



Access all areas?: a look at access, participation and higher education reform

Wednesday 7 September; 3:00pm-4:00pm;
Committee Room 18, House of Commons, Westminster, SW1A 0AA

Introduction to Higher Education reform

On 19 May 2016, the Higher Education and Research Bill was introduced to Parliament for its first reading in the House of Commons.

This Bill enacts a number of the reforms to the higher education system that the Government first announced in a Green Paper in November 2015, and reaffirmed in a White Paper in May 2016. These reforms aim to improve student choice and defend students' interests, which it proposes to achieve through opening up the higher education market to new providers, introducing a 'Teaching Excellence Framework' to assess the quality of teaching in universities, and creating a new 'Office for Students' to be the regulator for the sector.

Engines of social mobility

In introducing higher education reforms, the Government has been clear in its desire for universities to be 'engines of social mobility'.¹ This echoes its commitment to targets set in 2015 to double the proportion of disadvantaged students entering university from 2009 levels and to increase the number of BME students by 20%, both by 2020.²

At second reading of the Bill on 19 July 2016, Universities Minister Jo Johnson stated:

"The Bill reflects our determination to accelerate social mobility in this country through higher education...

"The Bill introduces a statutory duty on the office for students to promote equality of opportunity across the whole higher education lifecycle for disadvantaged students, and not just at the point of access... We will bring together the responsibilities of OFFA and HEFCE for widening access into the new office for students. As part of that body, the new director for fair access and participation will look beyond the point of access into higher education and across disadvantaged students' entire time in higher education. We will also require higher education providers to publish application, offer and progression rates by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background."³

Summarising access and participation in the Higher Education and Research Bill

This quote identifies the salient points within the Bill with regards to access and participation, which are further summarised below along with their clauses:

- The new Office for Students will have a statutory duty to "promote equality of opportunity in connection with access and participation" (*Clause 2(1)(d)*)
- Higher education providers must provide the Office for Students with 'transparency data' on course applications, offers and completions, broken down by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background (*Clause 9(2)*)
- 'Access agreements', which universities need to charge tuition fees above £6,000, will evolve into 'Access and Participation Plans' (*Clause 12 and clauses 28-36*)
- There will be an option for the Secretary of State to request a report on equality of opportunity, access and participation from the OfS (*Clause 36*)
- Bodies and institutions involved in applications will be required to provide 'application-to-acceptance information' to the Secretary of State and for research purposes, when asked (*Clauses 71 and 72*)
- An alternative student financial product – also termed 'sharia-compliant loans' – will be created to enable students unable to take out interest-bearing loans to access student loans (*Clause 78*)
- The role of the Director of Fair Access, and the accompanying Office for Fair Access (OFFA), will be merged into the new Office for Students (*Schedule 1*)

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/higher-education-and-research-bill-to-deliver-choice-and-opportunity-for-students>

² E.g. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/student-choice-at-the-heart-of-new-higher-education-reforms>

³ [Hansard, 19 Jul 2016, col. 788-789](#)



The current state of access

According to the latest figures from UCAS, the university entry rate of 18 year old students from the most disadvantaged (POLAR3 quintile 1) increased in England to 18.5% in 2014. In Scotland, the rate increased to 10.4%, while there were slight falls in Northern Ireland (to 15.7%) and Wales (to 16.6%).⁴

Compared to 5 years ago, using UCAS's data, 18 year olds from disadvantaged areas were more likely to go to university in all four nations of the UK: 30% more likely in England; 5% in Northern Ireland; 12% in Scotland; and, 23% in Wales.

However, this data only accounts for full-time undergraduates who are 18 when they enter higher education. The picture for access and participation when considering part-time students and mature students – whose demographics are known to be more likely to include students from access and participation backgrounds⁵ - is far more complicated, and more concerning. **The number of part-time students has plummeted by 38%⁶ and the number of mature students has dropped by over 180,000 since 2010.⁷**

While the causes behind these falls are complex, the number of students within both of these categories in recent years has been affected by the removal in 2008–09 of funding for students taking qualifications equivalent to or lower than ones which they already had, and by reforms to undergraduate funding in 2012–13, including an increase in fees following cuts to teaching grants and issues around eligibility for tuition fee loans. Following the removal of non-repayable maintenance grants for the poorest students as of the 2016/17 academic year, concerns have been voiced that the access to and participation within higher education of students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds will face even more new barriers over the coming years.

Bodies such as OFFA, NUS and the Equality Challenge Unit have also highlighted particular access issues for BME students and have particularly observed the disparity in the type of institutions BME students attend and in the subjects they study compared with white students.⁸

Problems with participation

There are also issues with the participation of students from particular backgrounds. This can be seen in the retention rates of certain students and also in the outcomes of students when they complete their studies.

Students at the most risk of leaving their courses early are students from neighbourhoods where there is not a great deal of participation in higher education, and mature students. For students from low participation neighbourhoods around 10 per cent disappear from the system while for mature students it is around 12 per cent. These students are also more likely to hold lower or non-traditional qualifications on entry. According to recent research 30-40 per cent of students consider leaving at some point during their course, while around a third of students who have left their course early cite financial or personal reasons for leaving.⁹

In terms of outcomes and academic attainment, there are notable differences in the degree classifications received by students on the basis of socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender and disability. In 2013–14, 57% of black and minority ethnic qualifying students obtained first or upper second class degrees compared to 71% of white students on comparable courses. In England the gap rose, with 60.3% of black and minority ethnic qualifiers obtaining firsts or upper seconds compared to 76.3% of white qualifiers.

Meeting ambitions on access and participation

Recent research by the Social Market Foundation, Open University and University Alliance has raised questions about the Government's ability to meet its stated access and participation targets by 2020.

⁴ <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/eoc-report-2015-v2.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/component/content/article?id=2060>

⁶ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pr/3771-statistical-first-release-224> and <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/sfr153>

⁷ Answer to [written question 36628](#), 9 May 2016

⁸ <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/external/equality-in-he-statistical-report-2013-students.pdf>

⁹ http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12238/2012_NUS_millionplus_Never_Too_Late_To_Learn.pdf



This has found that merely continuing the present trend in widening participation will not be sufficient to meet the ambition. By 2020, the participation rate would fall 5 percentage points short of what the ambition requires.¹⁰ These concerns particularly raised the problems of young people choosing to work over progressing to higher education; the conflict between encouraging routes into apprenticeships and aspiring for greater higher education participation; and, cuts to student support like maintenance grants.

The research found that the progress to date has disguised far greater success amongst a small number of universities in widening access and participation and substantial numbers of universities that have contributed little to the national picture: 10 institutions accounted for 32% of the increase in widening participation (under the government's measures), whereas half of institutions between them contributed only 9%.

Questions to consider within HE reforms

- What action can and should be taken to address the decline in part-time and mature student numbers?
- What mechanisms are being put in place to monitor the Government's progress in its targets for widening access and participation?
- From what academic year will sharia-compliant student loans be made available, helping access to higher education for significant numbers of, particularly, Muslim and BME students?
- How will transparency data be used to tangibly tackle issues around access and participation?
- Can and should the Bill go further in order to meet the government's commitments to access and participation?
- How can the successes at certain institutions be replicated amongst others where progress in widening participation has been much less marked?
- How can the Government ensure the independence of the Director of Fair Access to allow for robust challenge on access and participation?

For further information, please contact Alexander Lee, Secretariat to the APPG on Students (alexander.lee@nus.org.uk; info@appg-students.org.uk).

¹⁰ <http://smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Social-Market-Foundation-Widening-Participation-HE-data-pack-FINALv2.pdf>