Discourses of ‘Fair Access’ in English Higher Education: what do institutional statements tell us about university stratification and market positioning?

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Abstract This paper explores English universities’ responses to widening participation policy developments. It draws on an analysis of Access Agreements submitted to the Office for Fair Access (OfFA) - and publicly-available material produced by eight universities in one region. We analyse how universities from different mission groups present their commitment to widening participation and how this relates to their positioning in a stratified, marketised system. Our analysis reveals that, in spite of government rhetoric, OfFA appears willing to accept a variety of arrangements for offsetting the impact of increased fees on students from under-represented backgrounds. We suggest that a combination of government direction and institutional discretion enables universities to use financial incentives as marketing tools. We conclude that English universities, reflecting the uncertain policy climate and market concerns, are taking a cautious and ambivalent approach to fair access, signalling retreat from higher education as a vehicle for promoting social justice.

Key words: higher education, fair access, document analysis, education market, widening participation.

Introduction

Universities in the industrialised world are expected to act as an engine both of social mobility and increased national economic competitiveness (Avis, 2007). This tension between promoting social justice through higher education and exposing it to market forces has been apparent in government policy in England (Archer, 2007; Stevenson et al., 2010) for some time but has heightened since the election of a Conservative-led UK Coalition Government in 2010. Since 2003, English universities have been expected to broaden the social base of their student population while raising their national and global status to increase income from non-government sources (particularly from student fees). The Office of Fair Access (OfFA) was created to police universities’ efforts in this regard (DfES, 2003a; 2003b). OfFA was established as an ‘independent non-departmental public body’ and charged with promoting and safeguarding fair access to higher
education for lower income and under-represented groups, following the introduction of higher tuition fees from 2006. From the outset, government recognised that some universities (particularly those in the elite Russell Grouping of research intensive universities) had further than others to go in achieving a more diverse student population. In his letter to the incoming Director of OfFA in 2004, Charles Clarke, then Secretary of State for Education, made clear the need for OfFA to challenge elite universities:

Your independence and freedom to challenge institutions where necessary are an important safeguard and public assurance… I would expect that you would expect the most, in terms of outreach and financial support, from institutions whose records suggest that they have further to go in securing a diverse student body.

To date, however, OfFA’s role has been limited to ‘support and encouragement’ for improving access rates from low income and under-represented groups and to ensuring that universities provide ‘clear and accessible information’ to prospective students, offer financial support to students from lower income families and invest in outreach activities to encourage a wider range of students to consider entering higher education.

In 2009 an independent review of higher education funding and student finance (Browne, 2010) was established by the then Labour Government. It reported shortly after the election of a Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition. The Browne Report claimed a continuing commitment to widening participation. However the report’s three key assumptions did not sit well with this claim. The first was that competition between providers leads to raised quality; the second that sector stratification is desirable and should be reflected in differential fees; the third that the burden of funding for university study should be further shifted towards the individual and away from the public purse. The report’s conceptualisation of ‘student choice’ was underpinned by the belief that choices made in a ‘free market’ are unencumbered by differentials in economic, social and cultural capital.

The Government White Paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011a) reflected these assumptions. It emphasised ‘student choice’ and signalled the intensification of competition between universities by lifting the cap on student fees, allowing universities to set fee levels of up to £9,000 per annum. However, on paper, the Government also expressed concern about the under-representation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in the most selective universities. This concern was reflected in the promise of greater powers for OfFA and in the Government Ministers’ letter to the Director of OfFA in 2011:

...we want to encourage you and the higher education sector to focus more sharply on the outcomes of outreach and other access activities rather than the inputs and processes. In particular, the Government believes that progress over the past few years in securing fair access to
the most selective universities has been inadequate and that much more determined action now needs to be taken’. (Cable and Willetts, 2011)

From this one might assume that politicians were keen to ensure that elite universities demonstrated measureable progress in increasing the representativeness of their student population. The submission of an Access Agreement for OfFA approval is part of the process by which universities are expected to demonstrate their continuing commitment to widening participation while raising fees. An examination of Access Agreements makes it possible to explore how the most selective universities have responded to the government’s call for ‘more determined action’ as well as how universities with relatively good records on widening participation but relatively lower status are responding in a new funding climate which brings to the fore their concern with market position and financial viability.

