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Mind the opportunity gap: it's time to take the lie of the higher education landscape

A rapidly changing higher education sector is urged to ask who benefits from reforms

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By **Danny Dorling**



Source: Nick Shepherd

The controls on the numbers of students UK universities can enrol were fully lifted from last September, so we can start to take stock of the implications. According to the latest data from Ucas, published on 4 February, a record number of students once again applied to UK universities by the January deadline for 2016-17. However, as was also the case for 2015-16, that overall growth was due only to rapidly increasing numbers of applicants from overseas.

Acceptances into UK universities of undergraduates from the rest of the European Union rose by 11.1 per cent between 2014 and 2015, to 29,300. Given the acceleration in applications from overseas, acceptances are likely to be very much higher again by this autumn.

Why are so many overseas students coming to the UK – and especially to England – when it has the most expensive higher education in Europe? We could tell ourselves it is because the quality of what we have to offer is so good. Or we could examine how actively we market ourselves compared with institutions on the Continent that have little to gain from increased numbers given their much lower or non-existent fees. Or we could speculate that many young people from the rest of the EU – especially the poorer parts – have calculated that they will never earn enough to have to repay the loans (to which they are as entitled as domestic students). We could even worry that those who go on to earn high salaries abroad might forget to write to the Student Loans Company every year with their salary details and current address. Or we could simply celebrate our growing international popularity and the rising diversity on our campuses. I prefer to celebrate, but there are still immediate problems to address.

One is that the growth in international intake is disproportionately directed to the institutions with the highest entry requirements (with the exception of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, which change far more slowly). These are mostly the same institutions that have seen the greatest growth in home students since number controls were partially lifted in 2014-15. So our most crowded campuses are becoming even more crowded, while other, largely lower tariff institutions get only drips from the expanding international pool of applicants and mostly attract a declining share of home students from a birth cohort that is itself set to decline through to 2020.

So far, only those who are over 19 appear to have been put off from applying to English universities after the tripling of the tuition fee cap in 2012-13 and the forthcoming [conversion of maintenance grants to loans](#). It is very possible that most UK schoolchildren and their parents simply don't understand the loan repayments regime: in particular, that the terms and conditions can be retrospectively altered for the worse. Widening participation continues to improve, but at a slower rate than has been seen for many years, and the gap between the application rates for young people

from poorer areas compared with very affluent areas is not narrowing because even more people from affluent areas are also applying. The latter mostly apply only to higher tariff institutions, whose entry standards (the real ones rather than the advertised ones) are slightly lower than they used to be. Indeed, such “entry grade deflation” may be part of the explanation for the overall shifts.

Some of the widest inequalities in access are geographical. However, these can hide other inequalities. For example, of all children growing up in neighbourhoods in the middle quintile by deprivation, 28 per cent won university places last summer. However, only 9 per cent of the state-educated white boys eligible for free school meals living in those areas were accepted. Thus, more than nine-tenths of white boys from poor families in average neighbourhoods still do not go to university. This is one of the most extreme examples of what social scientists today call “intersectionality”.

Admissions statistics can be hard to follow, but it is worth persevering if you want to know how the landscape of opportunity is slowly changing. For all young people going to all UK universities, the least advantaged quintile by all measures saw their chances of admission rise by only 0.3 percentage points in autumn 2015, compared with 2014 arrivals. When pundits say that participation is widening, it is because they are not comparing that statistic to the 1.1 percentage point rise for the most advantaged quintile. This discrepancy was first revealed in [Ucas’ end of cycle report for 2015](#), published in December, but few people commented on the fact that the opportunity gap between the haves and have-nots is therefore growing, even while almost everyone’s chances of university admission are improving. Perhaps the statistics are so hard to understand that the usual commentators did not notice that inequalities in opportunity are rising.

It is important to dig below the headline figures. The cost of going to university is now very similar across all UK universities for English children, since almost all institutions charge the maximum £9,000 tuition fee. But the

advantage of going to university might well vary according to which one you attend, so it makes sense to look at who goes where.

Almost 80 per cent of applicants to UK universities get an offer, rising to 93 per cent of those who made five choices on their application form. The number of unconditional offers doubled, from 11,300 in 2014 to 23,400 in 2015, but this is still only 2.5 per cent of all offers, so there is great scope for further rises and controversy. We now know that last summer the largest increase in enrolments was among high tariff providers, whose students tend to go on to the best-paying jobs. They took in an extra 7 per cent of students compared with the year before, and now account for 27 per cent of all admissions. That proportion is very likely to rise further, and faster, by this summer, given the pattern of current applications.

This rapid expansion means that higher tariff institutions can take in a tiny number of additional students from very poor backgrounds. In summer 2015, only 3.3 per cent of children (or one in 30) in the most disadvantaged quintile of English neighbourhoods secured a place at a high tariff institution by age 18. That is a rise of 0.9 percentage points since 2011; in other words, in four years the increase was less than one extra child in every 100. Meanwhile, children growing up in the most advantaged quintile of English neighbourhoods were still more than six times more likely to gain entry to a high tariff institution by age 18 in 2015. More than one in every five did so (20.7 per cent): an increase of 2.8 percentage points since 2011, or an extra child in every 36. In other words, the rate of entry from the most advantaged quintile of areas to high-tariff institutions grew more than three times faster than that from the least advantaged quintile. Of course, many young people go to university at age 19, after a gap year, so these are not the final all-age admissions rates, but they are the most comparable and up-to-date figures.

In contrast to England, Scotland shows what a real narrowing of inequalities would look like. There, the most dramatic change has been in the proportion of children from the most disadvantaged quintile of areas going to the highest tariff universities. Home student applications continue to rise in Scotland even as they begin to stall in England. However, wider recent

changes in Scottish society, such as the growing confidence in the country's ability to govern itself, may be just as important as what the universities themselves are doing.

The lack of a greater improvement in widening participation in England in 2015 was remarkable given that the number of 18-year-olds who gained at least AAA at A level fell by 315 between 2013 and 2014 in the most advantaged quintile of areas, and rose by 130 in the least advantaged quintile. However, children from the most advantaged English neighbourhoods remain nine times more likely than their peers in the least advantaged areas to get three As by age 18. So entry to higher tariff institutions remains fractionally more progressive than the underlying distribution of very high qualifications. In short, all that huge effort made by university administrators and outreach officers does have an effect, but it is so slight that we can only just detect it.

The final lesson of the Ucas figures is that fewer students appear to be taking gap years. Quite why is hard to fathom. Maybe it is too expensive to stay at home or go travelling for a year in the aftermath of the global economic crash of 2008. Or maybe university marketing has become so effective that more 18-year-olds are enticed to apply as soon as they can. Either way, as their number declines and tuition fees remain static (so appear to institutions to fall in real terms), we can expect the battle to admit new students to get ever more ferocious, subtle and well targeted – in ways that will not always be in the best interests of students.

The implications of making the wrong choice at 18 are now huge for English-domiciled students facing high fees and half a lifetime of repayments. We forget that markets tend not to work well when the consumers get only one shot at them, no matter how much information they are showered with. The higher education landscape is changing rapidly. Now would be a very good time to take stock of the changes and to determine in whose interest they are working. In particular, where a high tariff and low tariff institution are located side by side, and where one is winning and the other losing, it may make a

great deal of sense to consider merging them. Just as educational inequalities were addressed when I was a child by merging so many grammar schools and their abutting secondary moderns, doing this would give the poorest students a much better chance of accessing the genuine social mobility that universities so often promise but less often deliver.

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