergraduate inequalities, rather than an additional deterrent effect.²⁵ Nonetheless, both universities and students have consistently raised this as an issue, and there are reasons to be concerned that people from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds may be particularly struggling to take part in postgraduate study. One report on postgraduate funding states the problem starkly:

“The current system is not working. While foreign students are flocking to join our graduate courses, our own students are not joining them in sufficient numbers. In particular, those without independent means struggle to pay their course fees and to cover their living expenses while studying. That is bad both for national income and for social mobility, as those who are unable to pay are excluded.”²⁶

Over recent years, postgraduate funding has moved towards doctoral programmes. Master's programmes are the bridge from undergraduate to doctoral work, and the funding for these programmes has shrunk. Around 30% of postgraduate researchers, and twice as many taught postgraduates, do not receive any support from public or private funders towards tuition fees and living costs.²⁷ The University of Oxford has

one of the widest range of scholarship schemes in the UK, yet its research suggests that inability to pay is the most common reason why students decline offers (45% of those turning down the offer of a place cite this as the reason).²⁸

There is a real risk that an individual's ability to pay up front, rather than their potential, will become an increasingly determining factor in who can access postgraduate education. This poses an unacceptable threat to the long-term health of the UK higher education sector. Moreover, as tuition fees rise, those from disadvantaged backgrounds may be less likely to want to take on additional debt after graduating.

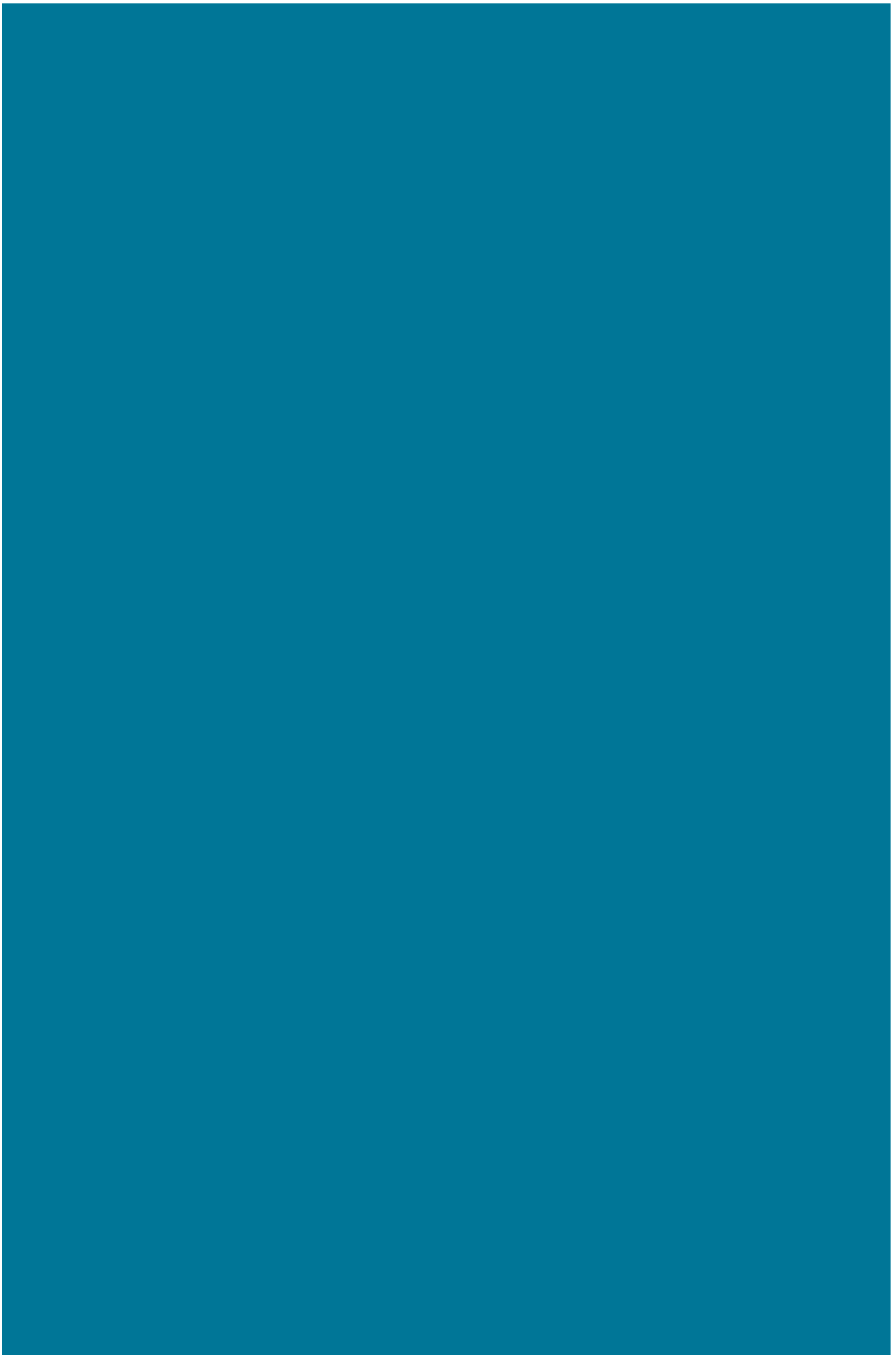
Lack of access to postgraduate study is in danger of becoming a social mobility time bomb. Several steps need to be taken to defuse it. First, **systematic data should be gathered by all institutions on both the social background of applicants for postgraduate courses and progression rates of different groups.** I welcome the fact that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is conducting an analysis of the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Previous reports have suggested that the Government establish a working group with the Higher Education Statistics Agency, higher education funding bodies, Universities UK and other stakeholders to advise on what additional information should be collected about postgraduates to inform future policy decisions on widening access to postgraduate study.²⁹

I endorse this recommendation. It should report by spring 2013.