This paper draws on a document-based analysis of Office for Fair Access (OfFA) Agreements for 2012-2013 and other publicly available material produced by eight universities in one English region. We analyse how universities in a stratified system present their commitment to widening participation and how this relates to their strategic positioning in a higher education market. Our analysis reveals first, that in spite of government rhetoric to the contrary, the regulation of proposals for offsetting the impact of increased fees on students from under-represented backgrounds has been weak. Second the combination of government direction and institutional discretion in relation to financial support for poorer students has enabled universities to use financial incentives as a marketing tool, while being unclear about the likelihood of prospective students benefitting from these incentives. Third, it suggests that universities, reflecting the uncertainty of the policy climate are taking a cautious and sometimes ambivalent approach to fair access. Overall, we discern a retreat from the idea of higher education as a vehicle for promoting social justice in an increasingly challenging market.

Researching Access Agreements

Analyses of past Access Agreements and Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (McCaig and Adnett, 2009; Thomas et al., 2010; Adnett et al., 2011) have shed light on the interactions between national government, OfFA and individual higher education providers. Thomas et al. (2010) analysed 129 UK Widening Participation Strategic Assessments to review how higher education institutions were addressing widening participation. They noted that while widening participation measures were being mainstreamed there was little evidence of institutions taking a systematic or targeted approach to inclusion.
Drawing on an analysis of earlier OfFA Access Agreements McCaig and Adnett (2009) suggest that OfFA has been reluctant to challenge the relatively poor performance of some universities in widening participation. They argue that the driving force behind the development of Access Agreements has been institutional self-interest, and that there are two distinct types of institution: ‘selecting’ and ‘recruiting’ universities. The ‘selecting’ institutions can take their pick of the highest achieving applicants and use widening participation as a marketing tool to soften their image. In contrast, the newer ‘recruiting’ universities are seen as relying on widening participation funding to maintain student numbers. They argue that the continuing status divide between universities demonstrates the limitations of OfFA’s powers to challenge universities.

As McCaig and Adnett demonstrate, Access Agreements offer insights into the way in which universities interpret and ‘speak to’ government policy; mission statements, university websites and prospectuses further illuminate universities’ priorities (Fairclough, 1993) and how these are translated for public consumption. A critical appraisal of the consistencies and contradictions these documents contain may help us to see how universities are managing the tensions between social justice and the market at a time of policy turbulence.

In 2011 we began a thematic analysis of the 2012/2013 Access Agreements and other publicly available documents emanating from eight universities in a selected region of England. We aimed to identify mission group similarities and differences around fee setting, targeting and widening participation activities. The universities were representative of the diversity of institutional histories and missions which now characterises English higher education. They included universities occupying different positions on the UK University League Tables as well as two institutions which had declined to provide data for inclusion in league tables on the grounds that they do not fairly reflect their strengths. Institutions whose documentation was analysed included:

- Two pre-1992 Russell Group Universities, ranked in the ‘Sutton Trust 30’ (2011) of highly selective and research intensive universities;
- One pre-1992 university not aligned to a university mission grouping or in the Sutton Trust list of highly selective universities;
- Three post-1992 universities (former polytechnics) aligned to the Million Plus mission group, of newer teaching and research active universities;
- Two University Colleges which are members of the Guild Group of specialist and vocational universities.

The questions framing our analysis were:
• How are universities publicly responding to changing government policy on fees and admissions?
• How are universities defining and operationalising widening participation and fair access?
• What differences and similarities can be discerned between universities in different mission groups?
• How are ‘outreach’, ‘targeting’ ‘retention’ and ‘employability’ activities being utilised in relation to widening participation?

