

## Joining the elite

How top universities can  
enhance social mobility

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The arguments and any errors that remain are the authors’ and the authors’ alone.

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# Glossary of key terms

## High-tariff university

A university which is either a member of the Russell Group or has entry tariffs higher than the lowest of the Russell Group institutions.<sup>1</sup> As the paper is addressing only English universities, this list comprises 29 institutions (see Technical Appendix).

Will be used interchangeably with ‘highly selective’.

When referring to research using different definitions, these will be provided.

## Disadvantaged students

Different measures of disadvantage are referred to in the paper, and defined throughout. If not stated otherwise, it refers to students living in areas with low higher education participation rates. These are defined by the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (HEFCE) POLAR3 measure.<sup>2</sup>

## Widening participation (WP)

A strategic priority for the UK government and the higher education (HE) sector to address the discrepancies in HE participation between different social and demographic groups.

1 As reported by the Complete University Guide, 2017.  
2 See: Higher Education Funding Council for England, ‘POLAR - Participation of Local Areas’, Briefing, (2017).

# Executive summary

It has long been the ambition of governments to improve access to higher education (HE). In 1999, Tony Blair declared an ambition for at least 50 per cent of young people to participate in HE, an aim which has almost been reached.<sup>3</sup> This increase in participation includes young people from the least advantaged backgrounds. Between 2006 and 2016 the HE participation rate for students from lower income backgrounds increased proportionally by almost 80 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

Still, large gaps between socioeconomic groups exist, and have in fact been growing. In 2016, students who were eligible for free school meals (FSM, a proxy measure for disadvantage) were less than half as likely to go to university compared to students who were not.<sup>5</sup> In 2014-15, 65 per cent of private school students entered one of the top third most selective universities, compared to 23 per cent of state school students.<sup>6</sup>

Gaps in participation have drawn the attention of politicians. As Prime Minister, David Cameron set out proposals to counter bias in the university admissions system.<sup>7</sup> In the first speech of her premiership, Theresa May highlighted the lower chance white working-class boys have of going to university.<sup>8</sup>

Overcoming these differences is not only a question of increasing HE participation for disadvantaged students, but also of increasing it at different types of institutions. Higher education institutions (HEIs) with the highest entry requirements have invested proportionally more in efforts to increase participation,<sup>9</sup> yet it is well-known that they struggle to achieve a wider intake.<sup>10</sup> This paper finds that very few high-tariff universities have made progress, and the majority consistently underperform compared to benchmarks set by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

The lack of progress is despite the establishment of a fair access regulator in 2004. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) monitors institutional efforts to improve the access and performance of disadvantaged students on an annual basis. Fears that higher tuition fees, introduced in 2012, would deter participation for certain groups led to a greater focus on access and, respectively, a rise in the level of spending on widening participation (WP) activities. Sector-wide, over a billion pounds were spent on widening participation in 2015-16, with more than £230 million devoted to increasing access. OFFA provides guidance on WP interventions, but does not assess the extent to which HEIs achieve value for money, and has to this date never used its powers to audit or fine institutions.<sup>11</sup> The lack of specific outcome targets and spending detail make any such assessment difficult. What is more, OFFA has no oversight of admissions systems, a key lever to improve access.

This paper ranks 29 high-tariff universities according to access outcomes over a five-year period. It assesses whether the institutions have increased proportional intakes of disadvantaged students, and how they have performed against benchmarks. Although the majority increased proportions of disadvantaged students, less than a third made any progress against benchmarks. The rankings also indicate universities’ spending on outreach per student, ranging from less than £200 to more than £1,000. Different spending levels are not correlated with performance. There may be a wide range of possible explanations for this, but it could indicate that HEIs are failing to achieve the best value for money.

3 ‘Blair Wants Student Boom’, *BBC News*, 8 March 1999; Department for Education, *Widening Participation in Higher Education, England, 2013/14 Age Cohort*, 2016.  
4 UCAS Analysis and Research, *End of Cycle Report 2016*, 2016.  
5 Ibid.  
6 Department for Education, *Widening Participation in Higher Education, England, 2014/15 age cohort*, 2017.  
7 David Cameron, ‘The Conservatives Have Become the Party of Equality’, *The Guardian*, 26 October 2015.  
8 Theresa May, ‘Statement from the New Prime Minister Theresa May’, Speech, (13 July 2016).  
9 Office for Fair Access, *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2015-16*, 2017.  
10 Sean Coughlan, ‘Oxford University to Have Most State School Students for Decades’, *BBC News*, 2 September 2016.  
11 Office for Fair Access, ‘Access Agreement Breaches’, Webpage, (2017).

This paper tries to discover what action has been taken at the institution that outperforms all others, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Findings point to the potential of contextualised admissions, where students’ backgrounds and circumstances are considered together with their applications. If applied as successfully at other institutions, assuming there are enough viable applicants, this may increase the number of disadvantaged entrants to high-tariff institutions by as much as 3,500 students every year. While some resist the idea based on fears that it will lower academic standards, evidence suggests otherwise.<sup>12</sup>

The lack of transparency on spending and admissions prevents effective learning between institutions. A regulator with the ability to monitor and assess value for money as well as admissions practices could support greater social mobility and allow more disadvantaged students to reach their full potential.

Based on analyses of data and literature, and interviews with nine HEIs and five other stakeholder organisations, *Reform* makes the following four recommendations.

- Recommendation 1:** To gain a more accurate impression of spending at different institutions, the incoming Office for Students (OfS) should make the reporting of outreach spending more consistent, and provide uniform, detailed guidelines for what should be included.

Spending on contextualised admissions should be reported in a separate access category.

If it proves too difficult for HEIs to adapt to more direct accountability for achieving value for money, regional centralisation of widening participation (WP) should be considered.

**Recommendation 2:** All universities should subscribe to a service tracking the outcomes of individual participants in outreach activities. With rigorous evaluation, this should inform performance assessment for attainment- and aspiration-raising work.

Targets for increasing attainment and general HE participation should be separate from universities’ own intake targets.

**Recommendation 3:** The OfS should manage a public database of different institutions’ headline approaches to contextualised admissions. This information should also be published in a standard format on institutional websites, and for use by third party information providers.

The OfS should have the powers to challenge institutions that fail to make progress to adopt more or other contextual measures. Ultimately, HEIs should run the risk of losing the right to charge maximum tuition fees if they refuse to adjust to OfS guidance.

**Recommendation 4:** The OfS should collect all evidence related to contextualised intakes and commission teams of academics to conduct analyses of anonymised datasets. Results should feed into advice on best practice.

12 Joanne Moore, Anna Mountford-Zimdars, and Jo Wiggans, *Contextualised Admissions: Examining the Evidence* (Supporting Professionalism in Admissions, 2013); Andrew Denholm, ‘Universities Scheme Backs Cutting Entry Requirements’, *The Herald*, 29 June 2017.

## Introduction

The state of social mobility in the UK is not encouraging. Against comparable countries, the UK has one of the strongest links between earnings and parental income,<sup>13</sup> and more than half of people aged 18 to 24 believe that where you end up in society is mainly determined by your background.<sup>14</sup>

Not only is this a sign of a failing meritocracy, it is also detrimental to the economy.<sup>15</sup> The Government has repeatedly set out its intentions to improve social mobility and increase opportunities for people from all backgrounds.<sup>16</sup> However, progress over the last two decades has been slow. Obstacles to social mobility appear right from the beginning of life; from the health of new-born babies to attainment throughout school, outcomes are systematically worse for lower socio-economic groups.<sup>17</sup> At current rates, the participation gap in higher education (HE) will take more than eighty years to close.<sup>18</sup>

Access to ‘elite’ universities has become a symbol of the differences in opportunity experienced by people with poorer or richer parents. Every year, their intake comes under scrutiny for the proportion of disadvantaged students. Their dominance in educating the most powerful in the country is also often highlighted – in 2016, around 90 per cent of senior civil servants attended a Sutton Trust Top 30 university.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, reports have previously pointed out that the overall increase in HE participation is masking inequalities in terms of the institutions attended.<sup>20</sup>

HE providers are aware that improvements to access are needed. Across the entire sector, more than a billion pounds were spent on widening participation (WP) activities in 2015-16, of which £232 million went to ‘access’.<sup>21</sup> Despite only making up around 20 per cent of the universities that submit access agreements to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), high-tariff institutions account for more than 40 per cent of higher education institutions’ (HEIs) WP spend.<sup>22</sup> High spending is no guarantee of genuine dedication, however. One sector expert interviewed for this paper claimed that some high-tariff institutions see WP spending as a ‘tax’, and have no particular concern over its effectiveness. Given the existence of such attitudes and the limited progress in this area, it is crucial that institutions understand the impact of spending, and whether investments are providing the best value for money. Although most WP spending is derived from fee income, the student loan system is heavily subsidised by the state,<sup>23</sup> and universities should be held accountable for their spending and progress like other public services.

This paper sets out to identify ways highly selective universities can increase access to full-time degrees for disadvantaged students. Its focus is deliberately narrow. Whilst there is much to be said about access work across the sector for part-time and mature students,<sup>24</sup> not to mention the experience of disadvantaged students as they go through a degree and enter the job market or further study, to achieve the benefits associated with any degree, one must first gain access. As highly selective HEIs have struggled most to

13 Julia B. Isaacs, ‘International Comparisons of Economic Mobility’, in *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America* (The Brookings Institution, 2016); OECD, ‘A Family Affair: Intergenerational Social Mobility across OECD Countries’, in *Economic Policy Reforms: Going for Growth 2010*, 2010.

14 Social Mobility Commission, *Social Mobility Barometer: Public Attitudes to Social Mobility in the UK*, 2017.

15 Richard V. Reeves, ‘The Economic Case for Social Mobility’, *Brookings Institution*, 16 August 2013.

16 Theresa May, ‘Britain, the Great Meritocracy’, Speech, (9 September 2016); Justine Greening, ‘Education at the Core of Social Mobility’, Speech, (19 January 2017); Department for Education, ‘Justine Greening Speaks at Social Mobility Employer Index Launch’, Speech, (21 June 2017).

17 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, *State of Child Health Report 2017*, 2017; Eva Lloyd and Sylvia Potter, *Early Childhood Education and Care and Poverty* (University of East London and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014); Department for Education, *Statistical Working Paper: Measuring Disadvantaged Pupils’ Attainment Gaps over Time (Updated)*, 2015.

18 Social Mobility Commission, *Time For Change: An Assessment of Government Policies on Social Mobility 1997-2017*, 2017.

19 Philip Kirby, *Leading People 2016: The Educational Background of the UK Professional Elite* (The Sutton Trust, 2016). The Sutton Top 30 list includes most Russell Group universities and other highly selective institutions.

20 Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, *Higher Education: The Fair Access Challenge*, 2013.

21 Office for Fair Access, *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2015-16*.

22 Office for Fair Access, ‘Annex Data Tables’, in *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2015-16*, 2017.

23 Claire Crawford, *Estimating the Public Cost of Student Loans* (The Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2014).

24 Stephen McDonald, ‘What Does the Decline in Part-Time Degrees Mean for Lifelong Learning?’, *Higher Education Funding Council for England*, 3 March 2017.

widen participation, and generally provide higher economic returns on degrees, they are the focus of this paper. Hopefully, lessons from these universities can feed into the learning and sharing of best practice between all institutions.