Second, **the Government should consider introducing a loan system for funding postgraduate students. To start this process, the Government should commission an independent report, building on the principles of the Browne Review, to come up with proposals for a loan system for all postgraduate study.** The aim should be to have a system that is sustainably financed, world class in quality, and accessible to anyone with the talent to succeed. This will require additional investment in higher education. However, the evidence clearly suggests that the benefits to the economy in the long term far outweigh the cost.³⁰

Conclusion

The debate on the role of universities in advancing social mobility has tended to focus on issues of access. The question of what happens to students once they leave university, and their ability to succeed in their chosen career, is all too often ignored. That needs to change. Universities have a clear responsibility both to be aware of how they are preparing students for the world of work, and to provide students with the tools they need to succeed. Employers have a part to play and, when it comes to making access to postgraduate education fairer, so too does government.



Chapter 8

How government can help

This chapter sets out:

- The Government's vision for higher education and how this links to social mobility
- The potential impact of policies in relation to the rise in tuition fees, the cap on total student numbers, the proposed approach to student number controls, the replacement of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and the future of careers advice
- Recommendations for changes in government policy relating to higher education

The Government's vision

The Government's Higher Education White Paper had three explicit aims:

- putting higher education on a sustainable economic footing
- delivering a better student experience
- enhancing social mobility.¹

The call for evidence found support for these objectives and many of the particular policies are welcome from a social mobility perspective. For example: the extension of student loans to part-time students; the significant allocation of funding to the National Scholarship Programme; strengthening the Office for Fair Access (OFFA); and establishing the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as a consumer champion. These are all positive developments. But the call for evidence also revealed consistent concerns as to the pace of change and, more significantly, fears that the mechanisms in place may have unintended consequences that damage the Government's objectives articulated in the

social mobility strategy.² In addition to the decision to abolish Aimhigher, examined in Chapter 4, there were five policy decisions which were consistently raised in the call for evidence as causes for concern regarding progress on widening participation and fair access to university:

- the rise in tuition fees
- the cap on total student numbers
- the proposed approach to student number controls
- the replacement of EMA
- the future of careers advice.

Rise in tuition fees

Unfounded fears?

The most vocal public debates on access to higher education have revolved around tuition fees. The cost of providing undergraduate education depends on the subject and the institution. For instance, some subjects need laboratories and workshops, while others are

taught in lecture theatres and seminar rooms. The national framework for costing teaching put the annual costs per student at £6,000–£7,500 for humanities, languages and business studies; around £10,000 for the sciences; and up to £15,000–£20,000 for medicine, dentistry and veterinary science.³

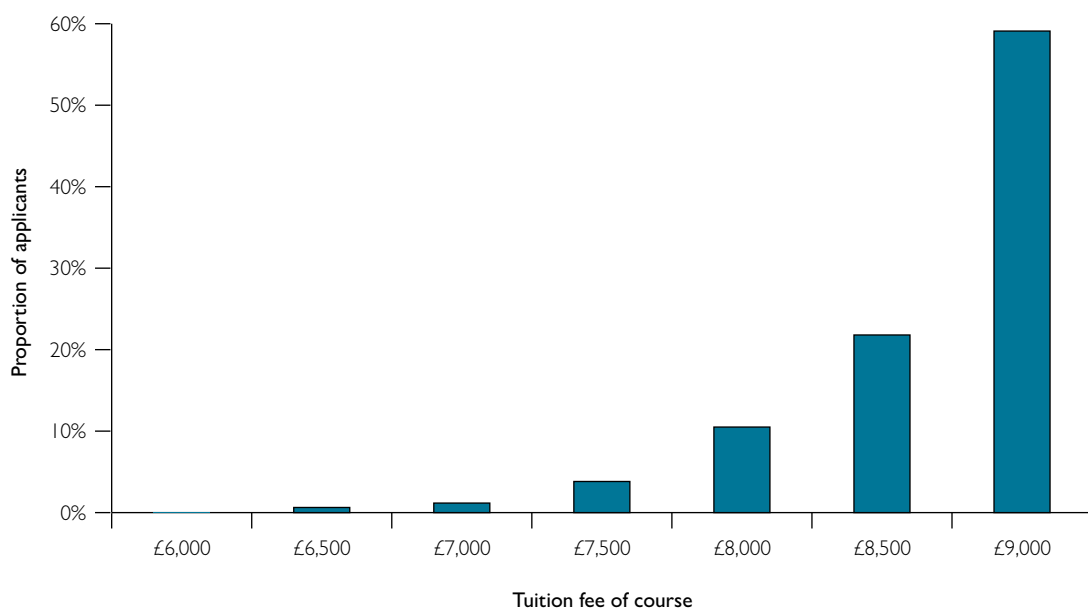
The Coalition Government made the decision to shift the balance away from general taxation towards the individuals who directly accrue the benefits of a degree by raising the cap on tuition fees. The previous Labour Government first announced the introduction of tuition fees in 1998. The initial limit on fees was £1,000 per year. In 2004, the then Government announced that it was going to raise the cap on fees to £3,000. By the time the latest reforms were implemented, the cap had risen to £3,375.

In 2009, Lord Browne was asked to conduct an independent review of the future of higher education funding. The Browne Review reported in 2010 and recommended removing the cap on tuition fees entirely so that universities could set their own fees.⁴ There would be no upfront cost and instead students would pay for their fees after graduation, only once earnings reached a certain level. The Government based its fees policy on these recommendations but rather than removing the cap on fees altogether, it was raised

to a threshold of £9,000. We now have a variable system of fees, but the public focus has been on that upper limit. In practice, the average tuition fee for a course applied to by English applicants is £8,527, with 59% applying to courses at the £9,000 cap (see Figure 8.1).