We first discuss how the eight universities profiled themselves in relation to widening participation: what they told OfFA and what information they gave the public. Next, we attempt to unravel the ‘offer’ made by these universities in respect of scholarships, bursaries and fee waivers for students from low income backgrounds. Finally, we explore what the universities told OfFA about their plans to use increased fee income to fund activities to further widen participation and improve student retention. We discuss our findings in the context of the institutions’ performance against Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) measures of widening participation (see Table 1).

Profiling widening access: different rankings, different messages

The relative performance of the eight universities against HESA measures of widening participation is summarised below. Immediately apparent is the difference between the Russell Group Universities and the rest in their recruitment from state sector schools and under-represented groups. The two Russell Group universities fell below the national average against all the cited measures of widening participation and there was a clear difference between the performance of Russell Group (‘selecting’) and Million Plus and Guild Group (‘recruiting’) universities. On the other hand, the Million Plus and Guild Group universities appeared to be performing well in relation to all measures of widening participation. If the stance taken by Willets and Cable in their Ministerial guidance were adopted by OfFA, the data might be expected to result in pressure on the selective universities to improve their performance, and this might be reflected in their OfFA agreements. By the same token, the relatively good performance by non-elite universities might be cause for celebration on their, and the government’s, part. This section of our analysis explores these assumptions, with reference to the universities’ OfFA agreements and their publicly available prospectus and website information.
Table 1: Performance in respect of under-represented groups

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<tr>
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<th>Low Participation Neighbourhood (%)</th>
<th>Socio Economic groups 4-6 (%)</th>
<th>State school (%)</th>
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<td>10.3</td>
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<td>6.1</td>
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<td>Guild 1</td>
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<td>46.6</td>
<td>99.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guild 2</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>96.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HESA, Participation of under-represented groups in higher education: young and full-time first degree entrants 2009/10

The Russell Group

The two Russell Group universities’ Access Agreements and publicly available documents positioned them as research-led, internationally profiled institutions whose commitment to fair access was expressed in terms of recruitment of ‘the brightest and the best’ regardless of school attended. One of the key messages embedded in these universities’ OfFA agreements was their belief that their performance in recruiting from under-represented groups should be measured, not against the performance of all universities, but against that of their ‘peers’. For example, Russell Group 1 explained that it benchmarks its performance in recruiting students from under-represented groups (low income, low participation neighbourhood and/or state school educated) against that of ten other highly selective universities, rather than against the whole sector. Russell Group 2 took a similar line:

The following self-assessment is underpinned by a firm belief that our performance should be placed against that of those institutions most similar to us in the Russell Group. Comparison against the sector as a whole underplays both the success we have achieved and, crucially, the clear commitment we have to fair access and widening participation. (Russell Group 2 OfFA Agreement)

In positioning themselves as distinctive, both downplayed their poor performance in widening participation relative to other institutions in their region, while asserting their commitment to fair access.

The Russell Group universities’ public documents – prospectuses, web information and mission statements – contained relatively few statements
about inclusion, accessibility, diversity and widening access. Where inclusivity was asserted it was tempered by reference to status and selectivity; widening participation was expressed in terms of recruitment from the state sector rather than from under-represented groups:

Our academic standards are high. We prize applicants who can demonstrate academic achievement, as well as those who have unrealised potential. We are proud that every year we welcome students from across the full range of state, independent and public schools from the UK and overseas. (Russell Group 2 prospectus)

The [Russell Group 1] experience is founded, first and foremost, on academic excellence. As measured by the UK league tables and the last government Research Assessment Exercise, [Russell Group 1] is one of the UK’s leading universities for both teaching and research and is rapidly climbing up the international league tables of world class universities. (Russell Group 1 prospectus)

These two universities were not identical in their approach; different traditions may mean that an element of targeting fits comfortably with a university’s image. Russell Group 1, for example, specifically mentioned accessibility in its prospectus and underlined its commitment to welcoming mature students.

....accessibility is important to us. We want to make sure that we provide support for anyone with the ability to benefit from higher education, regardless of economic or social circumstances.