# 1

## The state of access

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## 1.1 Current university participation

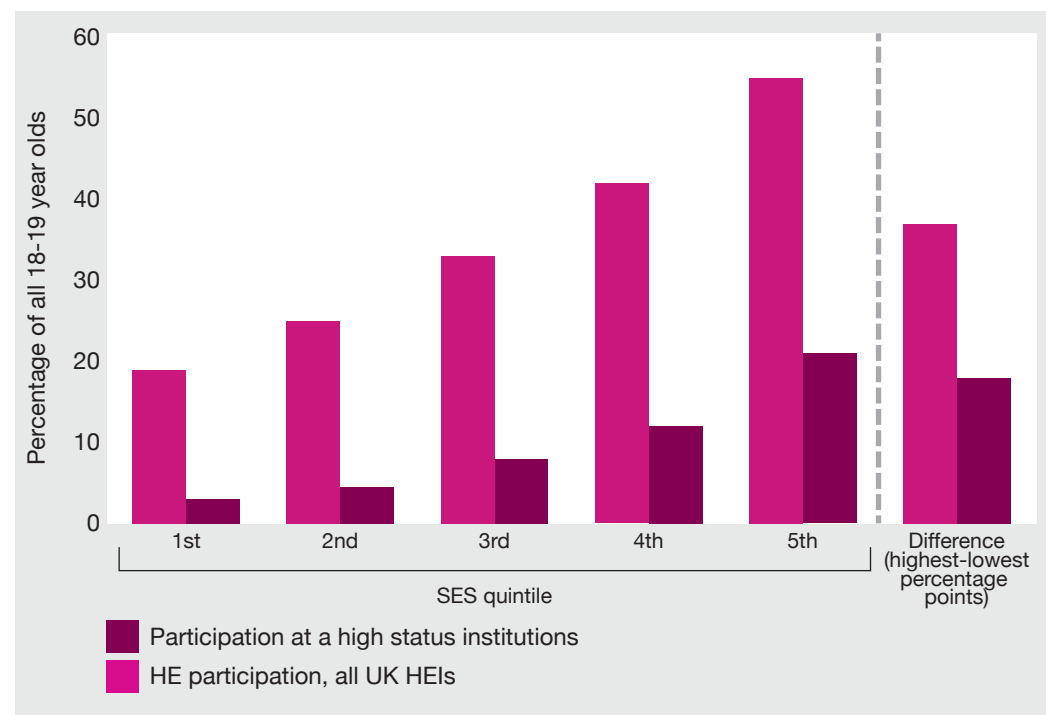
According to the latest figures, 38 per cent of state school students who were 19 in 2014-15, have entered HE.<sup>25</sup> This reflects a rise of seven percentage points since 2005-6. The likelihood of any young person to have participated in HE by the age of 30 was estimated at 48 per cent in 2014-15, compared to 42 per cent in 2006-7.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these overall increases in HE participation, significant differences exist between socioeconomic groups. In 2016, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) observed the largest gap ever recorded between entry rates for FSM and non-FSM students.<sup>27</sup> Although the HE entry rate for FSM students has increased proportionally by 78 per cent since 2006, the participation gap is currently at 16.7 percentage points.<sup>28</sup> This is up from 15.8 in 2015, and non-FSM students are still more than twice as likely to go to university.<sup>29</sup>

An even larger gap exists when it comes to the type of school students attended and entry to highly selective HEIs. In 2014-15, 65 per cent of independent school students entered a highly selective HEI by age 19 (defined as the top third of UCAS entry tariffs), compared to 23 per cent of state school students, a gap of 42 percentage points.<sup>30</sup> This gap grew from 37 percentage points in 2008-9.

The trend illustrated in **Figure 1** shows that socioeconomic background has a significant impact on the chances of attending university, and on the type of university attended.

**Figure 1: HE participation overall and at high status institutions, by socioeconomic status (SES) – indicated by percentage of state school pupils going to university at age 18/19**



Source: Claire Crawford et al., *Family Background and University Success*, 2016. High-status refers to Russell Group universities or universities with equivalent research standards. SES defined by the authors, using school administrative data at the age of 16.

<sup>25</sup> Department for Education, *Widening Participation in Higher Education, England, 2014/15 age cohort*.

<sup>26</sup> Department for Education, *Participation Rates In Higher Education: Academic Years 2006/2007 – 2014/2015 (Provisional)*, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> UCAS Analysis and Research, *End of Cycle Report 2016*.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

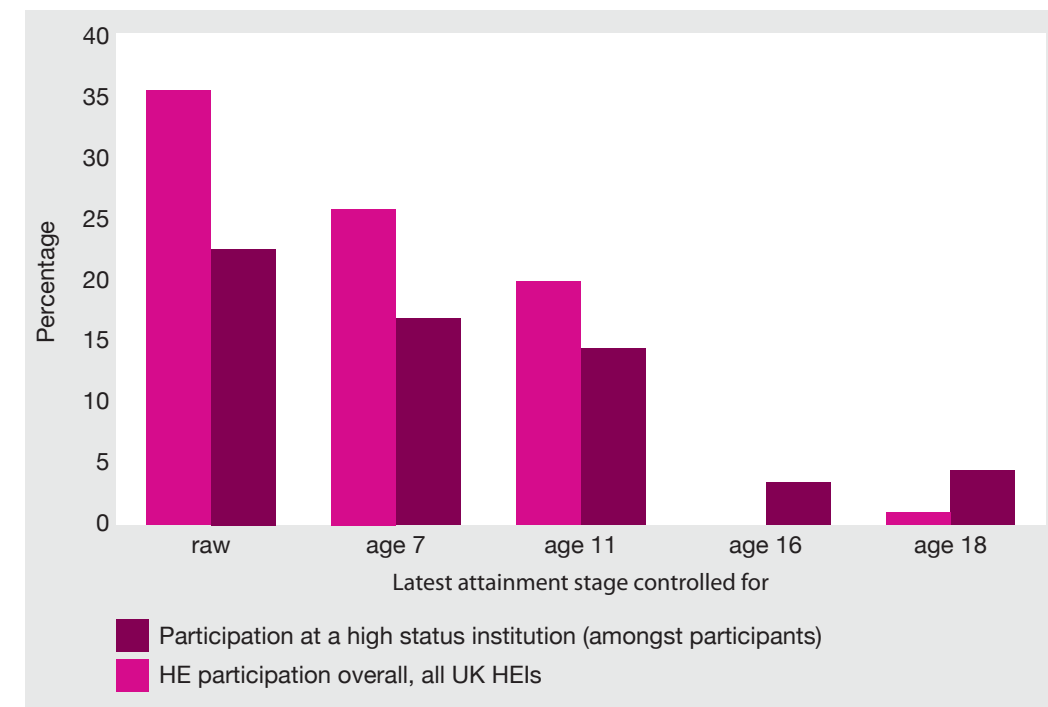
<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Department for Education, *Widening Participation in Higher Education, England, 2014/15 age cohort*.

Evidence suggests that the difference in HE participation is largely explained by prior attainment, meaning that the reason students from lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to attend university, and especially the most selective institutions, is that they obtain poorer educational results throughout school.<sup>31</sup> In 2015-16, only 39.1 per cent of FSM pupils achieved five or more grades between A\* and C at GCSE level, compared to 66.7 per cent of all other pupils.<sup>32</sup> At A-level, only 4.9 per cent of FSM students achieved three or more A grades in 2015-16, compared to 11 per cent of students who were not.<sup>33</sup>

Even when controlling for differences in attainment, students from the least affluent backgrounds are still at a disadvantage. The gap between participation at high-tariff universities for the 20 per cent most affluent state school students and the 20 per cent least affluent students is still almost five percentage points if they have the same attainment at age 18 (see Figure 2).<sup>34</sup> This indicates some progress, given that in 1993, young people with parents in the top income quintile were estimated to be 18 per cent more likely to attend university than those with parents in the bottom quintile, after controlling for attainment.<sup>35</sup>

**Figure 2: Difference in participation at age 18/19 between the 20 per cent richest and 20 per cent poorest state school students, both 'raw' and controlling for levels of attainment at different ages.**



Source: Claire Crawford et al., *Family Background and University Success*, 2016. High-status refers to Russell Group universities or universities with equivalent research standards.

<sup>31</sup> Haroon Chowdry et al., 'Widening Participation in Higher Education: Analysis Using Linked Administrative Data', *IFS Working Paper*, no. W10/04 (2010).

<sup>32</sup> Department for Education, *Statistical Working Paper: Measuring Disadvantaged Pupils' Attainment Gaps over Time (Updated)*.

<sup>33</sup> Department for Education, *A Level Attainment: Characteristics. Ad-Hoc Notice*, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Claire Crawford et al., 'Family Background and University Success' (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 5 December 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Jo Blanden and Stephen Machin, 'Educational Inequality and the Expansion of UK Higher Education', *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 51, no. 2 (2004).



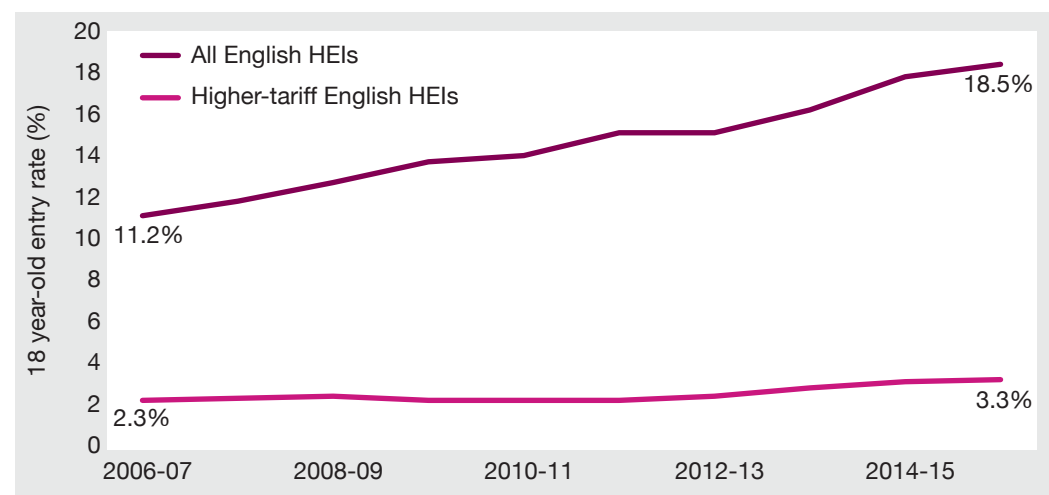
## 1.2 Why access to high tariff institutions needs to improve

Overall, graduates are more likely to be in employment and earn more over their lifetimes than non-graduates.<sup>36</sup> It is also increasingly understood that different degrees (by subject and institution) have different outcomes, including earnings.<sup>37</sup> For some courses at some universities, there is even a 'negative premium' on average, meaning that graduates from these courses are likely to have earnings lower than peers without degrees.<sup>38</sup> While there are courses that appear to provide good outcomes at all universities, at an institutional level, some universities tend to be more advantageous in terms of employment prospects and earnings.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, it has repeatedly been highlighted that the majority of the most powerful and lucrative positions in British society are occupied by graduates from the most selective institutions.<sup>40</sup> More than 15 years ago, a report by the Select Committee on Education and Employment highlighted the importance of a "more representative social mix in admissions to high status research-intensive universities, many of whose graduates go on to hold positions of power in business, industry, the professions and in politics."<sup>41</sup> In 2016, over a quarter of MPs and almost a third of CEOs attended either Oxford or Cambridge, and 89 per cent of senior civil servants attended one of the Sutton Trust's top 30 universities.<sup>42</sup>

These factors explain why increasing equity of access to certain highly selective institutions is an important part of improving social mobility. Furthermore, progress in access has almost exclusively been made by low- and mid-tariff institutions over the last decade, as Figure 3 shows. Only 3.6 per cent of 18-year-olds from low-participation areas entered high-tariff institutions in 2016-17, as opposed to 21.3 per cent of those from the highest participation areas – higher than the 19.5 per cent of the most disadvantaged students who entered HE at all.<sup>43</sup>

**Figure 3: Proportion of disadvantaged students entering HE**



Source: Office for Fair Access, *Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2015-16, 2017*. Higher tariff defined as the top third of UCAS entry rates. Disadvantaged defined as POLAR3 quintile 1 students.

<sup>36</sup> Jack Britton et al., *How English Domiciled Graduate Earnings Vary with Gender, Institution Attended, Subject and Socio-Economic Background* (The Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.; for most recent earnings data, see Department for Education, *Graduate Outcomes for All Subjects by University*, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Kirby, *Leading People 2016: The Educational Background of the UK Professional Elite*; Andy Beckett, 'PPE: The Oxford Degree That Runs Britain', *The Guardian*, 23 February 2017.

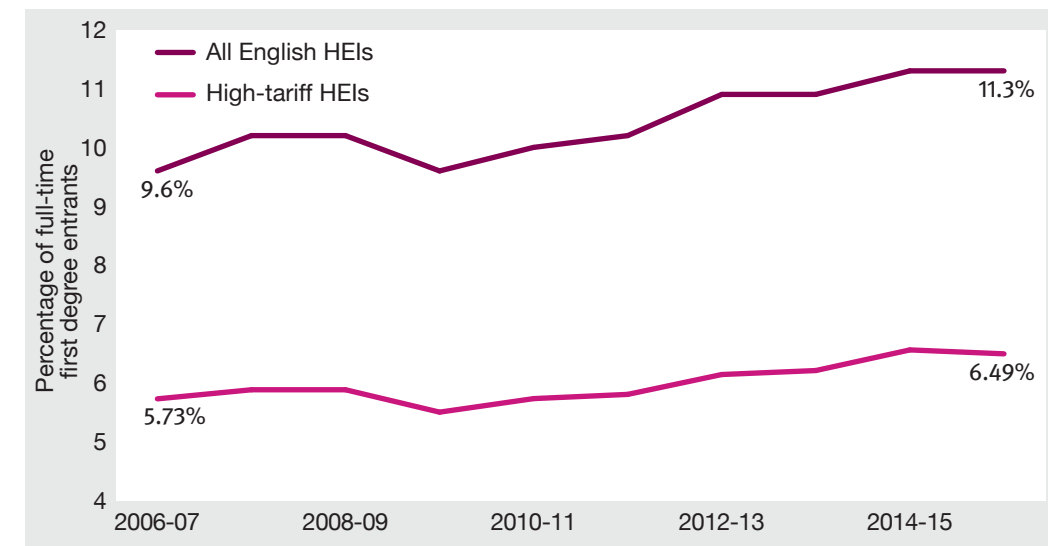
<sup>41</sup> House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment, *Higher Education: Access, Fourth Report of Session 2000-2001* (The Stationery Office, 2001), para. 74.