The increase in fees was controversial and hotly contested. It has heightened concerns that those from less well-off backgrounds will be put off from applying to university. One survey found that one in ten A-level students questioned reported being deterred from going to university by the rise in fees.⁵ Other research found that 80% of young people believe that staying out of debt is very important and, since the raising of fees, secondary school pupils are significantly more likely to believe that it is possible to be successful without degree-level qualifications.⁶ Universities responding to the call for evidence restated this concern, arguing that many prospective students would be put off applying by the high fee levels and the prospect of debt. This risk was thought to be particularly high for those coming from under-represented groups. As noted by one submission: “If you live in, or on the margins of, poverty and are lacking in confidence about what you could achieve for yourself and your family through higher education, the last thing you are likely to want to risk is a large, long-term debt.”⁷

Figure 8.1: Distribution of 2012 English applications by tuition fee of course



Source: UCAS, *How Have Applications for Full-time Undergraduate Higher Education in the UK Changed in 2012?*, 2012

Conversely, the Government argues that the new regime is fairer. It argues that the introduction of a 'pay as you earn' system ensures that no first-time undergraduate student will have to pay fees up front. Instead, students are only ever asked to contribute towards the cost of their education once they can afford to do so. The system means that graduates will only be expected to pay a portion of their salary towards the cost of their higher education once they are earning over £21,000 – previously, repayment had started at £15,000.⁸ In addition, any balance remaining after 30 years will be written off. This means that the taxpayer is set to lose 33p of every £1 loaned to students (up from 25p under the current system), although overall the new regime is projected to save the taxpayer £3,000 per graduate.⁹

A study conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that the new system is more progressive than its predecessor, with the poorest 29% of graduates being better off. In addition, the richest 16% of graduates will pay back more than they borrow, while others will be subsidised.¹⁰

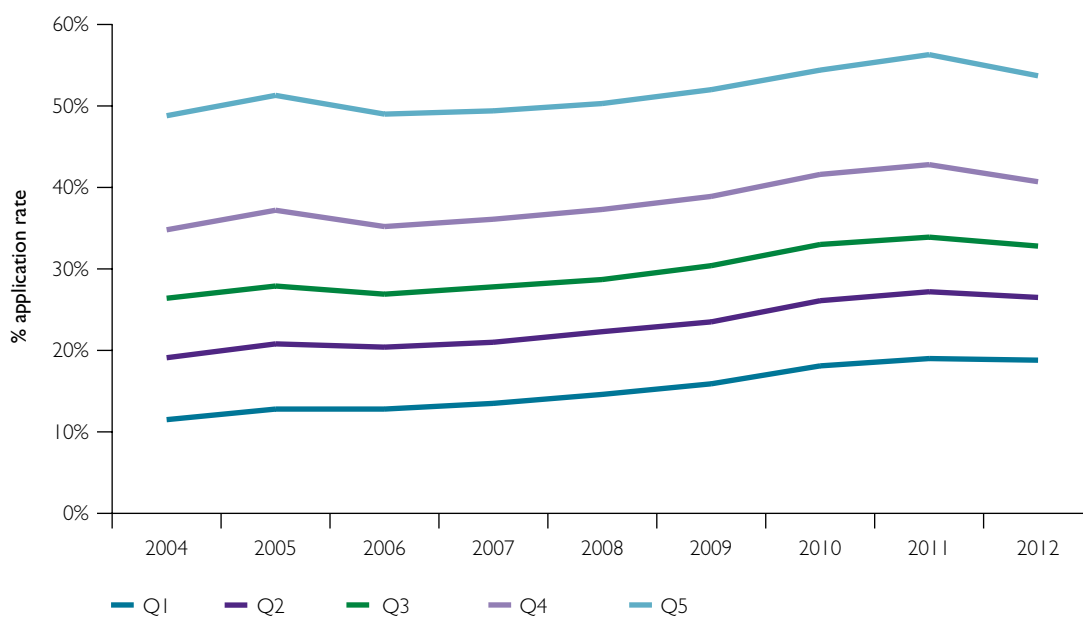
Under the new system, students from families with incomes of £25,000 or less are now entitled to a full grant for living costs of £3,250 a year, as well as maintenance loans of £2,750, £3,875 or £6,050 a year depending on where they study and their living arrangements. Those with household incomes above this amount see the loan element increase, while the grant decreases. In addition, other forms of support are available, for example through the Disabled Students' Allowance and the Access to Learning Fund, which is aimed at students who need extra financial support. As we have seen elsewhere in this report, individual universities also offer a range of bursaries and scholarships and they are required to provide a minimum bursary of £347 per year to students from the poorest backgrounds. The National Scholarship Programme, which we looked at in Chapter 4, provides additional financial support.

So what does all of this add up to? Overall, the new system is in many ways significantly more generous than the previous arrangements, albeit extremely confusing for prospective students.¹¹ The decision that graduates should only pay back their student loan when they reach a certain earning threshold is also welcome. Upfront fees present a clear obstacle to entry, and the decision to link the rate of repayment to earnings with a minimum threshold of £21,000 is a step in the right direction. It is a positive move from the perspective of retention, as students do not bear the burden of fee repayment while they study. In addition, the decision to extend student loans to part-time students is welcome. There is also some cause to believe that those who predicted that students would be put off from applying to university in their droves have not proven to be right. The total number of school leavers applying to university this year is the second highest on record.¹²

Causes for concern

Nonetheless, the new fees regime has induced widespread concern. The most thorough analysis of the impact of the new fee regime has been conducted by UCAS.¹³ The UCAS report is based on an analysis of 18 million applications made between 2004 and 2012. This data is combined with population estimates so that changes in behaviour can be distinguished from changes in the population. Amongst 18 year old applicants from England applying to English institutions there has been a 1% drop in applications in 2012 compared with 2011. This is the first time since 2006 that the proportion of applications from young people has fallen. Extrapolating from historical trends, UCAS concluded that around one young applicant in 20 who would have been expected to apply in 2012 did not do so, equating to approximately 15,000 applicants 'missing' from the system.