Our analysis suggests that the elite Russell Group universities were able present themselves to OfFA as committed to promoting wider access, whilst simultaneously claiming their place as ‘top’, selective universities, open only to the most ‘able’ and performing relatively poorly against measures of fair access.

The non-aligned and Million Plus

The OfFA and public messages of the non-aligned and the Million Plus universities in this regional grouping were more ambivalent. This ambivalence stemmed from their relatively poor positions in the UK University league tables, and their relatively good record in recruiting students from state schools, lower socio-economic groups and low participation neighbourhoods:

We are a university with a consistently high proportion of under-represented groups, and a student body which is socially inclusive. (Million Plus 1 OfFA Agreement)
[The university] performs exceptionally well both in absolute terms and by comparison to the adjusted sector benchmark in indicators of WP. (Million Plus 2 OfFA Agreement)

However, in their recruitment literature these universities were more reticent on widening access and inclusivity, possibly reflecting the tension between equity and market positioning. For the sake of survival these institutions needed to set their fees as high as the market would bear. A lower fees level might carry an implication of lower quality (and therefore lower value for money). In this case, self-projection as too ‘accessible’ might be a risky strategy. Their lower positioning in (or absence from) the university league tables could reinforce the perception of lower value and status. In their promotion materials, these universities tended to downplay their record on diversity and emphasise selected aspects of their league table performance which signalled prestige:

The university is currently ranked 5th in the UK and 1st outside London for graduate employability...The University is consistently ranked in the UK’s top 20 to 30 Universities confirming our place amongst the elite. (Non-aligned website)

We are committed to producing industry-ready graduates and are ranked in the UK top 30 by the Sunday Times University Guide (2012) for placing students in graduate-level jobs. (Million Plus 2 website)

Employability, rather than inclusivity, was the key message in the public profile of these institutions, reflecting their historical vocational specialism and current national concern about graduate employment. Although they tended not to profile themselves publicly for inclusivity, as with the elite universities, marketing literature could be used to portray an image of accessibility without being too specific:

The University’s campus provides the learning environment in which students from all backgrounds can achieve their ambitions whether they are studying for a first degree or developing their knowledge and skills later in their careers. (Million Plus 1 website)

These universities, like the Russell Group institutions, appeared to be asserting their achievements in widening participation to OfFA, while downplaying them publicly, focusing instead on key marketing messages, particularly employability, and making somewhat selective use of league table data.

Guild Group

There were two University Colleges in the regional grouping – one a faith-based, former teacher training college, the other a former Further Education
college. While these two institutions’ missions and course offerings were quite different, their OfFA statements and their public profiling consistently marked them as ‘committed’ to widening participation:

[The College] is proud of its success in providing access to university education to students from a comprehensive range of backgrounds. (Guild 1 OfFA statement)

[The College] is committed to high quality, accessible academic and professional education based on respect for others, social justice and equity. (Guild 1 prospectus)

[The College] is a specialist higher education institution with one of the most socially diverse student bodies of all in the university sector...It also strongly encourages applicants from backgrounds not traditionally associated with higher education and supports students through their study time with [us]. (Guild 2 OfFA Agreement)

[The College] has long been highly successful in attracting those from families with little or no experience of higher education. It has also been very successful in providing opportunities for progression to higher education from non-A level vocational programmes, and (in some disciplines) for mature students. (Guild 2 mission statement)

For the faith-based college the terms ‘student-centred’, ‘personal’, ‘support’ and ‘community spirit’ were prominent in materials aimed for public consumption, sending a message of accessibility. There was also evidence of focused targeting of care leavers – one of the most under-represented groups in higher education (Jackson et al., 2005). The public messages from the former further education college stressed its specialist vocational focused status for which ‘industry links’, ‘vocational relevance’ and ‘employability’ were key words.

