Money changes everything

How is the invisible hand reshaping higher education? With the cap on student numbers about to be lifted, Danny Dorling analyses the trends in admissions to see what we can expect.
The higher education playing field is changing shape. It is tipping in new directions and is about to undergo its greatest transformation yet as the free market in student numbers is ushered in.

With the first cohort of students to pay higher tuition fees entering their final months of study, and controls on university student numbers due to be removed this autumn, now seems a good time to stop and take stock of changes to the student body and university admissions. We all know that participation in higher education is widening, but by how much? How have £9,000 annual fees changed education is widening, but by how much? How have £9,000 annual fees changed participation and controls on university student numbers is ushered in.

The rise of the BTEC – but there are more students with A levels, too

It is England – which has by far the most expensive university tuition fees in Europe – that has produced the greatest surprise. The 2014 intake had just enough warning of what was coming to be able to make alternative arrangements before embarking on their A levels. It turns out that more pupils than ever chose to go to university, especially in England, and from the poorest of areas. Why?

When MPs voted to triple the cap on tuition fees in England, there were protests on the streets and warnings that the hike could damage participation and social mobility.

The decision led to a flood of university applications in 2011-12 as young people rushed to study in the final year of lower fees, but demand for places fell significantly in 2012-13, the first year of the new system.

However, figures published last month show that the number of university applications and enrolments has recovered to 2010-11 levels – but only among some groups. Among English students at English institutions, the number of applications made by young people through UCAS for 2014 entry is back at 2010 levels (just under 1.5 million, and 11 per cent higher than in 2009).

The number of acceptances has climbed since 2012 and is now 6 per cent higher than in 2010 (see graph above). Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency released on 15 January show that the rise in acceptances has followed through into enrolments, with the number of full-time students aged 20 or under on full-time first-degree courses in the 2013-14 academic year up 5 per cent on 2010-11.

However, this positive news has been accompanied by a significant drop in the number of mature and part-time students, points out Conor Ryan, director of research and communications at the Sutton Trust.

In England, 26 per cent fewer part-time students began first-degree courses in 2013-14 than in 2009-10.

“This is a real problem,” says Ryan, because part-time degrees are important for social mobility and are often a route into higher education for those who did not get the chance to go to university when they left school. He stresses that the “government and universities need to investigate why that has happened”.

Ryan believes that the data on efforts to widen participation need closer scrutiny, too. While official figures show an improvement, with a growing proportion of school-leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds gaining entry to university, at the most prestigious institutions the gap in participation between rich and poor students remains very wide.

When they left school, students at Oxford and Cambridge are state school-leavers, when in fact the proportion is about 60 per cent. Meanwhile, with different universities offering different financial packages for students from poorer backgrounds, the financial system “can be quite difficult for young people and their teachers to navigate”. This should be simplified, he adds.

Holly Else

The Sutton Trust
The English higher education system provides a fine example of just such a conundrum. Rounding to whole numbers, for every three children from the poorest areas going to the “poshest” (high-entry tariff) universities in 2014, some 21 children from the most advantaged areas also went. Three years earlier, in 2011, the respective figures were two and 19. To put this another way, for every extra child from a poorer area allowed in 2014 into a high-tariff university, another two from the best-off areas arrived in the same year.

Students are more in demand than ever before – so many more offers are being made. The latest Ucas admissions figures give us a tantalising glimpse of what might happen this autumn when a free market is set to be introduced and universities in England will be allowed unprecedented freedom over the numbers of students they can admit.

The current labour market for the young is appalling. Some 750,000 young people – 17 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds – are unemployed, according to the official count. Many others are underemployed, working part-time or on zero-hours contracts, or even claiming to be self-employed to avoid the stigma of unemployment. What few jobs are on offer to young adults are mostly precarious, and many more offers are being made.
More young men than ever before are going to university in England, yet the gap in entry rates between them and young women remains a 'disadvantaged group' when it came to being offered university places.

"There remains a stubborn gap between men and female applicants which, on current trends, could eclipse the gap between rich and poor within a decade," she said.

Elsewhere in higher education, however, women are very much in the minority. Most professors are men (18 per cent), as are 80 per cent of vice-chancellors.

Danny Dorling

University applicants are 50 per cent more likely to get a full set of five offers than their counterparts were just a few years ago.

one in five of all school students predicted AAB at A level actually achieved that result or better in 2014, but the figures are there in black and white on page 67 of the report. The financial incentives for institutions to take more students have never been greater. As universities enrol more students, this inevitably will be followed by the greatest increase in debt ever experienced by young adults in England.

Indeed, more debt has been amassed by young people in England in the past few years than in all the previous centuries combined – a result of decisions made by children about whether or not to go to university. Most had little real choice about whether or not to take on the debt.

But, to corrupt an old line and remain persuasive, while there are seats to be sat in time to advance, let’s face the music and dance.

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