Figure 8.2: Application rates for English 18 year olds for areas grouped by young higher education participation rates (POLAR2)



POLAR2 Quintile 5 (Q5) = highest participation areas

Source: UCAS, *How Have Applications for Full-time Undergraduate Higher Education in the UK Changed in 2012?*, 2012

There has been particular concern about the impact of increased fees on those from less advantaged backgrounds. Here, the picture is mixed. The decline in applications amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds is around 0.1%–0.2% (people from this group were 1% less likely to apply in 2012/13 compared with 2011/12), while for the most advantaged groups it is 2–3% (5% less likely to apply compared with 2011/12) (see Figure 8.2).

In recent years, the gap in application rates between the most and least disadvantaged young people has closed. For example, between 2004 and 2012, the application rates of young people living in the most disadvantaged areas increased by over 60%. When set against this trend of rapidly increasing participation, the fall in applications for the least advantaged groups in 2012/13 is disappointing and may suggest a greater deterrent effect from the fees reforms than has been previously thought. Certainly there seems to be a major difference from the last time fees were increased, in 2006. Then, applications dropped among all groups, except the most disadvantaged. Crucially, at that time the narrowing of the gap between the most advantaged and most

disadvantaged proved resilient to the increase in fees. The evidence suggests that this time around, that is not the case. This is a real cause for concern.

There are other concerns. When the data on all applicants (not just school leavers) is broken down according to region, some areas seem to be experiencing far sharper drops in applications to university. Both the South West and the North East saw steep falls, by 12.1% and 11.7% respectively, compared with an England-wide average of 10.0%.¹⁴ This is particularly worrying, since both regions have participation rates below the national average, with the North East having the lowest of any region.

The drop in applications among mature students is of particular concern. There has been a fall in applications amongst mature students of between 15% and 20%. The decline is consistent across all age ranges, and represents 30,000 fewer applicants than if applicant rates had remained at their 2011/12 levels. Seen in the context of over 50% growth in the number of mature students admitted to higher education between 2007 and 2010, this suggests that fees have had a deterrent effect on older cohorts. Some have suggested

that the steep drop in applications from mature students can be explained by the fact that previous rates were artificially high and are now 'returning to normal'. Application rates for older age groups from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, however, which had seen similar growth in recent years, do not show a decline in 2012/13. Others have suggested that mature students were simply applying a year early to avoid the increase in fees. The evidence suggests that this is not the case, as there was no spike in 2011 applications.

It should also be noted that applications are not the same as admissions: we will not have a full understanding of the impact of reforms until detailed data on actual admissions is available.

However, early data published by UCAS regarding admissions is not encouraging: the number of accepted applicants from the UK and the EU who will begin their studies in 2012/13 at English institutions had decreased by some 14% – 54,200 – compared with the same point in the 2011/12 admissions cycle. While much of the decline can be accounted for by the sharp fall in the number of students deferring entry last year to avoid fee rises, there was still an 8% – 31,000 – decrease in the number of accepted applicants in the 2012/13 cycle.¹⁵

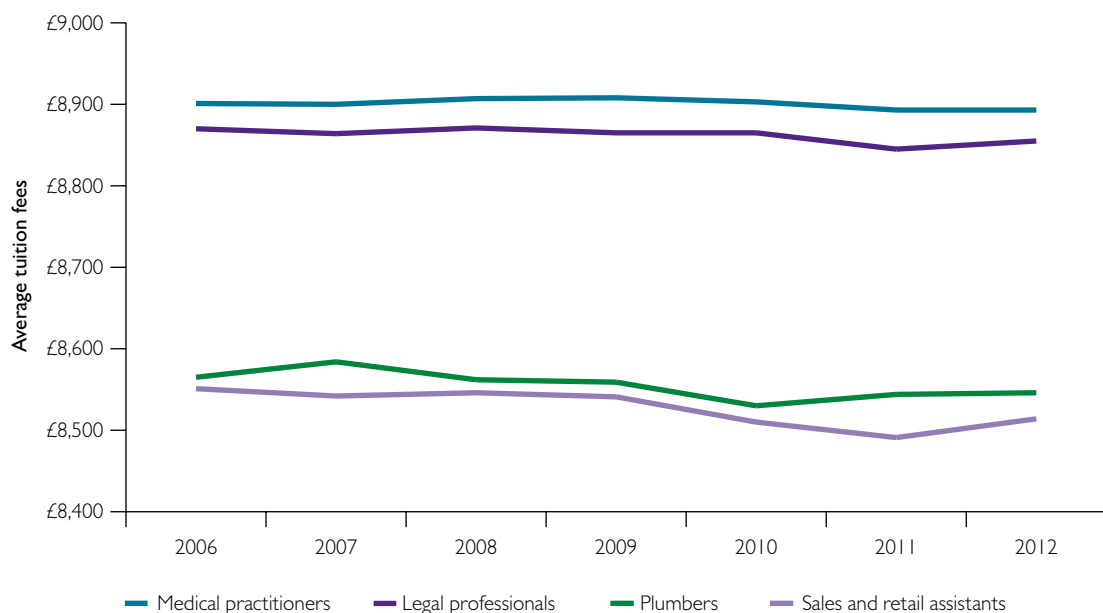
This is significantly higher than the small decline that was expected because of the Government's removal of the 10,000 additional places which were made available for 2010/11 and 2011/12.¹⁶ It appears that part of the decline is due to the Government over-estimating the number of students entering higher education in 2012/13 who would achieve AAB (and so not be subject to student number controls) by around 6,000: this has effectively placed a tighter cap on student numbers than the Government intended.

While clearing was still ongoing when this data was published, these early signs are worrying.

Risks to fair access

The introduction of fees does not appear to have had an impact on the courses to which people applied. People have neither moved towards, nor away from, more expensive courses (see figure 8.3). Nor have they applied in greater numbers to courses with higher graduate salary expectations. Both younger applicants and applicants from more advantaged backgrounds tend to apply for courses which have higher tuition fees. This pattern has remained consistent for the latest admissions window. The highly selective institutions have set

Figure 8.3: Average 2012 tuition fee of courses applied to by 18 year old English applicants to English institutions, by parental occupation



Source: UCAS, *How Have Applications for Full-time Undergraduate Higher Education in the UK Changed in 2012?*, 2012

their tuition fees at the upper limit. So assessing application rates amongst different groups is a reasonable proxy for progress on fair access. While the gap has not widened, it remains stark.