<sup>42</sup> Kirby, *Leading People 2016: The Educational Background of the UK Professional Elite*.

<sup>43</sup> UCAS Analysis and Research, *End of Cycle Report 2016*.

When it comes to the intake of disadvantaged students as a proportion of all HEI entrants, there has been less progress, as shown in Figure 4. This indicates that the increase in participation is largely driven by the creation of additional spaces at mid- and lower-tariff institutions. These universities have observed a decrease in applicants recently,<sup>44</sup> and therefore continue to have stronger incentives than high-tariff institutions to reach out to low-participation areas.

**Figure 4: Proportional intake of disadvantaged students at English universities**



Source: Reform calculations based on HESA Performance Indicators.

## 1.3 Efforts to increase access

While the participation rates remain low for the most competitive institutions, the majority do seem to be making concerted efforts to increase the participation of disadvantaged students. These include increased spending on outreach programmes, but also changes to admissions processes at some institutions.

### 1.3.1 Outreach

Since the implementation of the 2004 Higher Education Act, English HE providers have been mandated to submit plans for approval by OFFA, outlining how they intend to increase access for disadvantaged and under-represented groups.<sup>45</sup> The plans must be approved by OFFA for HEIs to be able to charge fees beyond the 'basic amount', currently at £6,165 per year.<sup>46</sup> Since 2012 these plans have been known as 'access agreements', and have increased in importance with the introduction of higher fee levels, of up to £9,250 from 2017-18.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to the spending monitored by OFFA, a main source of funding is allocated centrally by the Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE).<sup>48</sup> The HEFCE funding targeted at disadvantaged students peaked at £400 million in 2016-17, but is set to reduce by up to half by 2019-20.<sup>49</sup> HEIs also have access to some external and charitable funds.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> UCAS Analysis and Research, *June Deadline Analysis: Providers*, 2017.

<sup>45</sup> HM Government, 'Higher Education Act 2004' (Chapter 8).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 'Guidance on Tuition Fee Regulations', Technical article, (2015).

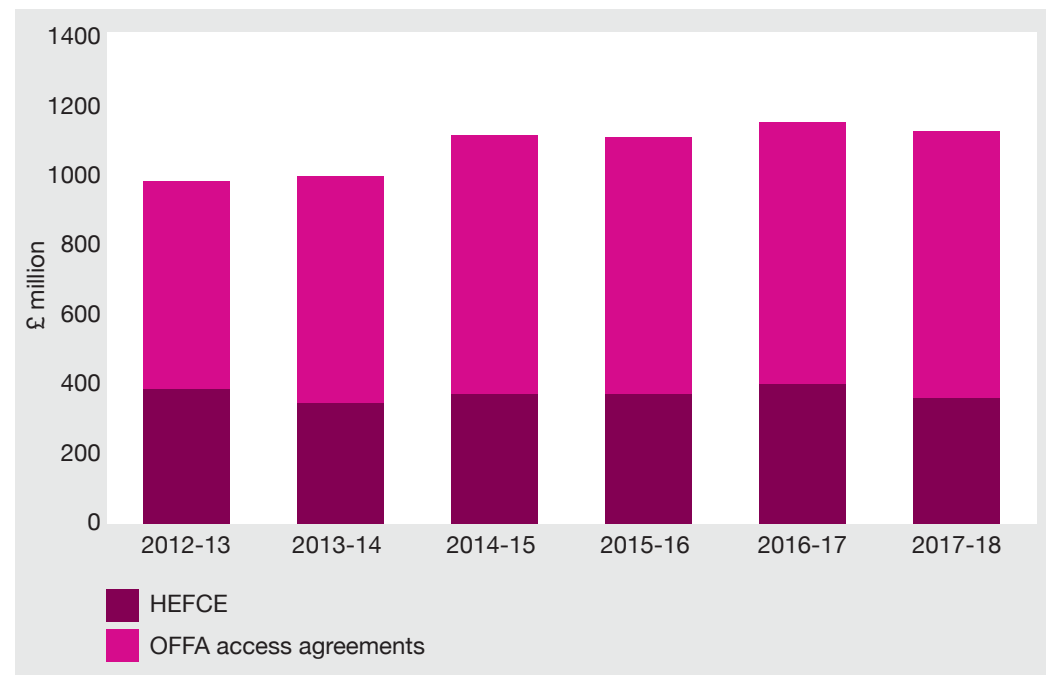
<sup>47</sup> Office for Fair Access, 'Fees and Student Finance: Minimums, Maximums and Thresholds', Guidance, (2017).

<sup>48</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England, 'How We Fund Student Access and Success', Policy guide, (2015); Higher Education Funding Council for England, 'Annual Funding Allocations', 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Recurrent Grants for 2017-18, 2017*; Paul Bolton, *Higher Education Funding in England*, 7393 (House of Commons Library, 2017).

<sup>50</sup> Office for Fair Access, *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2015-16*.



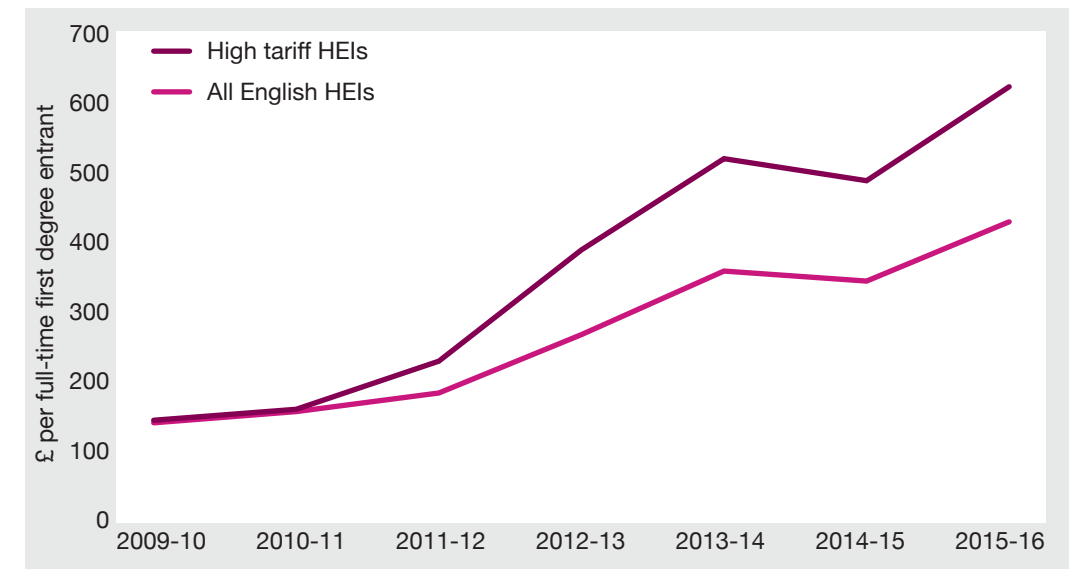
**Figure 5: Main sources of WP funding (real terms)**

Sources: Higher Education Funding Council for England, 'Archive of Annual Funding Allocations', 2017; Office for Fair Access, *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2015-16, 2017*. Funding for 2016-17 and 2017-18 are based on projections. Underlying prices deflated to 2016-17 figures using the ONS GDP deflator.

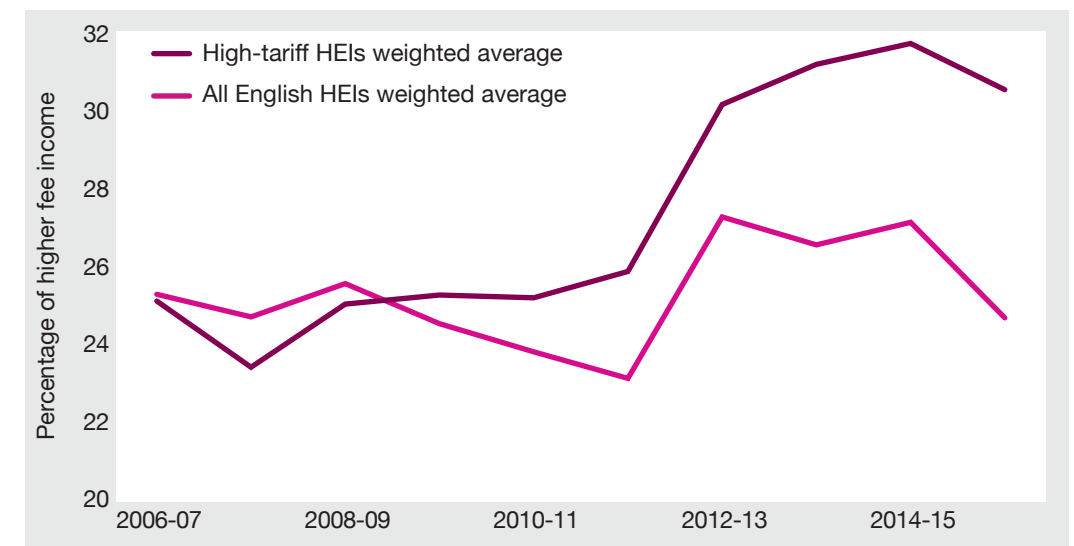
In access agreements, universities report what proportion of the income generated through higher fees will be dedicated to WP, split into the categories 'access', 'student success', 'progression', 'hardship' and 'financial support'.<sup>51</sup> The resources allocated to WP have been rising across the HE sector, growing from 1.9 per cent of university expenditure in 2010-11 to 2.9 per cent in 2014-15.<sup>52</sup> In 2015-16, this meant total access agreement spending of £725 million.<sup>53</sup> The increase is especially evident at high-tariff institutions, as shown in Figure 6 and Figure 7.

In total, including HEFCE allocations and external funds, £232 million was spent on 'access' in 2015-16.<sup>54</sup> Of this, £184.3 million came from access agreements.<sup>55</sup> Spending reported in access agreements is applied as the measure of spending throughout this paper, as it is the most consistently reported at an institutional level and the most comparable over the past five years.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup> These categories have been in place since 2015-16, spending was previously reported under slightly different headings.  
<sup>52</sup> Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Income and Expenditure by Location of HE Institution 2012/13 to 2010/11 (Table C)*, 2014; Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Income and Expenditure by Location of HE Provider (Table C)*, 2017; Office for Fair Access, 'Annex B Data Tables', in *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2014-15*, 2016; Office for Fair Access, 'Annex A: Summary Data for Sector Income and Expenditure', in *Access Agreement and Widening Participation Strategic Assessment Monitoring: Outcomes for 2009-10*, 2011.  
<sup>53</sup> Office for Fair Access, *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2015-16*, 2017.  
<sup>54</sup> Office for Fair Access, *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2015-16*.  
<sup>55</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>56</sup> References to spending on 'outreach' are equivalent to spending on the 'access' category in access agreements, as there was a change of category names in 2015-16.

