REFORM POLICY

Access for all?

The participation of disadvantaged students at elite universities

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#ReformHE

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About

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Recommendation 2: The Office for Students should carry out an official consultation seeking to develop a single, multi-dimensional measure of disadvantage when measuring and monitoring universities' progress on improving access. This consultation should focus on determining what is the appropriate amount of data needed to develop a highly accurate measure of disadvantage whilst satisfying data protection principles, building on the Multiple Equality Measure. In the long-term, this measure should replace the Participation of Local Areas Measure as the default measure of disadvantage and enable more accurate comparisons across the sector.

Recommendation 3: The Office for Students should consider the cost-effectiveness of different approaches to widening access when assessing universities' access and participation plans. This will require universities to collect more detailed information on spend and outcomes for specific interventions and share this information with the regulator. This would help the sector better understand the cost-effectiveness of different approaches to widening access and participation.

Recommendation 4: The Department for Education, in partnership with the Office for Students and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, should assess whether the content and rigour of Access to Higher Education Diplomas are comparable to foundation year programmes for specific subjects. If Access to Higher Education Diplomas are found to sufficiently prepare students for degree-level study, universities should not be able to exclude students with HE Diplomas from applying to undergraduate programmes.

Introduction

Attending one of the UK's top universities can be a gateway to social mobility. Graduates of the most selective universities can often expect to earn significantly more and access top jobs.[1] Those who attend Russell Group universities, for example, earn 40 per cent more on average than those who study at other higher education institutions.[2] Of course, there are other barriers to social mobility. Research shows that although seven per cent of the population are educated at independent schools, 39 per cent of those in elite occupations, such as leading civil servants and politicians, were privately educated.[3] Nonetheless, evidence suggests that higher education continues to be an "engine for social mobility."[4]

While getting into university is only one part of the student journey, it is a crucial milestone.[5] Progress is being made; in 2018, disadvantaged 18-year-olds were more likely to enter higher education than ever before.[6] However, the gap between disadvantaged students and their advantaged peers remains significant, and is particularly large at high-tariff universities. Only around four per cent of disadvantaged 18-year-olds go to the highest-tariff universities, and advantaged applicants are more than six times more likely to do so than their disadvantaged peers.[7] As it stands, the top eight schools and colleges in the UK send as many pupils to Oxbridge as 2,900 other schools combined.[8]

For the last two years, *Reform* has published an annual report examining ways in which top universities can enhance social mobility, including a league table ranking 29 high-tariff universities. This paper offers an update to last year's report. It examines how the landscape has changed in the last 12 months following the introduction of the Office for Students, and ranks the progress of high-tariff institutions in their attempts to improve access for disadvantaged full-time students. Finally, it proposes ways the higher education sector can further its efforts to ensure students from all backgrounds can benefit from higher education.

[1] Social Mobility Commission, *State of the Nation 2018-19: Social Mobility in Great Britain*, 2019, 91.
[2] Ibid.
[3] The Sutton Trust and The Social Mobility Commission, *Elitist Britain 2019: The Educational Backgrounds of Britain's Leading People*, 2019, 4.
[4] Social Mobility Commission, *State of the Nation 2018-19: Social Mobility in Great Britain*, V; Philip Augar, *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* (Department for Education, 2019).
[5] Social Mobility Commission, *State of the Nation 2018-19: Social Mobility in Great Britain*; Augar, *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, 25.
[6] Augar, *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, 85.
[7] UCAS, *End of Cycle Report 2018: Patterns of Applicant Characteristics*, 2018, 4.
[8] The Sutton Trust and The Social Mobility Commission, *Elitist Britain 2019: The Educational Backgrounds of Britain's Leading People*, 13.

1. The Changing Landscape

This year has been one of transition for the higher education (HE) sector. The Office for Students (OfS), the regulator for HE in England, became fully operational on 1st August 2019.[9] After much anticipation, the Augar Review of post-18 education and funding was also published, although the impact of its recommendations remains to be seen.[10] Both of these policy developments have proposed and, in the case of the OfS, implemented significant changes to the way the sector measures, assesses and funds activities to improve university access for disadvantaged students.

1.1 A new regulator with teeth?

This year saw the approach and activities of the OfS come into focus.[11] Learning from the lessons of its predecessors, the Office for Fair Access and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, which had "no formal mechanisms for influencing individual HEIs [Higher Education Institutions]," the OfS intends to be "a regulator with teeth."[12]

The OfS has a much broader range of regulatory capabilities than its predecessors. While the regulatory capabilities of the now defunct Office for Fair Access and Higher Education Funding Council for England were limited to choosing to accept or reject an institution's access agreement – a 'nuclear option' which in practice was never used – the OfS' levers of influence range from monitoring a provider's progress to removing an institution's power to award degrees (see Figure 1).[13] The OfS is embracing this stepped approach to intervention: for the 2019-20 registration process, only 12 universities were able to register with the OfS without regulatory intervention.[14] As a result, some providers have noted that the level of risk associated with non-compliance is much higher. For example, one provider commented that it "really wanted to avoid any conditions" that would damage the institution's reputation.