UCAS will continue to develop its analysis and reporting of application rates and application patterns. In so doing, it will enable the sector and policy-makers to assess the impact of policy and funding changes on application behaviour. UCAS is also sharing data with the Independent Commission on Fees, chaired by Will Hutton, which will gather evidence on the impact of the new fee regime over the next three years.

One thing is already certain: the increase in student fees is a major change. It means that families who are above the breadline but by no means wealthy now fear that they will incur considerable costs – and debts – if their children wish to go to university. Higher education is no longer a free good. That is especially salient for the fair access agenda. People from poorer backgrounds are more than twice as likely as those from wealthier backgrounds to say they will choose a university with lower fees, and are nearly twice as likely to say that they will choose a university where they can live at home.¹⁷ Of course, where people are making an informed choice based on their own aspirations that is welcome, but the evidence suggests that they are not always making a free choice. Instead, they are being constrained by debt aversion and the barrier of living costs. There is a very real danger that the Government has underestimated the extent to which fear of debt is part of the DNA of Britain's least well-off families.

The Government has struggled to successfully communicate exactly what these changes mean for students. That is not to say it has not tried. In response to a recommendation of Simon Hughes MP, the Advocate for Access to Education, a student finance school and college tour ran from September 2011 to January 2012. This reached 85% of the state-maintained schools and colleges in England. An evaluation indicated that 95% of pupils had a greater understanding of student finance after the tour, and 6,000 additional pupils said that they intended to go to university. In addition, the Independent Taskforce on Student

Finance Information was established in June 2011 to help ensure that students, their parents and advisers understood the changes to student finance in England.¹⁸

Despite these efforts, there is evidence to suggest that there is a long way to go in communicating the new fee regime. Almost a quarter of applicants do not know that their loans will be written off after 30 years; one in ten think that repayment starts at £18,000 or less; and over 40% over-estimate the repayment requirements for those earning £25,000.¹⁹ The feedback I have received from universities and students is that the communications effort to date has been sporadic and not always delivered by the most suitable people. ***The Government should now review how it is communicating with potential applicants and their families. A sustained communications campaign is needed, with messages that are delivered in a joined-up manner, using existing networks, by those in the most credible positions with the target audience.***

The Government's communication effort also needs to be broadened, particularly to part-time students.

While there has been considerable effort to target potential applicants from schools and colleges that go through the UCAS system, others, including mature students and part-time students, have been left out. Evidence from outreach teams suggests that part-time students are confused by, or simply unaware of, the loan support that is now available to them. Applications from this group have significantly dropped across the sector at universities which specialise in part-time students, and there is a risk that what should be a good news story regarding the extension of loans to part-time students will turn into a bad news story, as people are put off applying through a lack of effective information.

Part-time students may have a complex financial situation and need clear guidance as to what they are entitled to and how this might change if their financial situation changes. The Student Loans Company needs to get this complex job right and UCAS, following the piloting of part-time course information on its website, needs to review how effectively it is connecting with potential part-time

students. In the medium term, the Government needs to broaden its messaging to include potential applicants who are not coming straight from school. Understandably, the focus has been on school applicants, as they are the easiest to target and one of the key streams into higher education. Information needs to be available to all potential students in a clear and accessible format. Finally, ***the Government should work with key stakeholders from Universities UK, UCAS, the Student Loans Company, the National Careers Service and others to come up with a new strategy for encouraging non-traditional students – especially mature and part-time students – into higher education. It should start this work immediately, with the aim of having an effective strategy in place for the 2013/14 recruitment process.***

Expansion

Making university places available to more mature and part-time students, of course, means expanding higher education. That runs counter to a common belief that is prevalent today that too many people already go to university in the UK. Some think that expanding higher education has undermined the value of a degree. Others argue that it has encouraged people to go to university who are not suited for it. Overall, there is a common view that there are simply not enough employment opportunities for the number of graduates that we are producing. The evidence suggests that the opposite is true.

The nature of work has changed in recent years.²⁰ The trend is towards more growth in jobs that require graduate-level qualifications. These changes have been driven by globalisation, technology and other societal shifts. The strongest employment growth has been in the three occupation groups with the highest density of graduates, together accounting for three-quarters of growth between 2000 and 2010.²¹ Moreover, the economic crisis has accelerated existing trends, with continued growth in professional occupations even during the recession, while the largest job losses have been in routine manual and non-manual occupations. The total number of jobs in managerial, professional and associate professional occupations is projected to increase by 2 million in the next decade, while the number of jobs in other occupations reduces by

over 400,000.²² As the global middle class grows, this demand for high-skilled workers is likely to increase. These high-skilled jobs will be increasingly globally sourced. If the UK does not have the skills to meet demand, other countries will.

The latest figures show that 46% of those aged 25–34 have a higher education qualification in the UK.²³ This puts us seventh in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), over 18% behind South Korea. The example of South Korea is particularly relevant as it shows what can be achieved in a relatively short space of time, if a country is committed to developing the skill level of its population. Amongst those aged 55–64, only 13% of South Koreans have a higher education qualification. This compares with 41% for the same group in the US. In short, over the course of a generation, South Korea has leapfrogged many countries and created one of the most educated workforces in the world. Across the globe, emerging economies have similar ambitions. The social and economic necessity for an expanding higher education sector has never been greater.

Higher education participation amongst young people in the UK has grown from around 15% in the early 1970s, to a little under 30% in the late 1990s, to nearly 40% today. The Government has no target for the 'right' size of the higher education system, but believes that it should evolve in response to demand from students and employers, particularly reflecting the wider needs of the economy.²⁴ This principle is sound. It is, however, being compromised by the need to manage overall costs within a constrained public expenditure climate. The global competitors of the UK are continuing to invest heavily in expanding higher education despite their own budgetary pressures. In contrast, England has reduced the number of student places to control expenditure.²⁵ That is not a sustainable position.

