



Briefing Note: Understanding and addressing socioeconomic participation gaps in Higher Education in England

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Summary

- Higher education (HE) participation in England has been steadily increasing for several decades. However, young people from poorer households have not have benefited from this long period of HE expansion to the same extent as their better off peers.
- The HE participation gap between free school meals (FSM) eligible pupils and all other pupils, both overall and at more selective universities, is currently the highest on record (since statistics starting being published in 2008). Gaps between those living in neighbourhoods of lower versus higher HE participation have narrowed over the same period, but only slightly.
- HE participation gaps have persisted despite the annual investment of hundreds of millions of pounds by universities in widening participation outreach initiatives, and the expansion of contextual admissions policies which relax entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants.

Recommendations

- Efforts should continue to narrow socioeconomic attainment gaps by age 16 as these gaps are the main driver of socioeconomic disparities in HE participation.
- There may need to be a reappraisal of the way in which widening participation outreach initiatives and contextual admissions policies are implemented and evaluated given that the continued expansion of such initiatives has not yet led to any noticeable reduction in socioeconomic gaps in HE participation.

The Issue

The proportion of English school or college leavers who progress into HE has been increasing steadily over many decades (Crawford et al., 2016; Smith, 2018) and figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) show that HE participation continued to increase in 2020 and 2021 during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic (UCAS, 2021a). More recently, UCAS has reported slight drops in application and acceptance figures for the 2022 and 2023 application cycles (UCAS, 2023), however any reduction in demand for HE during the remainder of the 2020s is likely to be at least offset by increasing numbers of 18 year olds within the population (Drayton et al., 2023). It is crucial that all young people, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, have a fair chance to access HE. If young people from poorer backgrounds are less able to access HE, this risks leading to the reproduction of inequalities across generations given that graduates earn more on average than their non-graduate counterparts (Britton et al., 2020), and also on average enjoy better health outcomes, longer life expectancies, a greater likelihood of civic engagement and a reduced likelihood of committing crime (Brennan et al., 2013).

Trends in access to HE by socioeconomic background

Department for Education (DfE) widening participation data illustrates the disparity in access to HE by FSM eligibility, with the most recent data showing that the proportion of non-FSM eligible young people progressing to HE by age 19 (49.4%) greatly exceeds the proportion of FSM eligible young people progressing (29.2%) (Department for Education, 2023b). Whilst the proportion of FSM eligible pupils participating in HE has steadily increased over time,

the percentage point gap between FSM eligible and non-FSM eligible participation rates has remained largely flat, though the most recent published gap is the highest on record (with DfE records on this statistic dating back over the past 16 years).

While the freezing of the income thresholds for FSM eligibility complicates comparisons across years between FSM eligible and non-eligible students, a similar picture emerges when comparing changes over time in differences in HE participation using area-based measures of disadvantage. Using the 'POLAR' measure, the percentage point gap in participation rates between those residing in the top 20% of areas of highest HE participation versus those residing in the bottom 20% of areas of lowest HE participation has narrowed, but only slightly – to a still massive 30.1 percentage points in the most recent data, compared with 33.3 percentage points 12 years earlier (Department for Education, 2023b).

Another way to understand socio-economic inequalities in access to university is to look at how the characteristics of the student body have changed over time. The Office for Students has recently devised a composite measure of student disadvantage which allocates students to one of the three categories - 'significantly disadvantaged', 'economically precarious' and 'other' (with 'other' being the most advantaged group) - based on a combination of FSM eligibility status, household income, school type attended and financial dependency status (Office for Students, 2022). Looking at the categorisation of all students in higher education between 2017-2018 and 2021-2022, the number of students in the most advantaged group grew slightly, whilst the number of disadvantaged students slightly decreased. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) on the parental occupa-

tional background of HE students suggest a similarly stagnant picture (HESA, 2023).

Access to high-tariff institutions

DfE widening participation statistics reveal that the proportion of FSM eligible pupils who progress to 'high-tariff' universities (defined as those in the top third of universities when ranked according to average achieved grades upon entry) is very small at just 5.3% for the most recent cohort of data, compared to 14.6% for non-FSM eligible pupils. As with access to HE in general, the most recent percentage point progression gap between FSM eligible and non-FSM eligible pupils accessing top third universities is the highest on record (Department for Education, 2023b). A recent analysis of administrative data also reveals that students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to 'undermatch' (i.e. enrol in less selective courses than might be expected, given their grades) rather than 'overmatch' (enrol in more selective courses than might be expected, given their grades) (Campbell et al., 2022).