[9] Office for Students, *Office for Students: Annual Report and Accounts 2018-2019*, 2019.
[10] Augar, *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*.
[11] Office for Students, *A New Approach to Regulating Access and Participation in English Higher Education: Consultation*, 2018, 12.
[12] Augar, *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, 63; Department for Education, 'Universities Regulator Gains Full Powers to Protect Students' Interests', Webpage, 2019.
[13] Holly Else, 'Les Ebdon: "nuclear Option" Fears Kept Universities in Line', Webpage, January 2018; Office for Fair Access, 'Access Agreement Breaches', Webpage, 2017.
[14] Office for Students, *Office for Students Registration Process and Outcomes 2019-20*, 2019, 7.

Figure 1: What powers does the new HE regulator have?

Regulatory powers	Previous regulators (OFFA and HEFCE)	New regulator (OFS)
Formal communication *Inform providers of issues that might cause concern if left unchecked*	✗	✓
Enhanced monitoring *Actively monitor a provider's progress against action plans or targets*	✗	✓
Conditions of registration *Require providers to make improvements in specific areas*	✗	✓
Reject an institution's access agreement *This removes the ability of an institution to award degrees*	✓	✓

Source: Office for Students, *Annual Report and Accounts*, 2019

Unfortunately, it is unclear how many of the mitigations issued by the OfS are because an institution is failing to improve access for disadvantaged students. There are a few exceptions. Both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, for example, were required to conduct a "robust evaluation" of their bursaries to show how their spending is producing better outcomes.[15] The University of Cambridge has confirmed it has completed this evaluation and that the OfS was satisfied with this research.

To complement its broader range of powers, several interviewees noted a shift in the way the regulator interacts with the sector. Several institutions recognised that the processes and procedures when submitting the access and participation plans still need to develop, as there is currently considerable back-and-forth between institutions and the regulator. There was recognition, however, that these were 'teething problems' to be expected when working with a new organisation. Overall, it was noted the OfS has been more engaged with providers than its predecessor, partly because the requirements that providers must now meet to be registered with the OfS are ongoing, rather than limited to the annual renewal process.[16] As a result, institutions now feel a greater degree of scrutiny from the OfS, with one institution describing it as "a healthy sense of challenge."

[15] Chris Havergal, 'Oxford and Cambridge Singled out on Access by New Regulator', *Times Higher Education*, 19 July 2018.
[16] Office for Students, 'Conditions of Registration', Webpage, 2019.

1.2 Measuring disadvantage

As part of its new responsibilities, the OfS has committed to using a wide range of data to measure and monitor access and participation of disadvantaged students at university.[17] This reflects a growing consensus across the sector that the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) measures, which rank local areas into five groups based on how likely young people from that area are likely to participate in HE, do not take into account individual-level markers of disadvantage and therefore should not be used in isolation (see Figure 2 for summary and Appendix for definitions of all commonly-used measures of disadvantage).[18]

The OfS has taken several steps to meet this commitment. For example, the creation of an Access and Participation Dashboard provides sector and provider-level information across a range of measures of underrepresentation. Institutions interviewed for this paper agreed that the data provided by the OfS and used to develop access and participation plans provided more granular information compared to previous years.[19] In addition, the OfS has released new, experimental datasets, which aim to improve the understanding of how multiple characteristics – like age, sex, ethnicity and area background – interact to affect students' access and progression in HE.[20]

The extent to which these new measures are embedded and used across the sector, however, will depend on whether the OfS uses these data to measure and monitor providers' performance. The OfS' access and participation guidance for HE providers suggests this is the case.[21] The guidance "strongly encourages" institutions to use POLAR4 to measure underrepresentation – which uses more recent data than POLAR3 to calculate the participation rates of local areas – but suggests that other measures are to be used if POLAR4 is unable to reflect disadvantage within that location or context, as explained in the next section.[22] However, all the OfS' own key performance indicators use both POLAR measures, and several institutions have noted that universities have been asked to consider the OfS' national goals when setting institutional-level targets.[23] As a result, in several interviews for this paper, providers were uncertain as to the weight and importance placed on measures other than POLAR. One institution, for example, argued that there was an expectation to mostly focus on POLAR data.

This is reflected in access and participation plans. The University of Manchester's access targets, for example, are only based on POLAR4 data such as improving the gap between the areas with the lowest and highest HE participation rates– ignoring other measures of disadvantage.[24] For other institutions, however, a range of metrics are included. The University of Cambridge's plan shows that in addition to focusing on low-participation

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[17] Office for Students, *Office for Students Data Strategy 2018-2012*, 2018, 2.
[18] Office for Students, *A New Approach to Regulating Access and Participation in English Higher Education: Consultation*, 22; Augar, *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, 77; Luke Heselwood, *Gaining Access: Increasing the Participation of Disadvantaged Students at Elite Universities* (Reform, 2018); Emilie Sundorph, Danail Vasilev, and Louis Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility* (Reform, 2017).
[19] Office for Students, *A New Approach to Regulating Access and Participation in English Higher Education: Consultation Outcomes*, 2018.
[20] Office for Students, 'Better Data Can Help Close Equality Gaps', Webpage, 26 September 2019.
[21] Office for Students, *Regulatory Notice 1: Access and Participation Plan Guidance*, 2019.
[22] Ibid., 25.
[23] Office for Students, 'Participation Performance Measures', Webpage, 2019.
[24] University of Manchester, *The University of Manchester Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25*, 2019, 30.

neighbourhoods through POLAR metrics, it plans to reduce the gap in socio-economic participation rates based on the English Index of Multiple Deprivation, which measures relative levels of deprivation in local areas in the UK across a range of measures including income, employment, crime and living environment.[25]

1.2.1 Establishing consistency across the sector

There needs to be more clarity for providers as to the weight and importance placed on different measures of disadvantage. Despite its imperfections, POLAR3 and 4 are reliable proxies for other measures of disadvantage. The most disadvantaged group of students according to the POLAR3 metric make up 57.3 per cent of the most disadvantaged group according to UCAS' Multiple Equality Measure (MEM), and 29 per cent of the second most disadvantaged MEM group, which include individual-level indicators of disadvantage such as Free School Meals (FSM) (see Glossary).[26] Given that POLAR is not a data-hungry metric and is easy to use compared to other measures of disadvantage, this should remain the default measure used by the sector in the immediate term.