Emerging economies elsewhere in the world are investing hugely in higher education, with an aim to move to the top end of the value chain. As we saw in Chapter 2, the UK lags well behind the OECD average on proportional expenditure on higher education, with government funding set to drop significantly. Without a clear strategic plan

to increase the total number of graduates and an alignment of higher education opportunities with the new employment landscape, the competitiveness and long-term prosperity of the UK will be at risk.

There is a social as well as an economic reason for continuing to invest in higher education. When higher education is expanding, it creates a far more conducive environment for continued progress in getting greater proportions of people from less well-off backgrounds into university. When expansion stalls, access to university becomes a zero-sum game – with a growing risk that the progress of the less well-off comes at the expense of the better-off. Such a displacement effect makes public endorsement of widening participation more challenging. As President Obama has said: “higher education is not a luxury – it’s an economic necessity”.²⁶ It is also a social necessity.

I recommend that the Government reconsiders the total allocation of resources directed towards higher education. Whatever the short-term pressures for public spending constraints might be, the Government should make a long-term commitment to increase the proportion of national wealth being invested in education overall, with more public and private expenditure being directed into the higher education system.

Student number controls

Since its creation in 1992, HEFCE has regulated the number of students which each university may enrol. The mechanisms used to achieve this have varied, but the role of constraining numbers has been consistent. The Government has made clear that, due to a need to control costs, a cap on student numbers will remain but it believes that the previous system limited student choice. It has therefore introduced a system that aims to meet the dual demands of constraining costs and expanding choice. The aim is to shift the power from government to students in terms of where places are allocated. The Government is utilising the so-called ‘core and margin’ mechanism to achieve that objective. There are two parts to this:

- First, there will be unconstrained recruitment of an estimated 85,000 high-achieving students – typically those achieving A-level grades of

AAB or better – with universities competing to attract these applicants, and those applicants in turn standing a better chance of going to their first-choice university. This will be expanded to ABB+ from the academic year 2013/14.

- Second, a flexible margin of about 20,000 places will be made available. Universities can bid for these if they “combine good quality with value for money and if their average tuition charge after fee-waivers is at or below £7,500 per year”.²⁷

The call for evidence found widespread concern across the sector as to the unintended consequences of this policy. In particular, many argued that it may damage social mobility.

First, there is a risk that these proposals may minimise institutional flexibility over admissions decisions and create perverse incentives to recruit relatively well-off students. The bottom two socio-economic quintiles account for 25% of all young entrants to university but only 15% of the AAB+ population. In other words, students from less advantaged backgrounds are much less likely to achieve AAB+ grades. They are also more likely to apply with qualifications which are not covered by the HEFCE qualifications equivalencies or with combinations of qualifications which are excluded from the AAB+ equivalencies model. Students from less advantaged backgrounds are therefore much less likely to be in a position to benefit from the introduction of these new competitive incentives. The group for whom the new policy creates greatest choice are disproportionately from relatively well-off backgrounds. In order to maintain student numbers, universities will effectively be incentivised to target this group and are more likely to keep their entry requirement at or above AAB+ if possible.²⁸ This could make it less appealing for universities to give lower, contextual, offers to those with potential from disadvantaged backgrounds. In conversations with universities, admissions tutors said that the policy was encouraging them to put in place more mechanistic criteria, rather than pursue holistic admissions. The proposal to focus growth on places for AAB+ students has the potential to cut across the requirements on higher education institutions to improve access for those from less advantaged backgrounds.²⁹

In response to these concerns, HEFCE has adjusted the original proposal so that each university will retain at least a 20% core of student places. In other words, 20% of students can receive offers lower than AAB+ without reducing the number of places that a university can offer in total. The aim of this is to ensure that the use of contextual data and the focus on access agreement targets are not compromised. This may mitigate some of the risks but it will not remove them. Few universities have over 80% AAB+ students and, for the rest, this change will only have a limited impact.

The second concern is that this policy will inadvertently lead to a stratified higher education sector. In effect, universities recruiting below the AAB+ threshold but charging above £7,500 will feel a cumulative squeeze on student numbers. Yet these are precisely the institutions which, in many cases, have done outstanding work in diversifying their student intake whilst ensuring excellent outcomes for their graduates. The Business, Innovation and Skills Committee looked at the policy and concluded that while the aim of 'diversity, not division' was laudable, there was no clear reason to believe that the access agreement mechanism will be sufficiently robust to counteract polarisation within the sector.³⁰ Indeed, it found that the proposals could "polarise the higher education sector into 'traditional' universities versus a 'low-cost' alternative". Such polarisation would be deeply damaging and could have undesirable consequences for social mobility if able candidates from lower socio-economic backgrounds felt constrained to choose lower-cost provision. Indeed, it could create a vicious cycle in which those universities which charge less will have less scope to invest in facilities and to enhance the student experience with the result that they may find it increasingly difficult to attract high-achieving students, or those from wealthier backgrounds, regardless of the quality of teaching on offer.³¹ As Professor Stefan Collini said in his evidence to the Committee: "All the research shows that children at private schools have dramatically better chances of obtaining AAB at A-level than those at state schools. Now the universities they get into will be better resourced as well."³²

The fact is that students who get AAB+ are not spread across the sector; they are heavily concentrated in a very small proportion of universities. Approximately 40% of such students are in ten institutions. At these universities, around three-quarters of students have AAB+ grades.³³ These are also the institutions which are furthest away from their HEFCE widening-participation benchmarks.

The Government has made clear that the AAB+ threshold represents a starting point and that its ambition is to widen the grade threshold and to increase the size of the competitive margin. It has already announced that, from 2013/14, the threshold of unconstrained access will be moved to ABB+. I have not seen any evidence that suggests this would address the core risks identified above: it would still act as an incentive against the use of contextual offers, but at a slightly lower grade threshold; and there would still be the potential to artificially polarise the sector.