Our analysis suggests that there were differences in the way universities presented themselves, and that these differences were sharpest between the two Russell Group universities and the other six institutions in our region of focus. However, there was not only a distinction between selecting and recruiting universities (McCaig and Adnett, 2009). There were also distinctions which roughly mapped onto mission group membership. The Russell Group universities positioned themselves as elite and highly selective. The one non-aligned and the three Million Plus universities asserted to OfFA their good performance against widening participation benchmarks; however they tended to downplay this in their public profiling. Only the two Guild Group university colleges projected themselves consistently to OfFA and to the wider public - foregrounding diversity and social justice as integral to their mission. This leads us to suggest that the commitment of universities to widening participation in the current climate is differentiated, fluid and in some cases ambivalent.
Financial support for widening participation: Scholarships, bursaries and fee waivers

This aspect of our analysis focuses on the ‘offer’ made by each institution in relation to the National Scholarship Programme (NSP). The NSP was conceived as a vehicle for promoting fair access through providing financial discounts and incentives to students from less affluent backgrounds. The NSP was driven by central government directive ( overseen by the Department for Business, Industry and Skills) and exercised through the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE, 2011) but also provides for institutional discretion. Any institution charging fees above £6,000 per year was expected to include ‘a match funded contribution to the programme of at least the same value as the government contribution’. Government criteria establish the value of awards and eligibility. For example it made clear that eligibility for scholarships would be confined to those whose annual family income is below £25,000 (BIS, 2011). The guidance to universities stated that ‘each eligible student will receive a benefit of not less than £3,000 (full-time and pro-rata part-time...)’ and that this is a ‘one year benefit, not a recurrent annual entitlement’. It is worth noting here that BIS and HEFCE both conflate eligibility with award – an issue that we will return to in our discussion of the offers made by individual institutions.

Alongside the directive aspects of the NSP were provisions allowing individual universities “to decide their own eligibility criteria, based on targeting guidance and their own circumstances” (BIS, 2011). Universities were provided with a ‘menu’ of options including: a fee waiver, a free foundation year and/or discounted accommodation. However, it was stressed that ‘eligibility criteria must be clear, transparent and published on the HEI’s website’. This mixture of government direction and institutional discretion was mirrored in the NSP ‘offers’ made by the eight universities included in our analysis and contributed to a complex and confusing situation.

Presenting ‘the offer’

The non-aligned university offered a combination of tuition and placement fee waivers and accommodation discounts in the first year. However, this university later submitted a revised Access Agreement which added a £1,000 tuition fee waiver for a subsequent placement year, a move which did not to conform to HEFCE guidance that NSP should be regarded as a ‘one-year benefit’. The placement fee waiver was an example of the way institutions might use the NSP to include scholarships worth considerably less than the £3,000 laid down in government guidance. The non-aligned university also launched its own-branded ‘Advantage
Scholarships’, worth up to £2,000 and ‘Progression Scholarships’ which (depending on the students’ family income) could be worth as little as £500.

Other universities also used own-branded scholarships to offer lower financial incentives. For example, Russell Group 1’s ‘National Scholarships’ offered bursaries of between £500 and £2,500. Confusingly, the term ‘bursary’ was used to describe fee waivers of up to £2,500, despite government and HEFCE guidance that National Scholarships should be worth at least £3,000. Although Russell Group 2 did not rename its National Scholarships, it did offer, in addition, ‘awards’ of between £250 and £2,000, noting that National Scholarships are worth £3,000 ‘to those eligible’.

Million Plus 1 also offered own-brand scholarships. It complied with the £3,000 NSP minimum but added ‘local’ eligibility criteria for students, including attendance at an interview, obtaining a minimum achievement level, selecting the university as first choice or being a student at a school or college with whom the university had a formal partnership. In contrast, Million Plus 2 provided little detail about its NSP. Nevertheless it stated that it expected to support students deemed at risk of non-completion with scholarships or bursaries beyond their first year – although this is technically outside the remit of the NSP. Million Plus 3 provided more detail about continued financial support, offering fee waivers for eligible students successfully completing the first and second years and a cash payment for successful completion of the degree. These offers were all beyond the scope of the government’s National Scholarship Programme, but nevertheless formed part of the financial offer to prospective students.