However, there are well-known limitations to this location-based measure in densely populated areas such as London as people from a wide range of backgrounds live in the same area.[27] To overcome this, the OfS has recommended that universities "may choose to use an additional measure of disadvantage identified in the access and participation dataset, such as the English Index of Multiple Deprivation or suggest an alternative measure."[28] There is the risk, however, that using such a vast number of metrics clouds, rather than adds more clarity, on the issue of access. It also impedes the ability to compare progress across institutions. As shown in Figure 2, UCAS' MEM metric captures the majority of metrics currently used by universities to measure access. Crucially, in contrast to English Index of Multiple Deprivation, it includes individual-level indicators of disadvantage. Therefore, where there is clear evidence that POLAR is not accurately reflecting disadvantage in a specific context, OfS should work with providers to develop access targets based on the MEM.

[25] University of Oxford, *University of Oxford Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25*, 2019, 30.
[26] UCAS, *Equality and Entry Rates Data Explorers*, 2019.
[27] Fair Education Alliance, *Putting Fairness in Context: Using Data to Widen Access to Higher Education*, 2018.
[28] Office for Students, *Regulatory Notice 1: Access and Participation Plan Guidance*, 25.

Figure 2: Measures of disadvantage used to monitor access and participation

Measure	Definition	Individual or aggregate-level indicator?	Single or multidimensional measure?	Main metrics
POLAR3	The Participation of Local Areas 3 (POLAR3) classifies small areas across the UK into five groups, according to their level of young participation in HE.			An estimation of the proportion of young people living in an area who progress to HE by the age of 19. POLAR3 was calculated using data on students who begun their studies between 2005-06 – 2009-10.
POLAR4	POLAR4 is the successor to POLAR3. The main difference between the two is that POLAR4 uses more recent data.			An estimation of the proportion of young people living in an area who progress to HE by the age of 19. POLAR4 was calculated using data on students who begun their studies between 2009-10 – 2013-14.
IMD	The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) measures relative levels of deprivation in small areas in England.			37 separate indicators relating to income, employment, health, education, crime, living environment and barriers to housing and services.
FSM	An income-related benefit that can be used as an indicator of low income.			Whether or not a child in a state-funded school was eligible to receive free school meals in the last 3 or 6 years. This is dependent on if a parent of carer is in receipt of a qualifying income-related benefit.
MEM	The Multiple Equality Measure (MEM) is an aggregate measure of disadvantage developed by UCAS.			Gender, POLAR3 quintile, ethnic group, FSM status, IMD rank and school type.

Source: Chris Taylor, *British Journal of Educational Studies,* 2018; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Indices of Deprivation*, 2019; Office for Students, *Young participation by area*, 2019; UCAS, *Equality and entry rates data explorers*, 2019

To date, the MEM has struggled to gain traction in the sector. The reasons for this are multiple, with some institutions interviewed for this paper expressing that the weightings given to the different metrics within the MEM index are not readily communicated to universities by UCAS. Therefore, the increased use of MEM in the sector must be met by a commitment from UCAS to publish the full methodology used to construct the MEM index, including the weighting given to individual metrics on an annual basis.

Recommendation 1: The Office for Students should collaborate with universities to set access targets based on the Multiple Equality Measure when there is clear evidence that the Participation of Local Areas measure does not reliably reflect disadvantage in their specific location or context. This would provide clarity to universities on what measures they should use when developing their access and participation plans and targets.

1.2.2 Towards a better measure of disadvantage

In the longer-term, a better balance must be struck between the benefits of using POLAR as a measure of disadvantage and the accuracy that can be provided by multi-dimensional measures such as MEM. While the former requires minimal data collection and is highly transparent, the latter can provide a more accurate analysis. As a first step, and building on the MEM, the OfS should consult on how to develop a single, aggregate and multidimensional measure of disadvantage that can be used by all universities.

This consultation should consider the minimum amount of data needed to develop a highly accurate measure of disadvantage. This is particularly pertinent when considering contextualised admissions procedures (see Glossary). As it stands, the MEM metric provided by UCAS to universities for the purpose of contextualising admissions omits data on FSM status and ethnicity due to restrictions on usage of data. Interviewees have therefore voiced concerns that using the MEM metric to set targets for universities risks measures universities upon things they cannot directly affect.

More research is needed to understand the extent to which the omission of FSM status and ethnicity impacts the accuracy of the metric and, if so, to consider ways in which a proxy or aggregated version of this metric might be incorporated so as to not breach data protection. Likewise, if FSM status is found to not impact the accuracy of MEM, it should be discounted from the measure to reduce the volume of data needed to develop a score.