While the policy has significant risks in terms of social mobility, its actual impact will be far from clear for some time. Much depends on how the policy influences admissions decisions and which institutions choose to grow. ***At this stage, the threshold should remain at AAB+ for at least two full admissions cycles. This will allow time for detailed, independent evaluation of the policy. If the evidence shows that the policy is having a regressive impact, it will need to be fundamentally rethought in order to find alternative ways to free up student numbers. If, however, the concerns are not borne out by the evidence, then the threshold could be expanded to ABB+ or below.***

Replacement of Education Maintenance Allowance

The AAB policy is not the only one that has prompted concerns about social mobility. The removal of EMA is widely believed in the sector to have had a regressive impact. EMA was a scheme that provided funding to people aged 16–19 from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds in order to support their continuing studies.

EMA was generally regarded by universities as an initiative that encouraged progression, attainment and good study habits because of the way it was awarded.³⁴ Equally, teachers have expressed concern that EMA acted as a clear incentive for young people to stay on in education, and fear that its removal may have a damaging impact.³⁵ Independent evaluations also found that it significantly increased staying-on rates and attainment.³⁶ When the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) looked into EMA, it found that it had significantly increased participation rates in post-16 education among young adults who were eligible to receive it.³⁷ In particular, it increased the proportion of eligible 16 year olds staying in education from 65% to 69%, and increased the proportion of eligible 17 year olds in education from 54% to 61%. While it is widely agreed that EMA increased participation rates, the Government has argued that EMA was not sufficiently targeted and that it carried 88% deadweight cost. In other words, 88 out of every 100 students receiving EMA would still have been in education if EMA did not exist and were therefore being paid to do something they would have done anyway. The IFS modelled the impact of the policy building on this premise, and found that EMA still represented good value for money.

The Government has now replaced EMA with a new bursary scheme called the 16-19 Bursary Fund, which it believes will provide better value for money. The IFS also looked at this policy and identified two risks.³⁸ First, that many existing EMA recipients will get less money under the new scheme. We cannot be sure in advance which students might receive more or less under the new arrangements. It is possible that only those who would already have gone to university will get less. If this is the case, there would not be an impact on progression rates. Second, under the new scheme, students often have to apply for the bursary after enrolment. As a consequence they will not know, when applying for a place in post-16 education, whether they will receive a bursary – and if so, what its value will be. This could have an impact on their decision to stay on in the first place.

Research into those in receipt of the new bursary fund has found that, while it is too soon to quantify the long-term impact on student

numbers, many young people are not receiving the financial backup they need to support their everyday living expenses.³⁹ It suggests that without improvements to the scheme, there is a real risk to continuation rates.

In summary, there is legitimate cause for concern that these changes may have a negative impact on widening participation. ***The Commission on Social Mobility and Child Poverty should monitor the evidence on the EMA replacement closely as it becomes available. In the meantime, the Government should increase the funding level and refine the targeting. And, as recommended earlier, universities should consider providing EMA-style financial incentives for young people to stay on and succeed at school.***

Careers advice

There is one further area of policy that has a direct bearing on whether and where young people decide to apply to university: careers advice. In Chapter 3, we referred to one aspect of this: how choosing certain subjects at GCSE and A-level can limit potential access to some universities. As a recent Future First report put it: “people are not only being locked out of social mobility and access to the jobs market because of persisting educational or income inequalities alone. They are also being failed by inadequate careers advice”.⁴⁰

The 2009 report *Unleashing Aspiration* identified careers advice as a critical issue and made recommendations on how to make improvements.⁴¹ In particular, it recommended that schools should be given direct responsibility for providing careers advice, and that the funding for Connexions should be transferred to schools to enable them to deliver on this duty. The Government has delivered on half of this: it has transferred the duty, but not the funding. As the UK Careers Sector Strategic Forum has pointed out, the funding provided for the career guidance component of Connexions (estimated at £203 million) has been removed, which has led to the loss of approximately 4,000 careers advisers and about two million young people receiving little or no careers guidance this year.⁴² A survey in autumn 2011 found that four in five schools said

that the changes have adversely affected them, and half of these said that their careers advice provision has been reduced. In addition, 8% of schools said that they were planning to do nothing other than refer pupils to websites and other online services.⁴³ Given the changes to higher education, particularly around fees, the timing could hardly have been worse. There is much to do urgently to address these issues.

Research from the Sutton Trust suggests that non-academic factors can have a significant impact on who gets into university.⁴⁴ It found that schools with similar exam results can have very different progression rates. At two grammar schools with almost identical A-level results, for example, one recorded an average of 65% of students going to selective universities, while the other managed only 28%. At two low-scoring comprehensives, again with near identical UCAS tariff scores, almost 70% of 18 year olds applied to higher education at one, only 33% in the other. It is likely that careers advice and support is a significant factor in explaining these findings.

In order for careers advice to be effective, many of the principles are the same as those we found when looking at effective university outreach activity. Namely, we need structured programmes, consisting of a range of activities. This includes inspiring talks, visits to universities and work experience. Getting a taste for different types of employment is particularly important for those who have few family connections in professional working environments.⁴⁵