What drives socioeconomic disparities in HE participation?

Research suggests that disparities in access to HE by socioeconomic background can largely be attributed to the lower average school attainment of students from a poorer background, especially at age 16 (Crawford & Greaves, 2015; Croll & Attwood, 2013). Recent trends concerning socioeconomic disparities in access to HE have to a large extent run parallel to attainment trends. The Key Stage 4 attainment gap between disadvantaged (defined as those known to be FSM eligible in the past 5 years and/or recorded as being looked after) and non-disadvantaged pupils in 2022-2023 (the first

year of the return to pre-pandemic grading) was the widest recorded since 2011-2012 (Department for Education, 2023a).

Beyond attainment, a number of hypotheses have been put forward as to why, even amongst those with the grades to go to university, there is any relationship between socio-economic background and HE participation, especially at high status institutions. Lower SES students could be less likely to go because of lack of aspirations to go to university; lack of knowledge of HE options or the application process, or because of credit constraints (Hoskins & Barker, 2017; Jones, 2013). The following sections discuss the evidence on the effectiveness of programmes designed to reduce or eliminate these potential barriers to access.

Contextual admissions

If we cannot make fast enough progress on reducing the attainment gap amongst students from different socio-economic backgrounds, an alternative way of widening access to universities is to use 'contextual' admissions policies. At many universities, disadvantaged applicants who meet certain criteria may be flagged as 'contextual' and as such their application may be treated differently as a result (Boliver et al., 2021). Applicants may be flagged based on individual-level factors (such as FSM eligibility status), neighbourhood of residence, school-level indicators or participation in outreach programmes and once flagged applicants may benefit from lower A level (or equivalent) entry offers, prioritisation for interview or additional leniency on results day (Boliver et al., 2017).

The use of contextual admissions, and the use of reduced entry requirements in particular, has expanded in recent years. For example, both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge have recently begun making lower

offers to small numbers of disadvantaged applicants through their foundation year programmes for the first time (University of Cambridge, 2021; University of Oxford, 2022). However, across the sector it remains difficult to get exact numbers on how many applicants receive contextual offers in any given year.

There has also been considerable debate concerning the targeting of contextual admissions, with criticism of the use of neighbourhood level indicators (such as the 'POLAR' measure) as opposed to household level indicators (such as FSM eligibility) (Gorard et al., 2019; Harrison & McCaig, 2015). More recently, the DfE has started sharing individual FSM eligibility data with universities via UCAS (UCAS, 2021b), something which may help universities to target their contextual admissions approaches more effectively.

One criticism often levelled at contextual admissions policies is that they 'set students up to fail' by admitting them to courses for which they are inadequately prepared. However, the evidence does not bear this out. As outlined in a recent CEPEO blog, evidence from the US suggests that affirmative action bans have harmed students from under-represented backgrounds (Bleemer, 2022), and that the labour market return to going to a higher status institution trumps any potential negative effect from a lower student-university 'match' (Dillon and Smith, 2020; Light and Strayer, 2000). There is much less evidence on the implications of contextual admissions for student outcomes in the UK, but what little evidence there is does not suggest that students are disadvantaged as a result of receiving contextual offers (Boliver et al., 2017).

Related to this, it has been argued that the contextual offers made to disadvantaged students are not low enough considering the size-

able gap in attainment by socioeconomic background (Boliver et al., 2021), though there is of course an eventual limit as to how far entry requirements can be reduced before the extent of support that universities would need to provide to students to access the course becomes too significant – which is where contextual admissions might morph into foundation years.

Without a narrowing of attainment gaps, contextual admissions policies alone are therefore unlikely to eliminate socioeconomic HE participation gaps, and one analysis has revealed that, if attainment trends do not change, more selective universities would have to admit every disadvantaged applicant who applied irrespective of their examination performance in order to meet widening participation targets set by the Office for Students (Turhan & Stevens, 2020).

Financial support

The connection between the cost of university and socioeconomic disparities in HE participation is less clear. England has the highest average university tuition fees of all the OECD countries (OECD, 2021). However, England's high tuition fees do not appear to have had the effect of deterring poorer students from participating in HE, since increases in the size of tuition fees over time have not tended to coincide with a reduction in the number of young people from poorer backgrounds undertaking university study (Crawford et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2019). This may be due to England's income-contingent system of student loans, which offers young people the reassurance that they will not have to repay their loans unless they earn above a certain threshold after graduating (Murphy et al., 2019).