Recommendation 2: The Office for Students should carry out an official consultation seeking to develop a single, multi-dimensional measure of disadvantage when measuring and monitoring universities' progress on improving access. This consultation should focus on determining what is the appropriate amount of data needed to develop a highly accurate measure of disadvantage whilst satisfying data protection principles, building on the Multiple Equality Measure. In the long-term, this measure should replace the Participation of Local Areas Measure as the default measure of disadvantage and enable more accurate comparisons across the sector.

1.3 Achieving value for money

More than £1 billion is spent annually on widening access and participation and supporting disadvantaged students, but the link between spending and outcomes is not straightforward.[29] In practice, the approaches taken by different elite universities to increase the participation of disadvantaged students at university are varied. There needs to be greater assessment of the effectiveness of spend on different approaches to widening access and participation.[30]

The OfS' decision to focus on targets set and outcomes achieved, rather than solely concentrating on money spent, is a welcome change. As one interviewee for this paper

[29] Augar, *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, 76.
[30] Ibid., 77.

argued, "spending money isn't the same as making a difference." This represents a sharp departure from the approaches of the OfS' predecessors, for whom the amount universities spent on access and participation was a key concern.[31]

It is crucial, however, that cost-effectiveness is not overlooked when assessing the progress made by universities to widen access. There needs to be a focus on achieving value for money. For example, if a university marginally increases the proportion of disadvantaged students in a given year but spends a significant sum of money per student to achieve this outcome, this may not necessarily be the most effective use of funds. Indeed, less costly interventions may be able to achieve similar, or even better, outcomes (see Figure 4 in next chapter).

In this regard, the establishment of 'Transforming Access and Student Outcomes', a 'what works' centre for widening participation, is a positive step. King's College London, who will host the centre, have confirmed that a key aim of the organisation will be achieving value for money for the sector.[32]

As documented in the two previous *Reform* reports, there is currently little transparency as to what spending on access is used for, making it hard to assess the effectiveness of different activities and whether it is achieving value for money.[33] Universities should be required to share more information with the OfS on how their access budgets are spent. This should include information on what interventions are funded, the outputs delivered, and the outcomes achieved.

Recommendation 3: The Office for Students should consider the cost-effectiveness of different approaches to widening access when assessing universities' access and participation plans. This will require universities to collect more detailed information on spend and outcomes for specific interventions and share this information with the regulator. This would help the sector better understand the cost-effectiveness of different approaches to widening access and participation.

1.4 Do foundation years promise better access?

Foundation years are one-year courses aimed at helping students who may not meet the standard requirements for direct entry into university to spend one year developing the skills needed to succeed in HE.[34] Over the last five years, the number of students taking a foundation year has tripled from 10,000 to 30,000.[35]

Foundation years are often pitched as an important pathway to promote better access for disadvantaged students, and have become central to some universities' efforts to widen

[31] Office for Fair Access, 'Analysis, Data and Progress Reports', Webpage, 2017.
[32] Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education, 'Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Education', Webpage, 2019.
[33] Sundorph, Vasilev, and Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility*, 22–23; Heselwood, *Gaining Access: Increasing the Participation of Disadvantaged Students at Elite Universities*, 19.
[34] Tej Nathwani, 'Year 0: A Foundation for Widening Participation?', HESA, 2019.
[35] Augar, *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, 103.

participation.[36] For example, the University of Oxford this year announced plans to introduce ‘Foundation Oxford’, a foundation year offered to state school students from disadvantaged areas who have also experienced personal disadvantage or a severely disrupted education.[37] The University of Cambridge has also announced plans to introduce a foundation programme for educationally-disadvantaged students by 2020.[38]

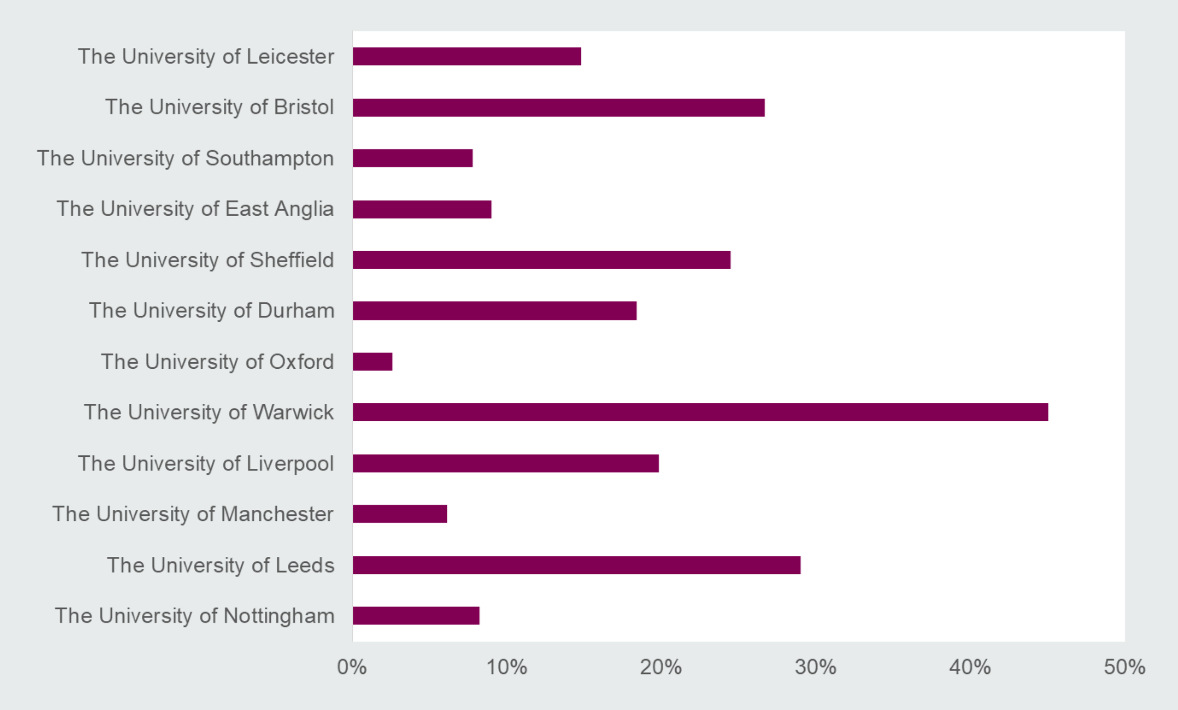
The Augar Review, however, critiqued the cost effectiveness of foundation years to widen participation. The Review argued “it is hard not to conclude that universities are using foundation years to create four-year degrees in order to entice students who do not otherwise meet their standard entry criteria.” It argued that Access to HE diplomas were comparatively better value for the taxpayer and students as fees are lower.[39] The Review recommended that student finance is withdrawn from foundation years and suggests that these programmes should be replaced with Access Diplomas.[40]