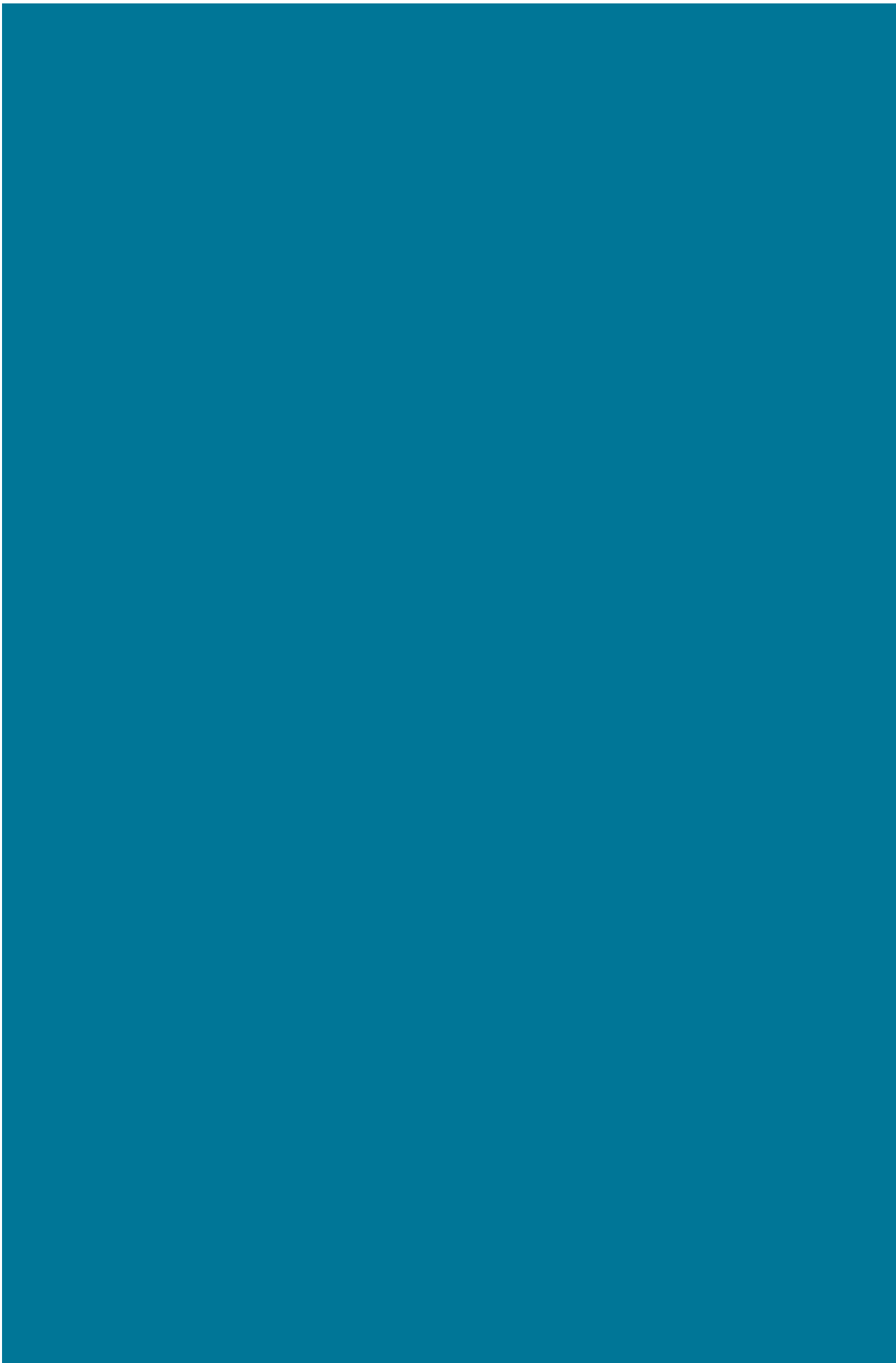
In March 2012, the Government published statutory guidance with the intention of identifying the key responsibilities of schools in relation to careers guidance for young people.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the guidance omitted many of the key features that were recommended by the Government's own National Careers Service Advisory Group.⁴⁷ In particular, it does not require schools to offer independent face-to-face guidance, nor does it require guidance providers to be qualified careers professionals. While this guidance is not due to be reviewed until May 2013, the Government has indicated that it can see the benefits of providing "practical information and additional support to schools to

help them to understand what their duties are".⁴⁸ ***The Government should provide this information and support to schools as a matter of urgency and in particular it should emphasise the importance of face-to-face careers guidance delivered by impartial and accredited professionals.***

The introduction of the new National Careers Service has the potential to address many of the problems associated with careers guidance. The aim is to develop a market in products and services for careers advice for everyone aged 13 or older. Many applicants to universities do not come straight from school, and the provision of careers advice to adults via the National Careers Service will be critical to progress on social mobility. In the meantime, it will be important for the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission to monitor the situation closely to ensure that progress is being made and that the current vacuum is being filled. Finally, ***there needs to be an ongoing evaluation of the careers approaches taken by schools, and this should form a new part of the school inspections carried out by Ofsted. The quality and effectiveness of careers advice should form part of each school report undertaken by Ofsted.***

Conclusion

While this report has focused primarily on what universities can and should do to make participation in higher education wider and access fairer, the right public policy framework is essential. Government policy needs to be evaluated as a whole, based on the evidence of what outcomes it has achieved. It is difficult to assess what impact the Government is making this early in its life, although its aims of greater student choice combined with advancing social mobility are laudable. At this stage, however, there are already causes for concern. The sharp rise in the cap on tuition fees has been the focus of public scrutiny. But, uncorrected, other aspects of public policy will undermine rather than enhance universities' efforts to accelerate social mobility in our country.



Annex

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The Bridge Group	London Higher
Brightside Trust	Manchester Metropolitan University
British Youth Council	Middlesex University
Lord Browne of Madingley	million+
Careers England	National Association of Head Teachers
Durham University	National Education Opportunities Network
Education and Employers Taskforce	National Foundation for Educational Research
Equality and Human Rights Commission	National Institute of Economic and Social Research
Equality Challenge Unit	National Union of Students
The <i>Financial Times</i>	Newcastle University
	Office for Fair Access

The Open University
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Policy Exchange
Princeton University
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Resolution Foundation
Russell Group
Social Mobility Foundation
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Sutton Trust
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University of Bradford
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University of Cambridge
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University of Derby
University of Exeter
University of Leeds
University of Leicester
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University of Oxford
University of Salford
University of Sheffield
University of Surrey
University Vocational Awards Council
University of the West of England
University of Winchester
University of Wolverhampton
University of York
up2uni

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University of Southampton, University of St Andrews, University of Strathclyde, University of Surrey, University College London, University of Warwick and University of York.

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