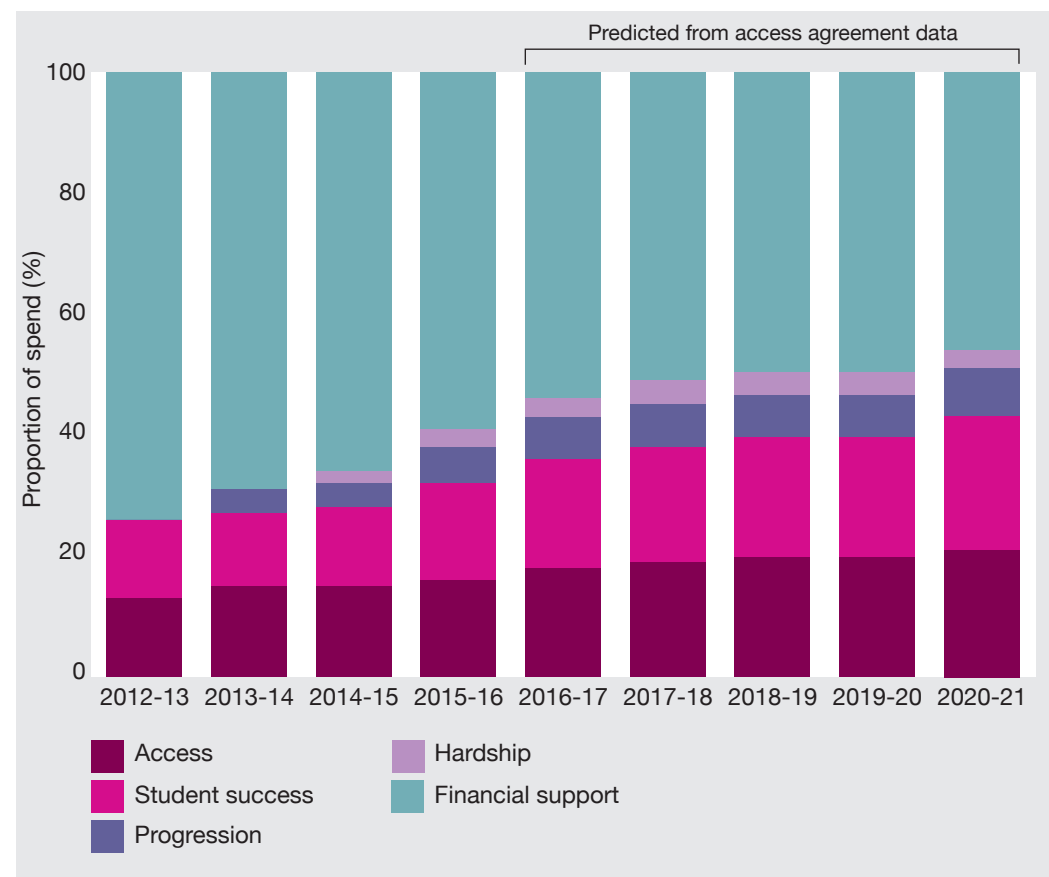
**Figure 6: Spending on the 'access' category of access agreements by English universities (real terms)**

Source: Office for Fair Access, *Monitoring of Outcomes*, 2016. Underlying prices deflated to 2016-17 figures using the ONS GDP deflator.

**Figure 7: Access agreement spending by English universities**

Source: Office for Fair Access, *Monitoring of Outcomes*, 2016

Accompanying greater spending has been a growing emphasis on 'lifecycle approaches'. These broaden the focus from attracting and recruiting WP students, to engaging young people from an early age, working to raise attainment, and continuing to provide additional support once students have been accepted, are studying, and enter the job market or further study. This change is illustrated by institutions' increasing spend on access, success and progression programmes, and plans to reduce financial support, as seen in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Institutional access agreement spend, 2012-13 to 2020-21**

Source: Office for Fair Access, *Monitoring of Outcomes*, 2017

The increasing emphasis on efforts other than financial support are largely based on the uncertainty around the effectiveness of bursaries,<sup>57</sup> and the realisation that attainment needs to be raised to increase the pool of applicants. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that not only is prior attainment key to increasing access, but disadvantaged students also face more obstacles in both degree performance and progression after graduation.<sup>58</sup> Interviewees argued that evidence of impact is becoming a greater factor in deciding on interventions, especially at the most selective universities, which spend more and are under greater pressure to increase their intake of disadvantaged students. A recent report, however, suggested that there is institutional resistance to making thorough evaluations a priority, as well as to using means like randomised control trials.<sup>59</sup>

### 1.3.2 Contextualised admissions

A Contextualised admissions system is another way HEIs can attempt to increase the participation of disadvantaged students. The term covers a variety of ways in which applicants' circumstances are considered during the admissions process.<sup>60</sup> In one version, it simply includes a number of 'flags' on an application, each representing a different indicator of disadvantage, for admissions tutors to take into consideration when making offers. Another way of contextualising admissions is more systematic, and uses applicant data to calculate individualised offers, reflecting the comparative difficulty for the

<sup>57</sup> Richard Murphy and Gill Wyness, *Testing Means-Tested Aid* (Centre for Economic Performance, 2016); Nursaw Associates, *What Do We Know about the Impact of Financial Support on Access and Student Success?* (Office for Fair Access, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> The Bridge Group, *Inspiring Policy: Graduate Outcomes and Social Mobility*, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Claire Crawford, Siobhan Dytham, and Robin Naylor, *Improving the Evaluation of Outreach. Interview Report* (Office for Fair Access, 2017).

<sup>60</sup> Supporting Professionalism in Admissions and HEDIIP, *SPA's Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*, 2015.

applicant in reaching a certain level of attainment. In a 2015 survey of 68 UK universities, 84 per cent said they were using some form of contextualised admissions. This is up from 37 per cent in 2012, but most universities appear to use contextual information in a broad sense. The most commonly used types of contextual information were 'in care/care-leaver status', 'declaration of exceptional circumstances' or 'involvement in WP activity'.<sup>61</sup> These were the only types of information used by more than 50 per cent of the survey respondents, and cover fewer students than if backgrounds were considered more broadly.

Contextualising admissions is more common in Scotland, with several high-tariff institutions having reduced entry requirements by as much as seven grades for some courses.<sup>62</sup> These HEIs have provided targeted academic support for students admitted under these schemes and report no negative impact on academic standards.<sup>63</sup> The University of Glasgow recently reported that completion and continuation for all students admitted with lower entry requirements are above 90 per cent, similar to the overall student cohort.<sup>64</sup> The organisation Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) argues that generally, the evidence building up around the performance of students admitted under contextualised schemes suggests that they are on a par with other students.<sup>65</sup>

## 1.4 Barriers

The increased spending and the focus on evidence-based activities raises questions as to why the intake of disadvantaged students at high-tariff universities is not increasing at a faster rate. During interviews for this paper, it became clear that the lower attainment of potential WP applicants is perceived as the main barrier, although there is still a gap in participation for the disadvantaged students who have the necessary grades (see Figure 2). Universities are increasingly focusing on raising attainment at a younger age, but such efforts are challenging; needing smooth cooperation with schools, time to refine interventions, and take years to show in WP outcomes, if at all. Interviewees reflected a conflict between allocating resources to work with younger students, and ambitions to fulfil short-term intake targets.

Another barrier may be in attitudes among young people in low-participation areas. Research covering the decade from 1996 to 2006 shows that disadvantaged students were less likely to apply to highly competitive universities, even if they had the required grades.<sup>66</sup> Some of these attitudes appear to remain, perhaps exacerbated by the influence of peers, parents and teachers. For example, evidence suggests that working-class parents are likely to prioritise university characteristics other than league table rankings, such as tuition fees, bursary schemes, and geographic proximity.<sup>67</sup> In addition, almost half of state school teachers say that they never or rarely encourage their best pupils to apply to Oxford or Cambridge.<sup>68</sup>

Admissions processes may have adverse consequences too. Research has suggested that applicants often find the entry criteria confusing, and insecurity can mean that they decide not to apply at all.<sup>69</sup> Several studies have suggested that implicit biases are also at

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Vikki Boliver, Stephen Gorard, and Nadia Siddiqui, 'How Can We Widen Participation in Higher Education? The Promise of Contextualised Admissions', in *The University as a Critical Institution?* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2017); Commission on Widening Access, *A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access* (The Scottish Government, 2016).

<sup>63</sup> Commission on Widening Access, *A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access*.

<sup>64</sup> Denholm, 'Universities Scheme Backs Cutting Entry Requirements'.

<sup>65</sup> Moore, Mountford-Zimdars, and Wiggins, *Contextualised Admissions: Examining the Evidence*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Vikki Boliver, 'How Fair Is Access to More Prestigious UK Universities?', *The British Journal of Sociology* 64, no. 2 (June 2013).

<sup>67</sup> Gavan Conlon and Maïke Halterbeck, *The Determinants of University Selection* (London Economics, 2017).

<sup>68</sup> The Sutton Trust, 'Over Four in Ten State School Teachers Rarely or Never Advise Bright Pupils to Apply to Oxbridge', Press release, (13 October 2016).

<sup>69</sup> UCAS Analysis and Research, *Through the Lens of Students: How Perceptions of Higher Education Influence Applicants' Choices*, 2016.

play in HE, working against the admission of students based on certain characteristics, including ethnicity and gender.<sup>70</sup> SPA has identified several stages of the application process where implicit biases could occur, including the wording of application forms, assumptions about ability based on background characteristics or, in the case of an interview, appearance, accent or confidence.<sup>71</sup>

In terms of accelerating the adoption of contextualised admissions, institutions cite the cost of gathering and processing data as a barrier,<sup>72</sup> perhaps exacerbated by the fact that although these costs can be included in access agreements, they do not have a natural fit in any current reporting category.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, higher entry tariffs count in institutions' favour in league tables, and negative perceptions of contextualised admissions persist, both in public debate and among students.<sup>74</sup> Admissions policies are outside OFFA's remit,<sup>75</sup> and there are no announced plans for this to change with the incoming Office for Students (OfS), which will take over OFFA's functions from early 2018.<sup>76</sup> This means that no official body can directly exert pressure on universities to find ways of overcoming these challenges.

Despite these obstacles, highly selective institutions have a responsibility to do better. It is therefore essential to find out whether any are making significant progress, and if so, what lessons can be drawn from good practice.

<sup>70</sup> Equality Challenge Unit, *Unconscious Bias and Higher Education*, 2014.  
<sup>71</sup> Supporting Professionalism in Admissions, *Potential Areas for Unconscious/Implicit Bias in Admissions*, 2016.  
<sup>72</sup> Supporting Professionalism in Admissions and HEDIIP, *SPA's Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*.  
<sup>73</sup> Office for Fair Access, "'OFFA-Countable' Access Agreement Expenditure", Web Page, (2017).  
<sup>74</sup> See for example: Rachael Pells, 'Universities Are Wrong to Lower Entry Requirements for Disadvantaged Students, Say Undergraduates', *The Independent*, 29 May 2017; Julia Shervington, 'Dumbing down University Access to the Point That It Is Meaningless Does Not Help Poor Kids', *The Telegraph*, 18 February 2017.  
<sup>75</sup> Office for Fair Access, 'Frequently Asked Questions (Journalists)', Webpage, (2017).  
<sup>76</sup> Jo Johnson, 'Delivering Value for Money for Students and Taxpayers', Speech, (20 July 2017).

# 2 Progress

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Despite significant barriers and slow improvement, the WP efforts of universities have not all been in vain. Some of the most selective universities have made progress, and to spread success more widely it is paramount to identify which policies have enabled them to do so. At the same time, it should be considered carefully whether resources are being spent efficiently. Failing to do so would prevent the participation of more disadvantaged students, and waste millions of pounds.

2.1 Access rankings

As demonstrated in Chapter 1, high-tariff universities have only marginally increased the proportion of disadvantaged students. However, comparing their progress to all other English universities on this measure would be unfair. Some universities find it more difficult to recruit disadvantaged students because they require higher prior attainment, have a specific subject mix, or are in an area where there are fewer disadvantaged students. The measure of disadvantage currently used by HEFCE, based on HE participation rates in the area of the student’s home (POLAR3 areas), has also been criticised, especially by urban universities who recruit many students from neighbourhoods where the most and least advantaged often live side by side.<sup>77</sup> UCAS has created an alternative ‘multiple equality measure’ (MEM) to take into account individual-level features, including family income.<sup>78</sup> Institutional-level data on this measure are not released, but almost 64 per cent of young people in the lowest MEM quintile are from POLAR3 quintile 1 areas.<sup>79</sup> More than 96 per cent of POLAR3 quintile 1 students are in one of the two lowest MEM quintiles.<sup>80</sup> While imperfect, this suggests that measures of low-participation neighbourhoods capture the majority of disadvantaged students.

In Figure 9, high-tariff HEIs are ranked based on their recent track record in increasing access for students from these areas. Rankings are based on increases in institutions’ proportional intake, but performance against a benchmark set by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is also included. The benchmark is an estimate of the proportion of disadvantaged students that a given HEI can be expected to recruit, given its selectiveness and subject mix.<sup>81</sup> The first column shows the average annual increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students from 2011-12 to 2015-16. The second is the average distance from the benchmark in the same five-year period. The last measure of performance is the progress against the institution’s benchmark.<sup>82</sup> Finally, average outreach expenditure per student, as reported to OFFA, is included.

77 For a detailed criticism of the use of low participation neighbourhoods, see: Colin McCaig and Neil Harrison, ‘An Ecological Fallacy in Higher Education Policy: The Use, Overuse and Misuse of “Low Participation Neighbourhoods”’, *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 39, no. 6 (2015).  
78 UCAS, ‘Equality and Entry Rates Data Explorer’, 2016.  
79 Ibid.  
80 Ibid.  
81 The methodology used to construct the benchmarks is on the HESA website: Higher Education Statistics Agency, ‘Benchmarks (Applicable to Tables T1 to T3, T7 and E1)’, Webpage, (2017)  
82 This is calculated by taking the distance from the benchmark in 2011-12 and subtracting it from the distance in 2015-16. A positive distance indicates that the university is performing better compared to its benchmark in 2015-16 than it did in 2011-12.