Both Guild Group institutions own-branded their scholarship offers. Guild 1 focused on ‘continued support’ for years 1 and 2 through fee waivers and reductions in accommodation costs, and ‘up to 40’ institution-branded scholarships which, although they were worth the same as National Scholarships, were to be spread over three years. Guild Group 1 also identified NSP as one of three scholarship programmes; the two other programmes being worth up to £5,000 and £6,000 over three years. Guild Group 2 announced plans to offer additional scholarships; however, its OFFA Agreement simply outlined its NSP as a waiver on first year fees.

In summary, five of the eight institutions engaged in own-branding in relation to their NSP offers. Own-branding appears to allow an institution to market a government-funded initiative as a ‘home grown’ one. It can also enable the institution to offer scholarships of lower value to prospective students on higher incomes (especially in the Russell Group) or to shape scholarships to reflect other institutional priorities. Even without own-branding of NSP, institutions may use their own scholarships to profile themselves. For the Russell Group and Non-aligned institutions, for example, the offer of a range of scholarships may imply high levels of
scholarship eligibility. For the Million Plus institutions the emphasis appeared to be on utilising scholarships to incentivise retention, progression and achievement, rather than encouraging applications from less wealthy students. In the case of the Guild institutions, own-brand scholarships appeared to reinforce institutional ethos.

Eligibility and the chances of success

Adding to the potential confusion caused by the own-branding of scholarships (within or outside the NSP) six of the eight universities did not clearly spell out their scholarship eligibility criteria or the likelihood of applicants actually receiving additional financial support. While Guild 1 mentioned the possibility of a lottery if ‘...applicants (are) equal’, only Guild 2 made explicit the distinction between eligibility and the likelihood of success. Meanwhile the non-aligned university informed applicants:

We’re investing £4.3 million in our scholarship programme to ensure that anyone who is qualified to come to [ ] University can do so, regardless of their financial circumstances …We estimate that around 65% of our students will be eligible for a scholarship ...of between £1000 and £5000 in total over the length of their course. (Non-aligned website)

Although the high percentage of those likely to be eligible was stressed, the likelihood of an eligible applicant actually gaining additional financial support and the likely level of that support remained vague.

Neither Russell Group university provided information on their total expenditure on scholarships or the likely number of beneficiaries. Russell Group 1 referred to a ... ‘generous programme of financial support worth up to £4500 a year’, and a degree: ‘...accessible to all academically talented people regardless of family income’. Russell Group 2 focused on setting out eligibility criteria for scholarships, adding that other awards might be given if criteria for NSP are not met. However, both institutions omitted reference to possible rationing. This may suggest that demand was not expected to exceed supply; alternatively it may be that the scholarships schemes operated as ‘window dressing’, enabling the elite universities to rehearse their message of admitting the ‘best and brightest’ irrespective of financial circumstances, whilst not backing this message with clear information.

The Million Plus universities also focused on informing potential applicants about eligibility. Million Plus 1 stated that its own-brand scholarships would be ‘awarded competitively’ on criteria given in the Access Agreement (attending an interview, reaching a minimum achievement level, selecting the university as first choice or attending a school or college with whom the university has a partnership). Million Plus 3 used similar criteria. However, it was unclear how these criteria would be applied or what the relative weightings between criteria were. It is difficult
not to see the use of additional selection criteria as a response to anticipated excess of demand over supply.

In its Access Agreement, Million Plus 2 noted that the number of applicants it attracted with a financial background that would make them NSP-eligible was likely to mean that only a minority would actually gain a scholarship. However, this information was not shared with prospective applicants who were only told that there would be 370 National Scholarships worth £3,000 for students with a family income below a stated threshold and who ‘demonstrate excellence in academic achievement, performance or potential’. Again, eligibility and likelihood of success were not distinguished clearly enough to enable applicants to assess their prospects of financial support.