Through a Freedom Information Request (FOI), this research sought to ascertain the characteristics of foundation year students at the 29 high-tariff institutions (see Glossary) that are ranked in the next chapter. The FOI asked for the total number of students who took a foundation year from 2013-14 to 2017-18 and continued on to study a full-time degree at that institution. In order to form a comparison, it asked how many of these students were from the most underrepresented areas across the country according to POLAR3 (see Figure 3). The FOI received 13 responses with data, with several other institutions noting that they do not offer foundation years (see Appendix for methodology).

As Figure 3 shows, in 2017-18, the proportion of students from low-participation neighbourhoods who took a foundation year and continued to study a full-time degree at that university differs among top universities. The University of Warwick had the highest proportion of students from underrepresented areas, with 9 out of its 20 foundation year students coming from areas with the lowest proportion of young people participating in HE, equating to 45 per cent. Conversely, only 3 per cent of the University of Oxford’s foundation year students who continued to study a full-time degree were from low-participation neighbourhoods. Indeed, only 2 out of 78 students at the University of Oxford were categorised as POLAR3 quintile 1. These figures, therefore, bring into question the notion that foundation years are a driver for social mobility, as students from low-participation neighbourhoods represent only a small proportion of foundation year students that continue to a first degree at the same institution.

[36] Nathwani, ‘Year 0: A Foundation for Widening Participation?’
[37] University of Oxford, ‘Foundation Oxford’, Webpage, 2019.
[38] Rosie Bradbury and Varsity, ‘Cambridge Announces Foundational Course to Widen Access for Under-Represented Groups’, Webpage, 6 May 2018.
[39] Augar, *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, 103.
[40] Ibid.

Figure 3: The proportion of foundation year students who continued to a full-time degree at that university from POLAR3 quintile 1 areas



Source: Reform **calculations based on HESA performance indicators 2017-18; FOI responses from 12 institutions (see appendix for methodology). Loughborough University has been excluded from the dataset as it did not provide data for 2017-18.**

While the FOI results suggest the Augar Review was right to be sceptical of the role of foundation year programmes to widen participation, several institutions interviewed highlighted that the content of foundation years are not comparable with Access to HE Diplomas. The University of Cambridge, for example, does not accept HE Diplomas for any science subject.[41] Therefore, removing funding from foundation years without improving the content and standing of HE Diplomas could prove counterproductive. Instead, the Department for Education should consider whether the content and rigour of Access to HE Diplomas is comparable to foundation years for specific subjects. Interestingly, OfS research has found that of those students who progress to full-time degree-level study after a foundation year or Access course, a slightly higher proportion of Access course students achieved first or upper second-class degrees (70 per cent) than those who studied a foundation year (67 per cent).[42]

If Access to HE Diplomas are found to be comparable to foundation years to prepare students for degree-level study, universities should not exclude students with HE Diplomas from undergraduate programmes. Similarly, if the content of HE Diplomas is found to be insufficient, efforts must be made to improve the content of these courses.

[41] University of Cambridge, 'Undergraduate Study Entrance Requirements', Webpage, 2019.
[42] Office for Students, *Preparing for Degree Study: Analysis of Access to Higher Education Diplomas and Integrated Foundation Year Courses*, 2019, 4.

Recommendation 4: The Department for Education, in partnership with the Office for Students and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, should assess whether the content and rigour of Access to Higher Education Diplomas are comparable to foundation year programmes for specific subjects. If Access to Higher Education Diplomas are found to sufficiently prepare students for degree-level study, universities should not be able to exclude students with HE Diplomas from applying to undergraduate programmes.