\*Figures for Queen Mary University of London are only available from 2012 onwards, hence figures are based on the period 2012-13 to 2015-16.  
  
Sources: *Reform* calculations based on HESA performance indicators and OFFA monitoring outcomes. Expenditure refers to spending on the ‘access’ category in access agreements, or what was previously reported under ‘outreach.’ Underlying prices deflated to 2016-17 figures using the ONS GDP deflator.



From 2011-12 to 2015-16 the university that made most progress, in terms of accepting a greater proportion of disadvantaged students, was LSE, followed by the University of York and the University of East Anglia, while St George's, University of London is at the bottom of the table. Of the 29 universities, 25 made some progress in terms of proportional intakes.

Some universities accepted a relatively higher proportion in 2011 already, leaving them with less space for improvement. For example, Lancaster University may not have increased its proportion of disadvantaged students by much, but over the four years it has consistently beaten its benchmark, as shown in the second column. This has been achieved despite Lancaster only spending £319 per student, far below the group median of £437 and the group mean of £476. Only five others have on average been above their benchmarks, three of which are in the lowest quartile of spending.

The progress universities have made against benchmarks is important too. In this respect, LSE stands out as it improved by 4.5 percentage points from 2011-12 to 2015-16. This is four times more than the University of Bristol, the second-best on this measure. Less than a third of the universities made positive progress against benchmarks, and only two of those that did are in the upper quartile of spending.

Outreach spending varies widely across institutions and the level of expenditure is not correlated to performance. The concentration of universities with high levels of spending at the bottom of the table is particularly worrying. This apparent absence of effective and efficient uses of resources is discussed further below.

2.2 Identifying what works

For the group of selective universities to learn from each other, they must know what practices are being applied by those at the top of the table. While there is an increasing focus on school-age pupils, these initiatives cannot yet be evaluated in terms of university access. Effects of this work could begin to show in pupil outcomes, but these will be difficult to trace to specific interventions, and they may never be reflected in universities' own intake, as participants could easily apply elsewhere (see Section 3.2).

The efforts that can be evaluated to some extent are HEIs' outreach spending, and their admissions systems.

2.2.1 Does spending improve outcomes?

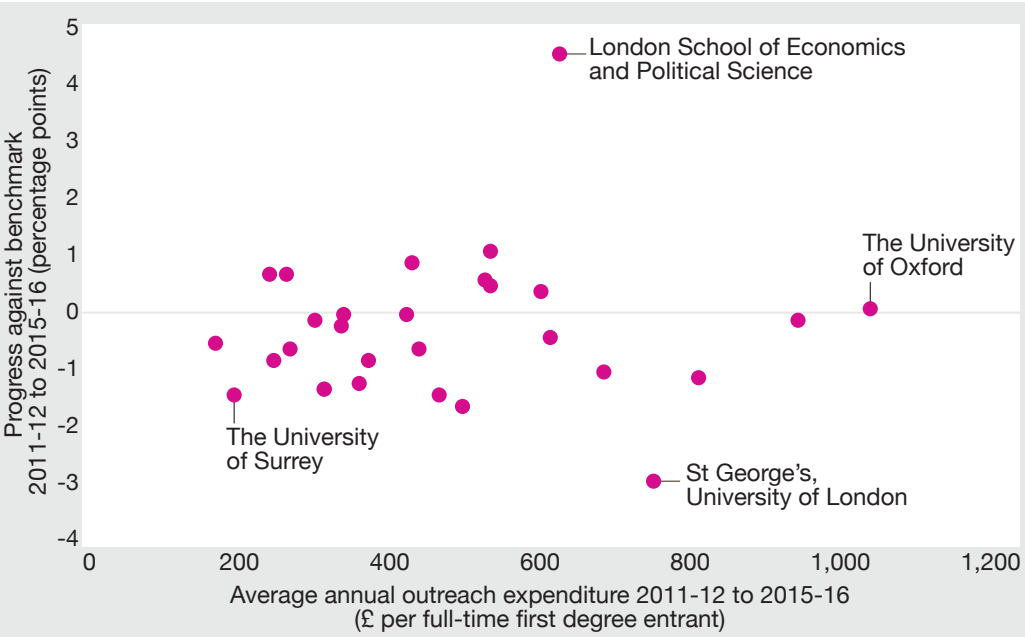
As noted in Chapter 1, there has been a shift in the focus of WP activities since 2012. The share spent on bursaries and financial support has decreased while spending on access, student success and progression has increased. In 2015-16, English universities spent £119.5 million of higher fee income on access activities, making up 16 per cent of access agreement expenditure.<sup>83</sup> It includes outreach work with all age groups, 'strategic relationships with schools', promotional activities directed at WP groups and the costs of gathering and analysing contextual data for admissions.<sup>84</sup>

This expenditure has been rising since the introduction of higher fees in 2012, and more selective universities have put relatively more resources into expanding access (see Section 1.3.1). Still, they have not seen any significant increases in the proportion of WP students as a result. In fact, in 2015, the 29 most selective universities would collectively have had to take on 3,470 more disadvantaged students if they were to reach their HESA benchmark.<sup>85</sup> Also of concern within the high-tariff group of HEIs is the absence of correlation between spending on outreach activities and progress against benchmarks.

83 Office for Fair Access, *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2015-16*.  
84 Office for Fair Access, "OFFA-Countable" Access Agreement Expenditure'.  
85 Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Table T1a - Participation of under-Represented Groups in Higher Education: UK Domiciled Young Full-Time First Degree Entrants 2015/16', in *Widening Participation Summary: UK Performance Indicators 2015/16*, 2017.

As universities are struggling to improve with current resources, achieving value for money may become even more important as WP funding from HEFCE is cut.<sup>86</sup>

Figure 10 High-tariff universities' progress over five years against their benchmarks and universities' spending on outreach activities (real terms)



Sources: *Reform* calculations based on HESA performance indicators and Office for Fair Access, *Freedom of Information Disclosure*, 2017, C2017/578. Included in annual outreach expenditure is spending on the 'access' category in access agreements, or what was previously reported under 'outreach.' Underlying prices deflated to 2016-17 figures using the ONS GDP deflator

Even more worrying than the absence of a correlation between spending on outreach and progress against institutional benchmarks, is a lack of knowledge of where resources are directed. Currently, HEIs report spending on access in the categories 'outreach work with schools and young people', 'outreach work with communities and adults', 'outreach work with disabled students' and 'strategic partnerships with schools.'<sup>87</sup> Most resources are spent on outreach work with schools and young people, but this category does not reveal the age groups worked with or any details about specific interventions. This prevents a thorough assessment of whether universities are achieving the intended outcomes, and how many years it will take before efforts should be reflected in their own intake.

A simple look at the lack of correlation between spending and intake of disadvantaged students has other limitations: some universities may have to travel further to reach WP students and some may be encouraged to spend more because they have bad WP performance historically. Still, the massive differences in spend and the apparent absence of a link to performance suggest that resources are not always providing the best value for money. It also suggests that there is a need for closer monitoring of which age groups resources are directed at, and a clarification of what the desired outcomes are. A recent report commissioned by OFFA confirms that WP professionals are interested in clearer definitions of successful outcomes and opportunities to compare performance with other institutions.<sup>88</sup>

The inclusion of more granular detail on age groups and activities will add some administrative burden, but it is the only way to allow for better evaluations of performance. If an institution is spending vast amounts on outreach with disadvantaged A-level

86 Bolton, *Higher Education Funding in England*.  
87 Office for Fair Access, *Freedom of Information Disclosure*, 2017, C2017/578.  
88 Crawford, Dytham, and Naylor, *Improving the Evaluation of Outreach. Interview Report*.

students and failing to increase intakes, allocation of resources needs rethinking. However, if the majority of resources are going towards pupils in primary or secondary school, with the aim of supporting social mobility in more general terms, the measure of success should be different, as should the evaluation of value for money.

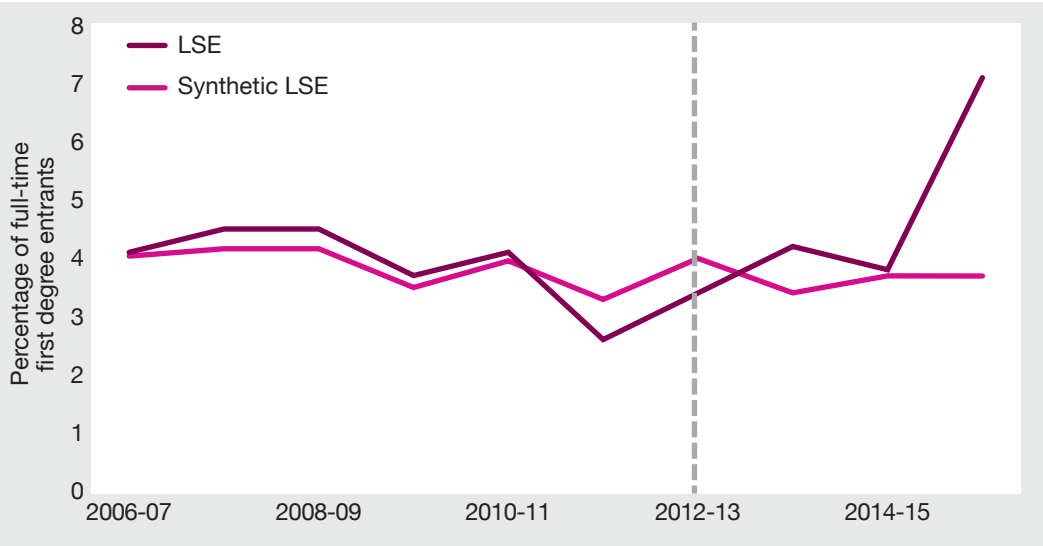
2.2.2 The effects of contextualised admissions

The one access tool universities have full control over is their admissions policy. During interviews for this paper, it was repeatedly highlighted as a necessary lever, with one WP professional stating that “no university that claims to be serious about widening participation can ignore contextualised admissions.”

Many universities among the group of 29 have introduced some form of contextualised admissions since 2006 – many in 2012 (see Figure A6 in the Technical Appendix). However, the existence of a group of universities that do not contextualise admissions at all allows for an estimation of the effect of contextualisation, using HESA data and a synthetic control method.<sup>89</sup>

Figure 11 summarises the findings from this analysis.<sup>90</sup> It compares a university that has introduced contextualised admissions, LSE, to a constructed weighted average of universities that resemble LSE in terms of observable characteristics, but have not introduced contextualised admissions.<sup>91</sup> The synthetic control group should, and does, track LSE closely in terms of the proportion of disadvantaged students prior to 2012 – the year when LSE introduced contextualised admissions. After 2012, the trend in the control group is an estimate of what would have happened at LSE if contextualised admissions were not introduced. The gap between the lines representing LSE and the synthetic control group is an estimate of the causal effect of contextualised admissions. According to LSE, this was the only significant change to their practices in this period, although it was accompanied by continuous evaluations and improved targeting of WP activities.

Figure 11: Disadvantaged student intake at LSE and at synthetic control group



Sources: Reform calculations based on HESA performance indicators and OFFA access agreements. See Technical Appendix for more detail.

89 As applied in: Alberto Abadie, Alexis Diamond, and Jens Hainmueller, ‘Synthetic Control Methods for Comparative Case Studies: Estimating the Effect of California’s Tobacco Control Program’, *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 105, no. 490 (2010).  
90 The methodology, data and detailed findings are summarised in the Technical Appendix.  
91 This is based on information in access agreements. Universities that only apply contextualised admissions in the case of reported extenuating circumstances have not been included in the contextual admissions group.

This analysis implies that LSE’s contextualised admissions scheme is successful, resulting in an average increase in the proportion of WP students of 0.93 percentage points per year from 2011-12 to 2015-16.<sup>92</sup> It should be noted that the biggest increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students occurred in 2015-16. In that year, the estimated effect of the policy was an increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students of 3.41 percentage points.

If the 2015-16 intake is excluded, the results become statistically insignificant. However, if the other 29 high-tariff institutions could emulate the average effect of the contextualised admissions process at LSE, they would see an estimated 918 more WP students enrol each year. This is still below the 3,470 students needed to reach the benchmark, but if the 3.41 percentage point increase achieved by LSE in its best year is sustainable across high-tariff HEIs, this would mean an additional 3,552 students enrolling every year. The effect would depend on the availability of suitable WP applicants, as universities could be competing for the same disadvantaged students.<sup>93</sup> This leaves an important role for university outreach teams.