Our analysis of information provided by universities in relation to financial support reveals first, a confusing range of support packages; second it highlights a lack of transparency about what is available and the likelihood of eligible applicants gaining support. Information provided to the public did not provide an accurate basis for decisions which have major financial implications for prospective students. Third, it suggests that the use of own-branding of scholarships by some universities may be another way that they position themselves as socially responsible whilst maintaining selectivity. In this context the use of the term ‘scholarship’, redolent of impoverished but worthy candidates being sponsored to attend elite institutions, perhaps suggests the direction of travel for fair access in the current political climate.

Activities to widen access

We tabulated the activities which universities told OfFA that they would undertake in 2012-13, utilising some of their additional fee income to widen participation (table 2). Our analysis was rendered problematic by the variation in the quality and quantity of information made available by the eight universities. Some gave detailed accounts of specific widening participation schemes; others merely listed examples of the type of activity undertaken, without specifying frequency, number of participants, expenditure or anticipated outcomes. Comparison on the basis of mission group was therefore difficult. However, with some exceptions, the range of activity types was similar across all the universities and consisted of a mix of local school and college partnership, campus visits and ‘taster sessions’, mentoring and advice.
Table 2: Statements to OfFA of activities utilised to widen participation

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<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Russell Group 1</th>
<th>Russell Group 2</th>
<th>Non-aligned</th>
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<th>Million Plus 2</th>
<th>Million Plus 3</th>
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General ‘Aimhigher’ activity

The cessation of government funding to *Aimhigher* partnerships was mentioned by six of the universities. *Aimhigher* was established in 2004 as a national programme whose aim was to work through regional institutional partnerships to encourage progression to higher education by young people from under-represented groups. The *Aimhigher* programme encompassed activities to engage and motivate school and college students seen as having the potential to enter higher education, but lacking the confidence or motivation to aspire to university entry. The government’s decision in late 2010 to withdraw funding from *Aimhigher* as of 2011 left universities having to decide whether to utilise additional fee income to maintain their
existing *Aimhigher* work. Six of the universities in our regional group opted to maintain their participation in a somewhat reduced *Aimhigher* partnership. Ironically, therefore, funds from fee increases were to be utilised to maintain activity which government had cut back, rather than supporting new work; the cost was thereby transferred from the public purse to fee-paying students. A number of universities pointed out that they were bearing the cost of the government’s cut; in doing so they could scarcely be seen as failing in their duty to raise aspirations. The Russell Group universities in particular emphasised their continuing involvement in collaborations:

The University has played a leading role in the success of the *Aimhigher* activities in collaboration with other institutions in the [region]. We believe that this work has a significant impact on the aspirations of young people. (Russell Group 2)

The government cut to *Aimhigher* funding arguably weakened OFFA’s position as enforcer of widening participation.

**Targeted activity**

Although there was plenty of evidence of general aspiration raising activities focused on under-represented groups, there was relatively little evidence of clear targeting. This suggested (as did Thomas et al., 2010) a generalised, rather than focused commitment to widening access. There were exceptions: three universities (one from each mission grouping) were targeting care leavers; one Russell Group university was targeting mature students and students with disabilities; the faith-based Guild 1 was targeting prospective Muslim students, white working class boys, part-time students and care leavers. Interestingly, both Russell Group universities were targeting students identified as ‘gifted and talented’, headlining schemes aimed at supporting and recruiting:

...the brightest and most creative young people (Russell Group 1 website)

This enabled these institutions to pitch themselves as selective in their approach to recruiting students from under-represented groups, reinforcing their elite image. Whether these students might anyway have found their way to university is, of course, a moot point.

It is interesting too that, notwithstanding their relatively poor performance against HESA measures of widening access, both the Russell Group universities positioned themselves as leaders in the widening participation field. Russell Group 2 emphasised its leadership role in regional and national widening participation initiatives and described its access scheme as a ‘sector leading’ and ‘flagship’; Russell Group 1 described itself as:
...the first research-led University in the UK to give priority to widening participation and lifelong learning. (Russell Group 1 OfFA Agreement)

In spite of government statements about the need to challenge the performance of the elite universities, it appears that these universities did not feel compelled to intensify their widening participation activities. Meanwhile it is difficult to see what more could be done by those universities which already met or exceeded widening participation benchmarks.