2. Updated access rankings

This year's access rankings (see Figure 4) are the third update tracking 29 high-tariff institutions and whether they have increased access for students from low-participation neighbourhoods from 2013-14 to 2017-18. The paper has updated last year's table based on a new five-year rolling average. In addition, Figure 5 charts the percentage of students from low-participation neighbourhoods at eight high-tariff institutions since 2009-10. These universities are the same eight institutions that were analysed in more detail last year because they have the highest entry standards among English universities, according to the Complete University Guide 2019.[43]

2.1. The rankings

Figure 4 measures the 29 high-tariff institutions according to several metrics from 2013-14 to 2017-18. The first column shows the average annual increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students from 2013-14 to 2017-18. The second is the average distance from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) benchmark, which sets an access target to each university individually, over the same five-year period. The third measures the institutions based on their progress against their benchmark. The final column shows the average outreach expenditure per student, as reported in each university's access agreements and access and participation plans.

The University of East Anglia (UEA) has topped this year's rankings, knocking the London School of Economics (LSE) from first place which it has held for the past two years. The University of Exeter is therefore the highest ranked Russell Group university. In 2017-18, 11.6 per cent of the students at UEA were from POLAR3 quintile 1 backgrounds – a rise of 2.2 percentage points from the previous year. LSE had a 0.5 percentage point increase from last year. Notably, the University of Oxford has risen from 18th to 4th, whereas SOAS and Royal Holloway have slipped down from 6th and 7th to 23rd and 29th respectively. Across all of the 29 universities, however, progress is slow. None of the universities had an average annual increase above 1 percentage point from 2013-14 to 2017-18, demonstrating that more work is needed to increase access for underrepresented young people.

When assessing universities based on the average distance from their individual HESA benchmark over the same five-year period, 22 out of 29 are below their targets. The University of Sheffield is closest to its benchmark, followed by the University of Lancaster. Like last year's rankings, although Lancaster is ranked 24th out of 29, its percentage of students from low-participation neighbourhoods is higher than many of the other elite universities. Furthermore, the five universities ranked at the bottom based on average distance from their HESA benchmark are all London based.

[43] The Complete University Guide, 'Top UK University League Tables and Rankings 2019', 2018.

From 2013-14 to 2017-18, LSE has made the greatest progress against its benchmark, improving by 2.1 percentage points over this period. LSE's improvement, however, is slightly less than its past two year's rolling averages. Moreover, 14 institutions have made negative progress against their benchmarks since 2013-14.

The access rankings also show the average per-student expenditure from 2013-14 to 2017-18. On average over the five years, the University of Oxford spent £1,797 per student – the highest among the high-tariff institutions. Although Oxford climbed this year's rankings to 4th, this does not necessarily demonstrate the impact of access spend. UEA, who topped this year's rankings, spent £696 on average per student over the five years. Moreover, University College London, who are ranked 28th, spent £985 on average per student – the fourth largest amount. Among all the universities, the average amount spent was £633 per student.

Despite the small improvements in access from 2013-14 to 2017-18, spending has seen a significant increase in real terms. In 2013-14, more than £40 million was spent on access among the 29 high-tariff universities.[44] In 2017-18, this figure rose to £66 million.[45] As previously mentioned, the OfS should call on institutions to provide more detail on where this money is spent.

[44] Office for Fair Access, 'Table 3 - Fee Income and Expenditure through Access Agreements in 2013-14, by Institution (HEIs Only)', *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2013-14*, 2015. The HM Treasury GDP deflator was used to calculate real-terms spend for the base year 2017-18.
[45] Office for Students, *Table 3: Fee Income and Expenditure through Access Agreements in 2017-18, by Provider.*, 2019.

Figure 4: High-tariff university access rankings

University			Average annual increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students 2013-14 to 2017-18	Average distance from HESA benchmark 2013-14 to 2017-18 (percentage points)	Change in distance from HESA benchmark 2013-14 to 2017-18 (percentage points)	Per-student expenditure across full-time young entrants (five-year average)
1 (4)	▲	The University of East Anglia	0.8	-0.14	1.3	£696
2 (14)	▲	The University of Exeter	0.775	-1.82	2	£486
3 (1)	▼	LSE	0.6	0.84	2.1	£827
4 (18)	▲	The University of Oxford	0.5	-1.62	1.4	£1,797
5 (26)	▲	St George's, UoL	0.475	-3.46	0.3	£1,162
6 (5)	▼	The University of York	0.45	-0.04	0.4	£573
7 (9)	▲	The University of Warwick	0.35	-0.58	0.9	£636
8 (11)	▲	The University of Leicester	0.35	-1.06	-0.3	£615
9 (3)	▼	The University of Sheffield	0.275	1.12	-0.1	£ 637
10 (27)	▲	The University of Cambridge	0.275	-1.18	0.4	£1,008
12 (20)	▲	The University of Durham	0.275	-0.92	0.5	£970
11 (16)	▲	The University of Bristol	0.275	-2.1	-0.1	£616
13 (2)	▼	The University of Newcastle	0.25	0.7	0	£800
14 (10)	▼	The University of Nottingham	0.25	-1.12	-0.2	£417
15 (25)	▲	The University of Manchester	0.225	0.62	0.1	£508
16 (13)	▼	The University of Surrey	0.2	-2.28	-0.3	£326
17 (8)	▼	Loughborough University	0.175	-1.86	0.3	£391
18 (15)	▼	The University of Birmingham	0.167	-0.86	0.1	£412
19 (23)	▲	Imperial College London	0.15	-1.28	0	£492
20 (28)	▲	The University of Southampton	0.15	-1.06	-0.1	£349
22 (24)	▲	The University of Leeds	0.1	0.32	-0.2	£350
21 (21)	=	The University of Liverpool	0.1	0.72	-0.6	£251
23 (6)	▼	SOAS, UoL	0.075	-4.72	-0.5	£680
24 (22)	▼	The University of Lancaster	0.075	1.08	-0.7	£450
25 (17)	▼	The University of Bath	0.05	-1.3	0	£726
26 (12)	▼	King's College London	0.025	-2.9	-1.5	£619
27 (19)	▼	Queen Mary, UoL	0	-4.28	-1.6	£122
28 (29)	▲	University College London	-0.125	-2.02	-1.4	£ 985
29 (7)	▼	Royal Holloway, UoL	-0.325	-3.68	-2.8	£463