It was possible to create credible synthetic controls for nine universities that have implemented some form of contextualised admissions, including LSE. The estimated average effect is an annual increase of 0.56 percentage points, which could ensure the acceptance of an additional 552 disadvantaged students at high-tariff institutions every year.<sup>94</sup>

Given the comparatively better results achieved at LSE, other HEIs should consider what lessons to draw. Interestingly, the method of contextualisation used by LSE does not include the most controversial feature of contextualised admissions: giving lower offers to disadvantaged students. Instead, the admissions system is fully centralised, staff are trained in implicit bias, all viable applicants who fulfil one or more WP criteria automatically progress to the second stage of selection, and they cannot be so-called ‘competitive rejects’, meaning that they cannot be rejected simply because there are too many applicants, without the further review by and agreement of the Undergraduate Admissions Manager.<sup>95</sup>

Before concluding that LSE’s contextualised admissions process should be copied across the sector, some limitations should be considered. One factor that makes LSE’s results more impressive is that they have a comparatively small student body that has grown less than average. The number of young full-time entrants to LSE increased by 12.9 per cent from 2011-12 to 2015-16, compared to an average of 15.4 per cent across the other high-tariff institutions.<sup>96</sup> Some institutions grew their intake by almost 50 per cent.<sup>97</sup> Given LSE’s low overall numbers and growth, the greater intake of disadvantaged students is reflected more significantly in their proportional numbers.

92 Equality reports published by UCAS suggest that LSE has maintained the significant effect into 2016-17, see: UCAS, *Sex, Area Background and Ethnic Group. L72 London School of Economics and Political Sci (UOL)*, 2017.  
93 3,552 is therefore an upper bound to the additional POLAR3 quintile 1 students who could gain access through this method of contextualisation.  
94 This figure is calculated by taking the average causal effect of contextualised admissions and multiplying it by the number of first time degree entrants at high tariff universities in the last year of the sample. The results are likely to be statistically insignificant, but this is not possible to verify given the small sample size.  
95 For more detail, see: LSE Governance, *2017/8 Undergraduate Admissions Policy*, 2017.  
96 Higher Education Statistics Agency, ‘Table T1a - Participation of under-Represented Groups in Higher Education: Young Full-Time First Degree Entrants 2011/12’, in *Widening Participation Summary: UK Performance Indicators 2011/12*, 2013; Higher Education Statistics Agency, ‘Table T1a - Participation of under-Represented Groups in Higher Education: UK Domiciled Young Full-Time First Degree Entrants 2015/16’.  
97 Ibid.



# 3

## Next steps for access

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### 3.1 Standardise guidance and reporting

Interviews with WP and access professionals, and examination of official guidelines, revealed that demands and expectations in key areas of financial reporting are not as clear as they could be. This makes it difficult to evaluate value for money at an institutional level.

In reporting spending to OFFA, universities have flexibility in deciding which costs to include in the different categories. The WP professionals interviewed for this paper said that some will consider the hours spent by academics on access activities an OFFA-countable expenditure, others will not. The same applies to other indirect costs. While this is allowed by OFFA,<sup>98</sup> inconsistencies in what universities choose to include are unhelpful as they distort spending data.

The fact that reporting is no more granular than ‘outreach work with schools and young people’ further prevents comparisons between institutions’ spending and outcomes, as it does not reveal the age groups worked with. Given the significant resources devoted to WP, this barrier to identifying efficiency is untenable, as it prevents more robust evaluations of value for money. The decrease in WP funding support from HEFCE provides an incentive for HEIs to observe and learn from the levels of efficiency and effectiveness at other institutions, and the OfS should be able to display best practice. The funding cut also adds urgency to the implementation of consistent and detailed guidelines, as institutions who previously didn’t include indirect costs may start doing so and report this as an increase in spending, distorting analyses of the effects of increased spending levels.

A category to be included in new reporting guidelines is spending on contextualised admissions. HEIs are currently allowed to include spending on this in access agreements, but it is not reported separately. Given concerns over the costs of collecting and analysing data, it is important to give HEIs a chance to observe the costs of contextualising elsewhere.

If HEIs find the administrative burden of more detailed reporting too heavy, and better evaluations of value for money do not become possible, an overhaul of the current WP system is worth considering. Universities might instead pay a certain proportion of fee income into a regional centre, which then allocates funding and is held accountable for achieving value for money. This could build on the current National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), but be funded mainly by fee income and focus on multiple measures of disadvantage and successful outcomes.<sup>99</sup> Such centres may have advantages compared to the current system in terms of both efficiency and impartiality.

**Recommendation 1:** To gain a more accurate impression of spending at different institutions, the OfS should make the reporting of outreach spending more consistent, and provide uniform, detailed guidelines for what should be included.

Spending on contextualised admissions should be reported in a separate access category.

If it proves too difficult for HEIs to adapt to more direct accountability for achieving value for money, regional centralisation of WP should be considered.

<sup>98</sup> Office for Fair Access, ‘“OFFA-Countable” Access Agreement Expenditure’.  
<sup>99</sup> Currently NCOP only uses POLAR3 as a measure of disadvantage and does not have attainment-raising as a main focus, see: Higher Education Funding Council for England, ‘National Collaborative Outreach Programme’, Policy Guide, (2017).

3.2 Adopt clear national outcome metrics

Universities are encouraged to focus greater resources on raising attainment at younger ages, on the basis that it could have a higher rate of return.<sup>100</sup> Any efforts to increase impact should be applauded, but most of the tangible targets institutions are encouraged to set relate only to their own yearly intake, which is less likely to be affected by earlier investment. Although this is understandable, given the easy availability of intake data compared to the impact of working with younger students and schools, institutions expressed concerns at this mixed messaging. Investment in intensive attainment-raising work with schools may help a greater number of students, yet even if these are prospective university applicants, they are not guaranteed to apply to the university in question and if they do, it will not be until many years into the future. It therefore does not help universities reach their year-to-year access targets.

Rapidly increasing take-up of tools to track the outcomes of individual participants in outreach activities is one way to overcome this inconsistency. There are several versions, including STROBE provided by UCAS, and regional ones in the West and East Midlands.<sup>101</sup> Most of the interviewees consulted for this paper referred to the adoption of the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), which is a non-profit service founded by HEIs, monitoring the outcomes of students taking part in universities’ WP activities.<sup>102</sup> It allows them to report positive outcomes even when these do not include applications to their own institution, with one WP professional stating that it will help them “join the dots and get some hardcore figures.” A benefit of HEAT is that it tracks not only the HEI engagement of students participating, but also outcomes while still at school, allowing institutions to report potential effects achieved earlier on.<sup>103</sup> Widespread uptake of HEAT has been rapid, but mostly quite recent, meaning that these outcomes are not yet reported on widely.

Although a few interviewees rightly pointed out that tracking does not prove direct impact, it is a step on the way to a more robust evidence base. The tracking systems work with comparators and control groups, and therefore allow monitoring to be more consistent, creating a database of the observed effects of different programmes. Of the 131 HEIs registered with HEFCE, 72 are subscribed to HEAT.<sup>104</sup> Between 2014 and 2017 HEFCE are providing £3 million to support its complete roll-out.<sup>105</sup> Remaining HEFCE funds should be spent supporting smaller institutions which are less likely to prioritise the subscription fee as it is the same regardless of institution size.<sup>106</sup> Crucially, transparency is needed around the methods of tracking and of estimating comparable outcomes, enabling the OfS to determine whether reported achievements are statistically sound.

It is vital, however, that the focus on outcomes in terms of raising attainment should not detract from targets for yearly intakes and outreach work with prospective applicants. There are still disadvantaged students who already have the grades to enter high-tariff HEIs (see Section 1.1), and highly selective universities should be held accountable for attracting them. Targets must be separated clearly and efforts focused on younger ages cannot replace universities’ responsibilities to diversify intakes in the near term.

100 Office for Fair Access, *Strategic Guidance: Developing Your 2017-18 Access Agreement*, 2016.  
101 UCAS, ‘STROBE’, Webpage, (2017); Higher Education Funding Council for England, ‘National Collaborative Outreach Programme’.  
102 Higher Education Access Tracker, ‘What Is HEAT & Who Are Our Members?’, Webpage, (2017).  
103 Higher Education Access Tracker, ‘HEAT Outreach Participant KS4 Outcomes – School Comparison Data’, 22 November 2016.  
104 Higher Education Access Tracker, ‘What Is HEAT & Who Are Our Members?’  
105 Higher Education Funding Council for England, ‘Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT)’, Policy guide, (2017).  
106 Higher Education Access Tracker, ‘What Is HEAT & Who Are Our Members?’

**Recommendation 2:** All universities should subscribe to a service tracking the outcomes of individual participants in outreach activities. With rigorous evaluation, this should inform performance assessment for attainment- and aspiration-raising work.

Targets for increasing attainment and general HE participation should be separate from universities’ own intake targets.

3.3 Accelerate contextualised admissions

The evidence so far seems to suggest that contextualised admissions have not had the negative impact on academic standards that some fear. Although there is only limited public research on outcomes for students admitted under contextualised schemes, indications are positive. St George’s Medical School in London has been running an Adjusted Criteria programme since 2002, where students with A-level results 60 per cent above their school’s average (at low-performing schools) are guaranteed interviews.<sup>107</sup> Between 2002 and 2008, the programme accounted for about 7 per cent of intake, and in first-year exams its participants scored only 0.61 percentage points lower than the regular intake on average.<sup>108</sup>

Recent research has shown that disadvantaged students at Russell Group universities have slightly lower chances of achieving a ‘good degree’ (first or upper second class honours) compared to peers with similar entry qualifications from the most advantaged backgrounds.<sup>109</sup> This could be taken to suggest that contextualised admissions put disadvantaged students at risk of failure. The same research, however, found that entry requirements have risen more than grade inflation, driven by a need to manage demand for HE places.<sup>110</sup> The average entry qualifications needed for a better than 70 per cent chance of gaining a ‘good degree’, for students from both the least and most advantaged backgrounds, are considerably lower than those advertised by most high-tariff universities.<sup>111</sup> This suggests that universities could contextualise admissions and widen participation by providing lower offers, without putting students’ chances of succeeding at risk.

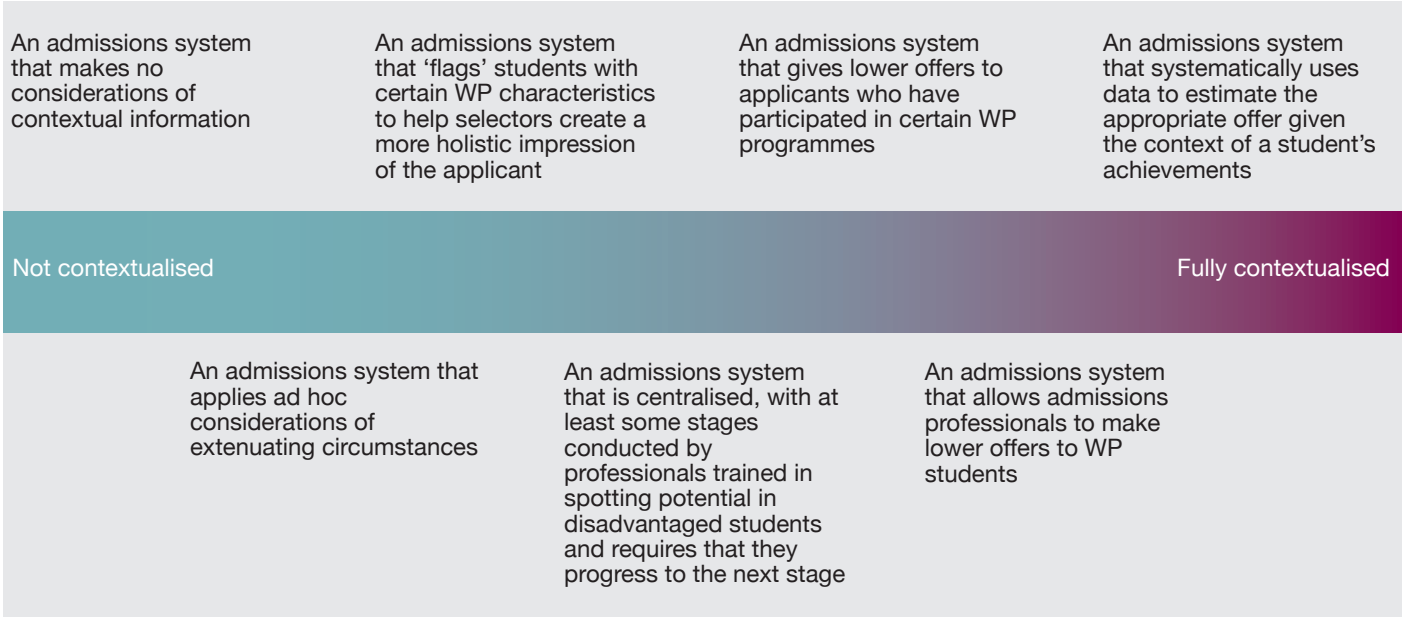
Recommending the expansion of contextualised admissions is not new a new idea; in 2004, the Schwartz Steering Group recommended it as one of its five principles of fair admissions that universities select “for merit, potential and diversity”, highlighting that merit is not only a question of achieved marks, but also the context in which they have been achieved.<sup>112</sup> In 2012, the Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty concluded that the HE sector should seek to, as far as possible, make the use of contextual data universal, to counter any institutional concerns about being singled out for “social engineering or positive discrimination”.<sup>113</sup>

Still, despite universities’ stated commitment to diversity and fair access, a resistance to systematic contextualised admissions persists. Even when institutions have successfully implemented contextual information, there is a reluctance to publicly share methods, lessons and outcomes. Interviewees spoke of a need to preserve a ‘safe space’ to work on contextual methods and avoid charges of unequal treatment of applicants. Given how slowly universities are progressing, however, and the detrimental effect this has on social mobility, this can no longer be tolerated. Considering applicants against this backdrop is not ‘social engineering’, it is merely a step towards a fairer and more socially mobile society.