At the same time, however, there is some evidence to suggest that packages of financial support provided to students in England (e.g.

non-repayable maintenance grants) can incentivise HE participation (Dearden et al., 2014) and some evidence that financial support can also lead to better outcomes for students from poorer backgrounds once they are at university (Murphy & Wyness, 2016, 2023).

Providing financial support (though a combination of income-contingent loans and non-repayable bursaries) to support with living costs is likely to be especially useful for disadvantaged students in the current context where the cost-of-living is particularly high. However, a recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that considerable real terms reductions in the value of student maintenance loans have now become baked in to the system, given that actual recent rates of inflation have exceeded considerably the forecast rates of inflation on which maintenance loan increases are based (Ogden & Waltmann, 2023). Similarly, the parental income threshold for the maximum student loan has been frozen since 2008 (The Russell Group, 2024).

This erosion of the value of financial support for living costs for disadvantaged students risks deterring these students from participating in HE and could also reduce the likelihood that they are successful on their courses after enrolment. Whilst the recent government-commissioned 'Augur Review' of HE funding suggested reducing university tuition fees to a level of £7,500 per year (Independent Panel Report, 2019), in the current financial climate many students will be likely to benefit more from greater support in meeting cost-of-living challenges.

Outreach interventions

There is no dearth of aspirations to go to university amongst those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, with a greater gap be-

tween expectations and reality for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds than higher socio-economic backgrounds (Chowdry et al., 2011). There is, however, more evidence of a lack of knowledge or understanding of the options available amongst students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and some disadvantaged students may find themselves less equipped to navigate the university application process successfully (Jones, 2013).

A number of widening participation outreach interventions are delivered with the aim of reducing some of these 'softer' barriers, therefore potentially enabling more students from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress to HE. Many initiatives are delivered and funded by universities themselves, while others are delivered through the government-funded 'Uni Connect' programme or provided by third sector social mobility charities. Outreach interventions often take the form of the provision of mentoring, counselling and role models, the provision of information, advice and guidance or residential summer school programmes (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). Expenditure on outreach interventions by universities is considerable and England's HE providers have forecast an estimated expenditure of £1.03 billion on access initiatives (a figure which excludes spend on bursaries and scholarships) between 2020 and 2025 (Office for Students, 2019).

A number of literature reviews on the effectiveness of outreach interventions have been published, such as those by Gorard et al. (2006), Moore et al. (2013) and Robinson and Salvestrini (2020). These reviews have concluded that the evidence on the effectiveness of outreach programmes does tend to show signs of promise, but that the evaluation methodologies used are typically not able to elicit a causal effect of outreach interventions. Evidence on

the effectiveness of the government-funded Uni Connect outreach programme is mixed, with one evaluation finding that the programme had little to no effect on participants' HE knowledge or intentions (CFE, 2022), while another estimated that in 2020-21 the programme led to an additional 2,350 higher education entrants (Savours & Walkden, 2024).

More recently, experimental trials have been undertaken of both online and in-person summer school interventions (TASO, 2022, 2023), however interim findings have suggested that those participating in the programmes were already on an HE pathway prior to the interventions, meaning that there was unlikely to be any change in participant behaviour as a result of taking part. There may not be a large pool of young people who are both disinterested in HE and also willing to voluntarily take part in an HE outreach intervention. Outreach programmes which aim to support those who may already have an interest in HE to access the most selective universities and courses may be more likely to change participant behaviour when compared to programmes aiming to support with access to HE per se, which may have a tendency to simply 'preach to the converted' (Martin, 2024).

Summary and implications

There has been mixed success with regard to addressing socioeconomic inequalities in access to HE. Whilst the number of young people from poorer backgrounds progressing to HE has increased, the gap in participation between poorer and better off students is currently the highest on record despite considerable investment (financial and otherwise) in this area. Continuing socioeconomic disparities in access to HE risk reducing social mobility and entrenching intergenerational disadvantage.

Strategies such as widening participation

outreach programmes and contextual admissions policies have been implemented in an attempt to mitigate the consequences of the persistent socioeconomic attainment gap in both primary and secondary schooling. While we do not know what would have happened to HE participation gaps in the absence of these policies, they have not yet succeeded in narrowing socioeconomic participation gaps in HE substantially relative to where we were 10 or 20 years ago. We need more and better evidence on what works to widen access to HE, to ensure that everyone who wants to can benefit from a university education.

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