Source: *Reform* calculations based on HESA performance indicators, in addition to OFFA and OfS monitoring outcomes. Expenditure refers to spending on the 'access' category in access agreements, which were previously reported under 'outreach'. The access figures have used the HM Treasury GDP Deflator with 2017-18 as the base year.

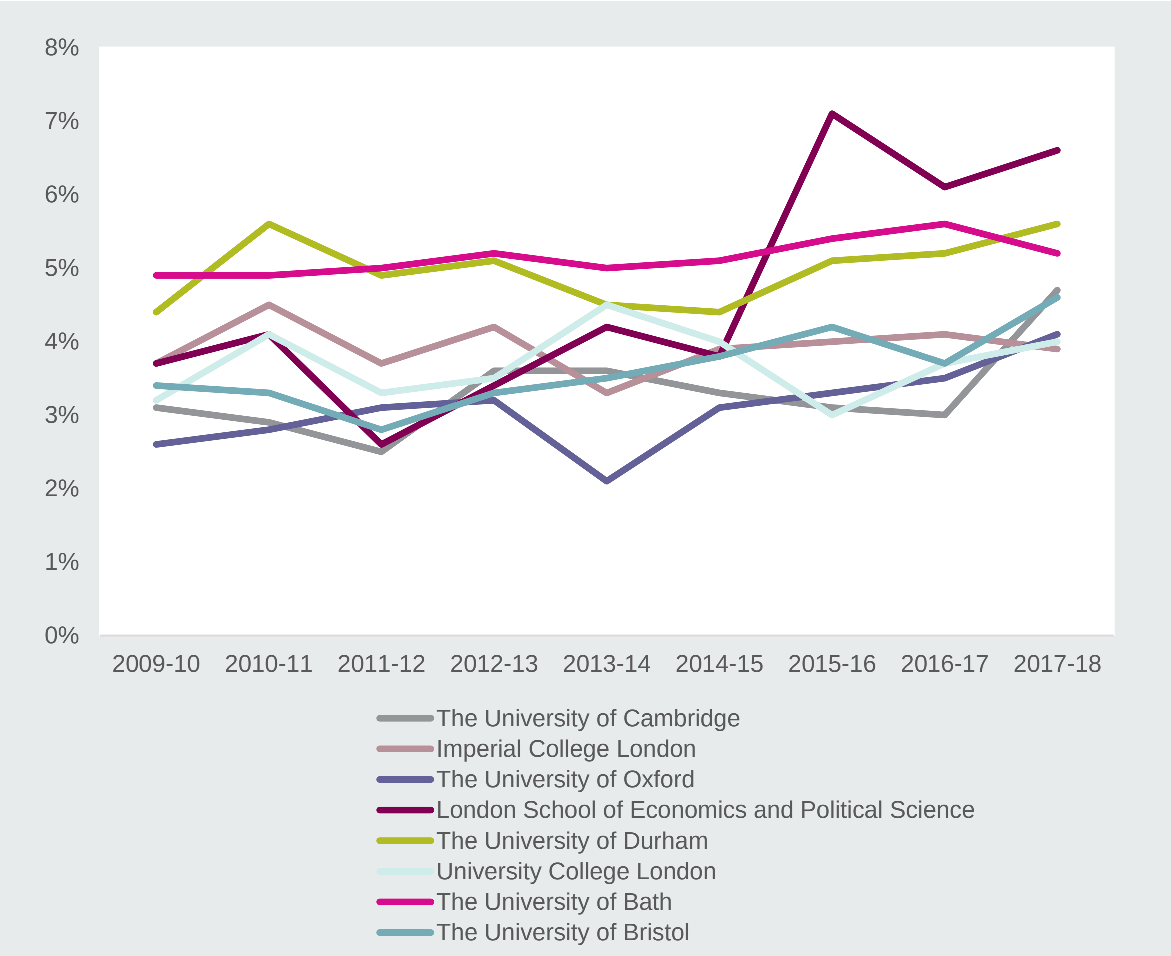
Figure 5, which provides an in-depth look at the percentage of students from low-participation neighbourhoods among the eight universities with the highest entry tariffs, shows that progress continues to be slow. In 2017-18, the percentage of students from POLAR3 quintile 1 backgrounds who went to university across the sector in England was 11.6 per cent.[46] Among the high-tariff institutions in Figure 5, LSE has the highest

[46] Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Widening Participation Summary: UK Performance Indicators 2017/18', Web Page, 7 February 2019.

percentage of students from low-participation neighbourhoods with 6.6 per cent coming from a low-participation neighbourhood.

Furthermore, the figure demonstrates that since 2009-10, the percentage point increase has been relatively minimal. LSE has seen the largest increase of 2.9 percentage points over this period, whereas Imperial College London had the lowest increase, at 0.2 percentage points.