107 The Sutton Trust, *Innovative University Admissions Worldwide: A Percent Scheme for the UK?*, 2009.  
108 Ibid.  
109 Boliver, Gorard, and Siddiqui, ‘How Can We Widen Participation in Higher Education? The Promise of Contextualised Admissions’.  
110 Ibid.  
111 Ibid.  
112 Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice* (Department for Education and Skills, 2004).  
113 Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty, *University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility*, 2012, 50.

OFFA's inability to influence admissions policies is based on a commitment to institutional autonomy,<sup>114</sup> and no regulator should determine HEI intakes. Preventing an access regulator from having any impact on admissions processes, however, is also preventing the regulator from achieving the best possible effect. As a new regulator, the OfS should make clear categories on a spectrum of contextualised admissions, and require universities to identify where they place themselves. Figure 12 is a suggestion for what the different levels of the spectrum could look like.

Figure 12: Spectrum of contextualised admissions policies



The levels of contextualisation should be worded so they are accurate enough to be meaningful, yet not so granular that they become descriptions of each HEI's exact admissions system. In that way, the OfS can monitor the effectiveness of systems, and if universities are failing to diversify intakes, they should have the powers to challenge HEIs to adopt more, or other, practices.

**Recommendation 3:** The OfS should manage a public database of different institutions' headline approaches to contextualised admissions. This information should also be published in a standard format on institutional websites, and for use by third party information providers.

The OfS should have the powers to challenge institutions that fail to make progress to adopt more or other contextual measures. Ultimately, HEIs should run the risk of losing the right to charge maximum tuition fees or be fined if they refuse to adjust to OfS guidance.

As seen in Section 2.2.2, not all ways of contextualising admissions are as effective. To ensure that systems work, and are fair and transparent, it is crucial that policies are continuously evaluated and improved. It must furthermore be assessed whether contextualised admissions are accompanied by support systems that prevent setting students up to fail. The OfS should therefore collect data on the characteristics and performance of institutions applying contextualised admission schemes, and commission academic teams to analyse outcomes. The sources of data should be anonymised before publication. This ensures the preservation of some 'safe space' for institutions to

114 Office for Fair Access, 'Frequently Asked Questions (Journalists)'.

experiment and improve approaches. Meanwhile, it will allow the OfS to provide better guidance when universities develop their admission policies.

**Recommendation 4:** The OfS should collect all evidence related to contextualised intakes and commission teams of academics to conduct analyses on anonymised datasets. Results should feed into advice on best practice.

# Conclusion

It is easy to side-step responsibilities for social mobility. Schools can correctly point out that parenting has a major impact on pupil outcomes, universities can point to prior attainment, and employers can point to the qualifications and work experience of applicants. None of them would be wrong. Meanwhile, if institutions at every stage do not take the initiatives available to them to improve, progress will remain unacceptably slow.

High-tariff institutions are a small piece of the puzzle, but not an insignificant one. So far, they have educated the majority of the most influential members of UK society. Although numbers are small, increasing the intake of disadvantaged students could have a significant impact.

Universities know this, and are investing significant resources in reaching out to applicants from non-traditional backgrounds. They are increasingly focused on the evidence of impact, and have to report on their efforts to OFFA on an annual basis. There is, however, a lack of understanding of how to achieve value for money in WP, and much more both a regulatory body and HEIs could do to gain insights and use them to shape approaches.

To understand the impact of spending, and to identify HEIs that achieve good value for money in work on increasing access, it is necessary to standardise reporting, and to make it more granular. Alongside increasing evidence on the impact of interventions must be knowledge of their costs. This will allow resources to be directed towards interventions with the greatest impact. A great proportion of university income is still provided by the government, and universities should be held to account for the effectiveness of attempted contributions to social mobility, as well as the efficient use of resources in doing so. As the regulator ensuring fair access to HE, the OfS needs to be able to work with universities on admissions systems. Successfully widening access would benefit not only the individual student, but the country as a whole.

# Technical appendix

## Data

Three main data sources have been used in this study:

- > Institutional-level data on widening participation from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).<sup>115</sup>
- > Financial data from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).<sup>116</sup>
- > Universities’ Access Agreements with OFFA to identify which universities introduced contextualised admissions and when.<sup>117</sup>

Across the different admission datasets used, universities are identified by their name (as opposed to a UK Register of Provider Reference Number (UKPRN) or other numerical identifier), which may change from year to year.<sup>118</sup>

Figure A1: Description of main variables

Variable name	Definition	Dependent variable (outcome)	Independent variable (covariate)	Time	Source
POLAR3Q1	Proportions of disadvantaged students at each university in all academic years.	X		2006-07 to 2015-16	HESA
POLAR3 benchmark	A measure of the expected POLAR3Q1 intake at a university, given its selectiveness and subject mix of students. Further details can be found on the HESA website.		X	2006-07 to 2015-16	HESA
Location adjusted benchmark	A measure of the expected POLAR3Q1 intake at a university, given its selectiveness, subject mix and region of origin of its students. Further details can be found on the HESA website.		X	2006-07 to 2015-16	HESA
OFFA-countable access agreement expenditure on “Access”, “Student success” and “Progression”	Expenditure is measured in terms of the proportion of higher fee income. The reported expenditure is only allowed to include funds spent on supporting ‘under-represented and disadvantaged groups’. Detailed information can be found on the OFFA website.		X	2006-07 to 2015-16	OFFA

115 Higher Education Statistics Agency, ‘Widening Participation Introduction’, Webpage, (2017).

116 Office for Fair Access, ‘Analysis, Data and Progress Reports’, Webpage, (2017).

117 Office for Fair Access, ‘Find an Access Agreement’, Webpage, (2017).

118 Merging was done using the Excel “fuzzy lookup” add-in and manually verified. The linked data is available from the authors on request.



Outcome variable

POLAR3 is the most reliable and relevant measure available despite its disadvantages in terms of reflecting all advances in widening participation.

Figure A2: Advantages and disadvantages of POLAR3 as a measure of student background

Advantages	Disadvantages
<div><div>&gt; The POLAR3 measure is available for virtually all students used in calculating the benchmarks and outcome variables. HESA can identify the POLAR3 status of 99.6 per cent of students. This compares to only 84 per cent for the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) measure of background, which has been discontinued.</div><div>&gt; By looking at POLAR3, quintile 1, this paper focuses on widening participation to the most disadvantaged students.</div></div>	<div><div>&gt; POLAR3 is not a good measure of disadvantage in some areas. For example, school leavers from the same London neighbourhoods may have very different HE participation rates. This variation is not properly reflected in POLAR.</div><div>&gt; Change in the POLAR methodology in 2009-10 leads to a structural break in the data.</div></div>

The descriptive statistics for the proportion of WP<sup>119</sup> students across the sample of high-tariff universities for every year are presented in Figure A3.

Figure A3: Descriptive statistics of POLAR3Q1 proportions in the group of high-tariff universities

Year	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
2006	28	5.42	1.72	3.3	9.3
2007	28	5.59	1.89	2.6	9.1
2008	28	5.59	1.89	2.6	9.1
2009	28	5.24	1.75	2.6	9.1
2010	28	5.38	1.89	2.4	9
2011	28	5.26	1.86	2.5	8.8
2012	28	5.88	2.02	2.8	9.9
2013	28	5.89	2.1	2.1	9.8
2014	28	6.26	2.09	3.1	10.2
2015	28	6.24	2.06	3	9.6

Independent variables

These benchmarks are a measure of the expected proportion of POLAR3 quintile 1 (POLAR3Q1) students at HEI, given the subject mix offered and the university's entry requirements. For the location-adjusted benchmark, the region where students come from is also considered.

Since the benchmark carries information about the subject mix and selectiveness of a given university, it has predictive power for the actual proportions of POLAR3Q1 at a given university.

119 The terms 'WP', 'disadvantaged' and 'POLAR3Q1' are used interchangeably, unless otherwise specified.

The descriptive statistics for the three independent variables are provided in Figure A4.

Figure A4: Benchmark, location-adjusted benchmark and access agreement expenditure for intake of POLAR3Q1, descriptive statistics

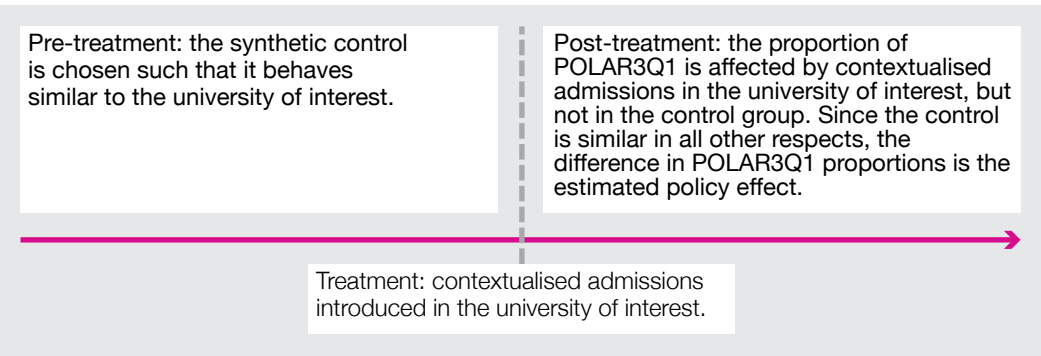
Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation.	Min	Max
Benchmark	284	6.83	1.28	4.3	9.9
Location-Adjusted Benchmark	284	6.41	1.91	3.4	11.1
Access Agreement Expenditure	284	27.82	6.58	13.8	51.01

Methodology

To analyse the impact of contextualised admissions on the proportion of disadvantaged students, the synthetic control method (SCM), developed in Abadie and Gardeazabal (2003) and Abadie et. al (2010), is applied.<sup>120</sup> The approach allows for causal inference on aggregate (macro) data. The technique is suitable for estimating the effect of a given policy intervention when the latter takes place in one (or more) unit(s) of observation continuously after a certain period, but never in the rest of the sample. The part of the sample which did not introduce contextualised admissions is referred to as the donor pool.

In the context of this paper, for a given university which introduced contextualised admissions, a weighted average of universities that did not introduce the policy is constructed. This 'synthetic' weighted average is such that it resembles the university of interest as close as possible in the period before the intervention. After contextualised admissions are introduced the proportion of POLAR3Q1 at that university of interest is compared to the proportion that prevails in the weighted average of controls. The difference is an estimate of the causal impact of contextualised admissions. This is illustrated in Figure A5.

Figure A5: The synthetic control method



Most high-tariff universities have introduced contextualised admissions over the past ten years. This information is available in universities' access agreements – published on the OFFA website.<sup>121</sup>

Figure A6 presents the timing of the introduction of contextualised admissions in the sample of universities analysed. The rows in bold indicate universities who either did not mention contextualised admissions at all in their OFFA access agreements prior to 2015-16, or they only did so in the context of the Realising Opportunities programme.<sup>122</sup>

120 Abadie, Diamond, and Hainmueller, 'Synthetic Control Methods for Comparative Case Studies: Estimating the Effect of California's Tobacco Control Program'.