The universities proposed a mixture of activity which was not, in most cases, clearly targeted, and whose projected outcomes were ‘steady as she goes’, rather than ambitious. This suggests that the universities may be less than enthusiastic about renewing efforts in an uncertain policy climate. It also suggests that OfFA’s approach to monitoring the focus and impact of planned widening participation activities remained laissez-faire and that the elite universities were not under pressure to improve their widening participation performance.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on publicly available documents to illustrate how universities negotiate rapid and sometimes unpredictable policy shifts. Our analysis raises concerns about the prospects for widening participation as a result of funding changes in England. Although the requirement for annual Access Agreements signals that universities still have to respond to government’s stated priorities to increase fair access, we suggest that the policy context in which these agreements are produced is characterised by a combination of bravado, neglect and interference. Simultaneously, other drivers, mostly notably competition in higher education, underpin the accelerating development of a stratified higher education market.

Bravado is apparent in the public statements of politicians about OfFA’s strength as a regulator. However, the use of OfFA as an ‘arms-length’ agency means that government can distance itself when it comes to what universities actually do to promote fair access. Thus the evidence suggests that in spite of government rhetoric to the contrary, OfFA has to date been permissive in its approach, and has been prepared to sign off on vague statements about student financing and targeted widening participation activities. Nor does it appear that the demand for clear and transparent information about financial support to students from low income families has been rigorously enforced. Furthermore, it seems that the most selective universities did not feel under pressure to take the ‘determined action’ called for in 2011 by Cable and Willetts on behalf of the UK government; rather they continued to differentiate themselves on the basis of their elite status. Government exhortations to the sector to focus more sharply on widening
participation outcomes have not been followed through in terms of incentivising or monitoring. In a market climate which is increasingly challenging this failure contributes to the likelihood that universities will feel obliged to retreat from the idea of higher education as a vehicle for promoting social justice in order to ensure survival.

Policy characterised by both bravado and neglect is apparent in relation to scholarships, bursaries and fee waivers which have enabled universities to use financial incentives and own-branding as marketing tools, giving an impression of a generous range of packages of financial assistance but leaving it less clear what proportion of eligible students was likely to benefit from financial incentives offered by universities, and by what criteria applicants would be judged.

Interference as an aspect of government policy has been apparent through the period over which we conducted our analysis. It was clear when increased tuition fees were introduced that government’s expectation was that universities would use fee levels to organise themselves into a stratified market with just a few ‘elite’ institutions charging the maximum. However, most institutions, wanting to avoid appearing to signal lower quality, opted for higher fees. Government’s misreading of the way universities would respond led to a number of unexpected interventions in the operation of ‘market forces’. One was a decision to allow unrestricted recruitment of highest achieving students – a move which would arguably benefit elite universities with the least impressive records on widening participation. Another was the reallocation of 20,000 places to universities charging lower fees, reinforcing the status divide between the cheaper ‘mass’ universities and the more expensive and selective elite (Mroz, 2011).

The study of publicly available documents offers a route to a clearer understanding of the twists and turns of higher education policy. Such an understanding is of benefit in itself, but it can also provide a basis for recommendations about government policy and institutional practice. At a policy level our analysis suggests that if government policy on widening participation is to be more than bravado, Access Agreements need to include targets with incentives (or penalties) attached. Such targets would require more stringent use of benchmarking data. An incentivising element may have unintended consequences; these, in turn, would need to be monitored and mitigated. This implies a greater role for an independent regulator than OfFA has had to date. At the level of practice our analysis highlights that universities have a difficult task in maintaining the balance between the social justice mission and operating in a global market. They need to recognise that while fee levels, scholarships and bursaries may play a part in marketing strategies, for potential applicants they support the making of decisions which carry with them significant long-term financial implications. There is reason to be concerned, however, that currently the balance is moving against social justice.
References