Figure 5: Percentage of students from low-participation neighbourhoods



This year's access rankings show that although progress is being made to increase access for students from low-participation neighbourhoods, there is still a long way to go. Among the eight universities with the highest entry tariffs, LSE has seen the greatest percentage point increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students which, as *Reform's* previous report has shown, is in part a result of its approach to contextualised admissions.[47] Going forward, the OfS should ensure that access and participation plans set out clear strategies to improve the use of contextual admissions in an effort to increase access for disadvantaged students.

[47] Sundorph, Vasilev, and Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility*, 24.

Conclusion

It has been a promising year for the HE sector. The OfS has hit the ground running and made significant improvements to the way it measures, monitors and holds universities to account on their efforts to improve access for disadvantaged students. Crucially, its regulatory capabilities can now be used as a tool to continuously engage with and challenge universities on their approaches to increase participation, in contrast to the previous ‘pass-fail’ system.

The full impact of the OfS remains to be seen, however, as there is an inevitable lag between the introduction and impact of a policy change. In the coming year, it will be crucial to see how universities intensify their efforts to improve access in response to the new regulatory regime. This year’s ranking affirms why a step change is needed. Across all 29 top universities, the average annual increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students at elite universities was just 0.24 percentage points over the last five years. Recent spikes in improvement from universities such as LSE show that faster progress is possible.

The HE sector has seen significant policy churn in recent years and proposing further radical changes is neither realistic nor desirable. Indeed, reconciling the short-term political cycles with the long-term, structural changes needed to truly shift the dial on widening participation has been a constant challenge for the sector. The shift from one to five-year access and participation targets presents an opportunity for universities to think more strategically. In the coming year, the challenge for the HE sector is to begin to meet the ambitious targets set out in access and participation plans in an effort to improve access for disadvantaged students.

Appendix

Methodology

The analysis of foundation years is a result of a Freedom of Information (FOI) request that was sent to the 29 high-tariff institutions in the access rankings (see Figure 4) on the 28 August 2019. The FOI asked the universities to provide data from 2013-14 to 2017-18 academic years on:

- The total number of students taking a foundation year before their first degree at that institution.
- The number of students in POLAR 3 quintile 1 taking a foundation year before their first degree at that institution.

Twelve institutions responded with data, two provided incomplete data, eight responded saying that they do not offer foundations years and one refused to provide data. Six institutions did not respond to our request. The analysis was therefore based on the 12 institutions that provided data.

Glossary

Contextualised admissions: information and data used by universities and colleges to assess an applicant's prior attainment and potential, in the context of their individual circumstances.[48]

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 of low higher-education participation rates. These are defined by the POLAR3 measure.

English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD): a measure of relative levels of deprivation in small areas or neighbourhoods in England. The measure brings together 39 separate indicators across seven domains of deprivation including income, employment, health deprivation and disability, education and skills training, crime, barriers to housing and services and living environment.[49]

Free Schools Meals (FSM): an income-related benefit that can be used as an indicator of low income. Entitlement to free school meals is determined by the receipt of any of the following income-related benefits: Income Support, income-based Jobseekers Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit 7; child Tax Credit (provided they were not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and had an annual gross income of no more than £16,190, as assessed by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs), working Tax Credit run-on (paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit during the initial roll out of the benefit), and Universal Credit (this category was added from 29 April 2013).[50]

High-tariff university: a university which is either a Russell Group institution or has entry tariffs higher than the lowest Russell Group institution. As the report is only addressing English universities, this list comprises 29 institutions. 'Higher-tariff universities' is used interchangeably with 'elite universities.' When referring to research using different definitions, these will be provided.

Multiple Equality Measure (MEM): a multi-dimensional measure of disadvantage developed by UCAS. The MEM brings together information on several equality dimensions, for which large differences in the probability of progression into higher education exist. These equality dimensions include sex, ethnic group, POLAR3 classification, secondary education school sector (state or private), and income background (as measured by whether a person was in receipt of free school meals, a means-tested benefit while at school).[51]

[48] UCAS, 'Contextualised Admissions - What It Means for Your Students', Webpage, 2019.
[49] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *The English Indices of Deprivation 2019*, 2019.
[50] Chris Taylor, 'The Reliability of Free School Meal Eligibility as a Measure of Socio-Economic Disadvantage: Evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study in Wales', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 66, no. 1 (2018).
[51] UCAS, *Equality and Entry Rates Data Explorers*.

Participation of Local Areas 3 (POLAR3): classifies small areas across the UK into five groups, according to their level of young participation in HE. Each of these groups represents around 20 per cent of young people, and is ranked from quintile 1 (areas with the lowest young participation rates, considered as the most disadvantaged) to quintile 5 (highest young participation rates, considered most advantaged).[52]

Participation of Local Areas 4 (POLAR4): classifies small areas across the UK into five groups, according to their level of young participation in HE. Each of these groups represents around 20 per cent of young people, and is ranked from quintile 1 (areas with the lowest young participation rates, considered as the most disadvantaged) to quintile 5 (highest young participation rates, considered most advantaged). POLAR4 is the successor to POLAR3. The main difference between the two is that POLAR4 uses more recent data.[53]

Widening Participation: a strategic priority for the UK government and the higher education sector to address the discrepancies in HE participation between different social and demographic groups.

[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

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