121 Office for Fair Access, 'Find an Access Agreement'.

122 Realising Opportunities, 'Realising Opportunities', Webpage, (2017).

Figure A6: English high tariff universities and contextualised admissions

University	Contextualised admissions introduced	Notes	Realising Opportunities member
London School of Economics and Political Science	2012		
University of Surrey	2012		
University of Bath	2012		
University of Southampton	NO	Mentions that the policy was considered, but it was never employed	
Loughborough University	2013		
University of Leeds	2010		YES
University of York	NO	No mention of contextualised admissions, but is a member of Realising Opportunities	YES
University of Oxford	2008		
University of Bristol	2012		
University of Nottingham	2006		
University of Exeter	2011		YES
Imperial College London	NO	No mention of contextualised admissions	
King's College London	2014		YES
University of Cambridge	NO	Uses contextualised admissions, but only if the student submits an extenuating circumstances form. Hence, included in the donor pool.	
Durham University	2012		
The University of Manchester	2012		YES
Lancaster University	NO		
University of Leicester	NO	No mention of contextualised admissions apart from being a member of Realising Opportunities	YES
Newcastle University	2010		YES
University College London	NO	No mention of contextualised admissions apart from being a member of Realising Opportunities	YES
The University of Warwick	NO	No mention of contextualised admissions apart from being a member of Realising Opportunities. Stated it was "keen to explore" contextualised data	YES
University of Birmingham	2012		YES

University	Contextualised admissions introduced	Notes	Realising Opportunities member
University of East Anglia	2014		
The University of Sheffield	2013		YES
University of Liverpool	2012		YES
SOAS	2014		
Queen Mary University of London	2012		
Royal Holloway University of London	NO	Have access to contextual data, but the text in the access agreement suggests that this is not actually used in the admissions process.	
St George's, University of London	2013		

In an extended version of this annex two iterations of the synthetic control methodology are run.<sup>123</sup> In the first iteration, the focus is on LSE as it experienced the biggest increase in POLAR3Q1 students after treatment.

Examples of policies that appear to be unique to LSE include automatic progression to a second stage of assessment when the student has one or more indicators of disadvantage – for example an FSM student or a care leaver. It should be noted that there is no mention of contextualised admissions in access agreements referring to earlier years. In 2015, the university stated:

*“Since 2012 onwards we have been working to use more contextual data supplied through UCAS to further help us assess the ability and the potential of applicants to the School. We plan to develop a more robust ‘flagging’ system for WP candidates at admissions stage for 2015 entry, with particular emphasis on POLAR 3 data. We hope that this will enable us to make further progress against our [low participation neighbourhoods] LPN benchmark.”<sup>124</sup>*

UCAS transparency reports indicate that offer rates for POLAR3Q1 students have increased significantly almost exclusively at LSE.<sup>125</sup> This indicates that contextualised admissions are effectively in practice only at that university. Therefore, all other universities in the sample are used as controls in this first iteration.

The second iteration applies the synthetic control method to all universities who have indicated in their access agreement that they use some form of contextualised admissions. Results for LSE are virtually unchanged, hence only those are reported in this version of the appendix. Average treatment effects for one, two and three years post-intervention are calculated, based on the nine universities for which a counterfactual can be constructed.

In the second iteration, the donor pool is restricted to only nine universities who did not mention contextualised admissions in their access agreements. This small donor pool inhibits assessing the statistical significance of the results. However, when all universities are used as donors in estimating the impact at LSE, a simple inference technique, developed by Abadie et. al (2010), shows that the effect of contextualised admissions at LSE is significant, albeit driven by the effect in the last year.

123 The extended version of the technical annex is available from the authors on request.  
124 London School of Economics and Political Science, 'The LSE Access Agreement for 2015 Entry', 2014.  
125 Wonkhe, 'Transparency Revolution: Is There Bias in University Admissions?', Web Page, (2017).



Some universities in the second iteration donor pool are members of the Realising Opportunities programme, which might result in a lower offer if the programme is successfully completed.<sup>126</sup> Since it is targeted at increasing participation among disadvantaged students, the practice is somewhat similar to contextualising admissions. This means that four universities in the donor pool have some form of contextualisation, University of York, University of Leicester, University College London and The University of Warwick.

It should be noted that the University of Cambridge also claims that its admissions process is contextualised, but from the access agreement it is clear that students have to file an extenuating circumstances form before their background is considered.<sup>127</sup>

Even though the donor pool is contaminated with some form of contextualised admissions, this should not result in significant biases as the level of contextualisation is not high.

Results are considered only where the synthetic control accurately reproduces the treated unit's pre-treatment trajectory.<sup>128</sup> This does not always happen due to a small donor pool. An accurate control could be constructed for only nine universities.

Results where the synthetic control has a proportion of POLAR3Q1 students that lies entirely above or entirely below the treated unit in the pre-treatment period are disregarded. If this is the case, it means that the university in question is very different from the control group and there is no weighted average of universities that accurately replicates the treated unit.

The synthetic controls are constructed based on the HESA benchmark and location-adjusted benchmark in the pre-treatment period.<sup>129</sup> In addition, universities are matched on their spending levels as per access agreement spend.

The main specification uses all pre-treatment predictors. Some robustness checks in line with recommendations in Kaul et. al (2017) are carried out and reported in the extended version of the annex.<sup>130</sup> Results are robust to different specifications.

Results

The most dramatic increase in the proportion of POLAR3Q1 students occurred at LSE. LSE's access agreements indicate that a robust method of contextualised admissions has been in place since 2012 and it was further developed in 2015.<sup>131</sup> Interviews with widening participation teams reveal that LSE's approach is among the most systematic and it is also the main innovation in fair admissions at LSE. SCM can then be applied with a degree of confidence.

When estimation is executed, the control group for LSE consists of Imperial College London and University of Cambridge. The respective weights given are 0.342 and 0.658. When all other universities are used as donors, the control group also includes SOAS, which introduced contextualised admissions in 2014.

The synthetic control group is a more suitable comparison than the weighted average of all universities as it resembles LSE more closely in terms of its HESA benchmark, location-adjusted benchmark and access agreement expenditure. This is illustrated in Figure A7.

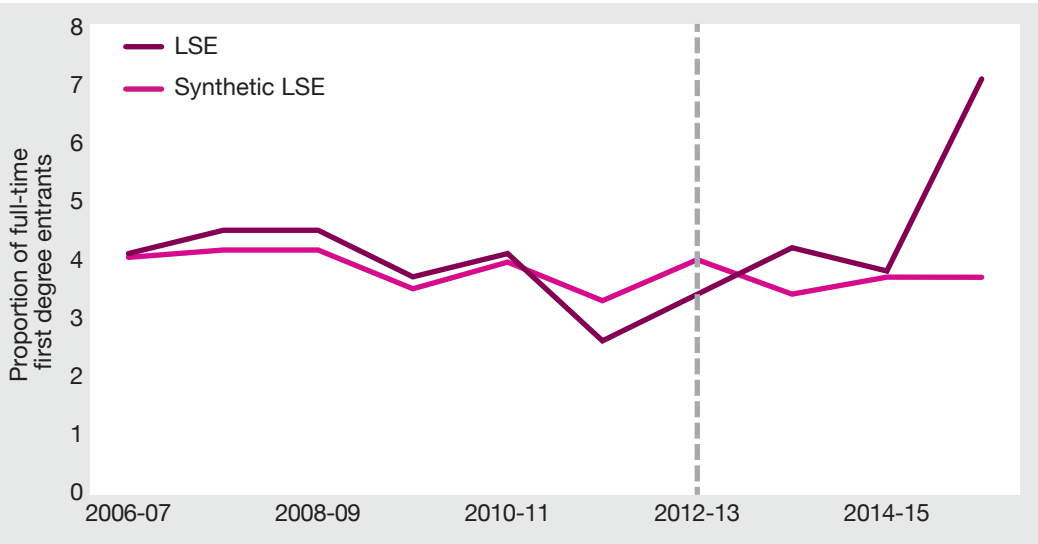
126 University of York, 'University of York Access Agreement 2017/18', 2016.  
127 University of Cambridge, *Access Agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) 2015-16*, 2014.  
128 In this paper, the SCM is deemed to provide a good fit when the root mean squared prediction error is lower than 1 in the pre-treatment period.  
129 The analysis is implemented using the synth Stata command. The beginning of the intervention period is chosen to be the academic year when contextualised admissions first applied – see Figure A.  
130 Ashok Kaul et al., 'Synthetic Control Methods: Never Use All Pre-Intervention Outcomes as Economic Predictors', 2017.  
131 London School of Economics and Political Science, 'The LSE Access Agreement for 2012 Entry', 2011.

Figure A7: Average value of observables in the pre-treatment period old and new synthetic control

	LSE	Synthetic	High-tariff weighted average
Benchmark	5.07	4.81	6.62
Location-adjusted benchmark	3.87	4.06	6.71
Access agreement expenditure	30.85	32.04	24.92

In the post intervention period, positive effects are observed. This is depicted in Figure A A8.

Figure A8: LSE treatment effect



The figure shows that the gap between LSE and the synthetic control is closed from 0.689 in 2011 to 0.594 percentage points in 2012. In 2013 LSE is 0.79 percentage points above the control, 0.105 percentage points above in 2014, and 3.41 points above the control in 2015. This is an average increase in the POLAR3Q1 proportion of 0.93 percentage points.

The analysis continues by repeating the same steps for all other universities that claimed to have introduced contextualised admissions in their access agreements. Credible controls are constructed for Loughborough University, Kings College London, Durham University, The University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Birmingham, The University of Sheffield and SOAS.

The estimated treatment effects for all universities are plotted in Figure A9. For some universities, a negative treatment effect is estimated up to 3 periods after the intervention. The average of the estimated treatment effect is 0.56 and is broken down in Figure A10.

Figure A9: Estimated treatment effects for nine English high-tariff universities

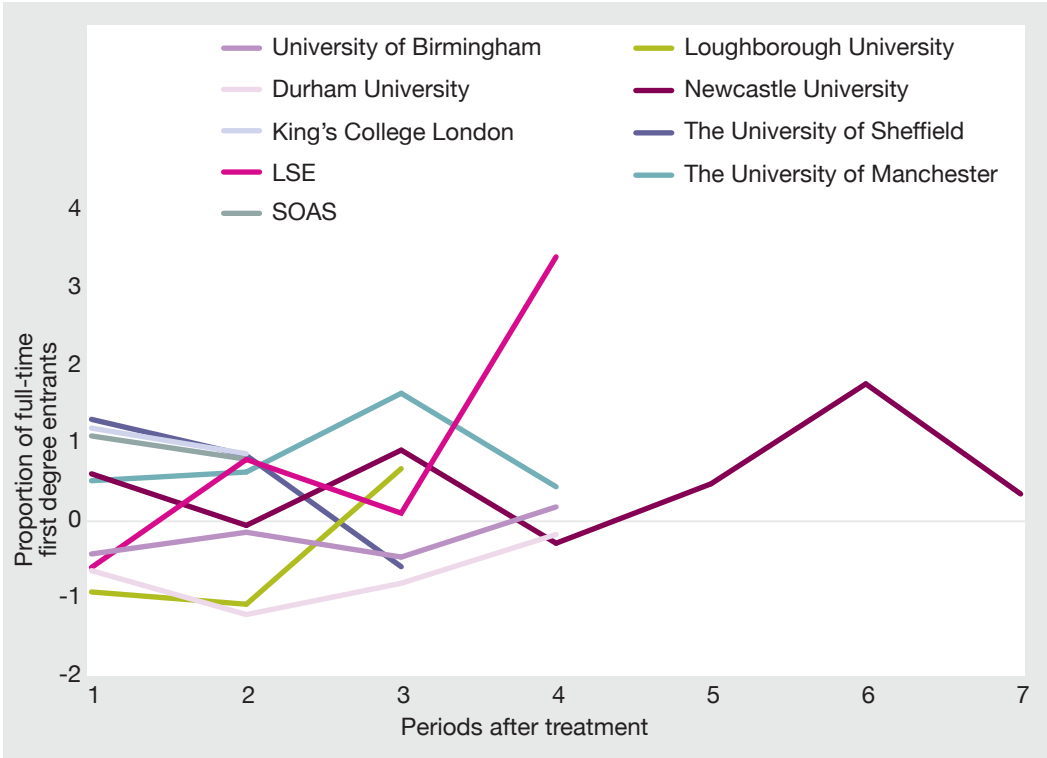


Figure A10: Average treatment effect for nine universities

Years after introducing contextualised admissions	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
Treatment effect (increase in percentage POLAR3Q1 proportion)	0.24	0.17	0.22	0.72	0.48	1.77	0.35	0.56

The results indicate that the average effect of introducing contextual admissions is an increase in the proportion of POLAR3Q1 students by 0.56 every year post-intervention.

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