

Widening Participation and Fair Access: An Overview of the Evidence

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Introduction

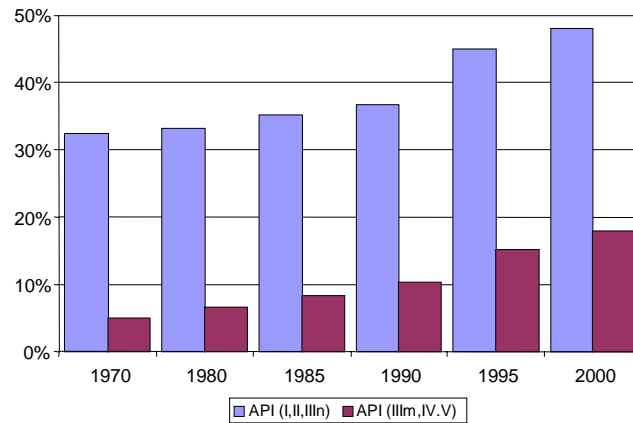
1. In many ways the issues of widening participation and fair access are quite distinct, and the measures required to address them are different. Nevertheless, in some important respects they are closely related, and in political discourse they are often conflated. Broadly speaking, widening participation is a sector-wide issue whereas fair access is one that concerns individual institutions.
2. Widening participation broadly refers to the widening of the social groups that benefit from higher education. Fair access is less straightforward. Most obviously the term refers to the fairness, or otherwise, of the admissions processes of institutions (and even this provides room for argument: for example, whether it is past performance or future potential that should be considered). But it has also come to refer to the mix of students in individual institutions. On the one hand, it is quite possible to widen participation without having fair access in either sense of the term. On the other hand, it is possible to concentrate on fair access in a way that detracts from a broader effort to widen participation.

Widening Participation

3. It is a well rehearsed fact that children from better-off backgrounds are far more likely to participate in higher education than children from poorer backgrounds, who also tend to enter later and are more likely to study part-time. Also well known is the fact that the absolute gap in participation between the higher and lower social groups has not narrowed over the past few decades. Chart 1 shows this clearly. If anything, the absolute gap has widened: in 1970, 32 percent of the higher social groups and 5 percent of the lower groups participated — a gap of 27 percentage points. In 2000, 48 percent of the higher social groups participated compared with 18 percent of the lower groups — a gap of 30 percentage points.

Chart 1

Actual API of lower and higher social groups over time

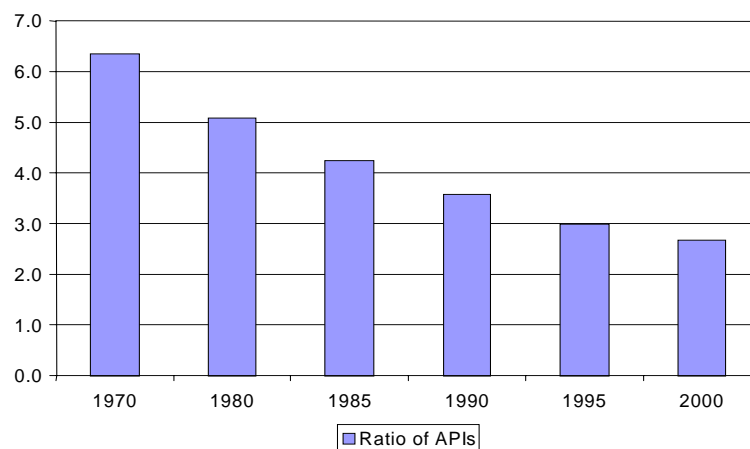


Source: Table 1.1 Dearing Report 6. Updated from Social Trends (dataset ST30313).

4. There is another way of viewing this, however, which suggests that there has been quite a lot of progress. Chart 2 shows that in 1970 the higher social groups were more than 6 times more likely to participate in higher education than the lower groups, and this ratio had reduced to just less than 3 times by 2000.

Chart 2

In 1960 higher SEGs were 7 times more likely to enter HE. The difference had reduced to 3 times by 1995



Source: Table 1.1 Dearing Report 6. Updated from Social Trends (dataset ST30313).

5. What is more, the significance of this gap has reduced enormously, and on a like-for-like basis, even the 3:1 ratio overstates the gap, relative to the earlier differences. This is because the number of people in those groups defined as lower social groups has declined very considerably over the years. As recently as 1970, nearly 90 percent¹ of the population was defined as being in those groups, but that has now declined to about 40 percent. As a consequence, the scale of the problem is very much smaller than it was previously. Whereas after the war and right up to the 1960s the number of students from the lower groups would have had to increase more than four-fold to achieve parity with the higher groups, only a 40 percent increase would be required today.

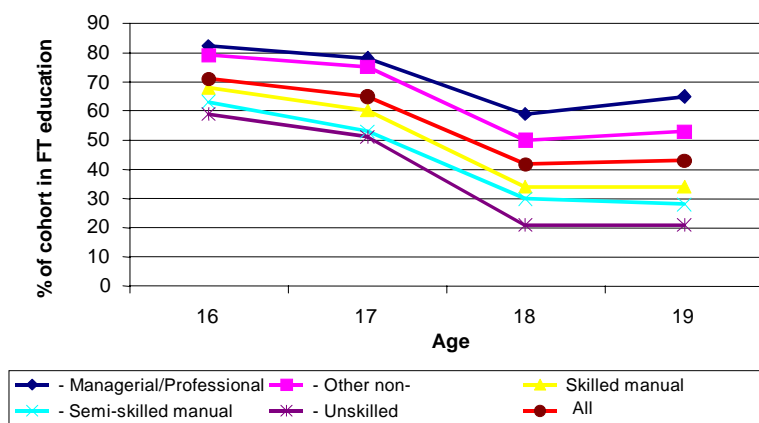
6. So, whether you believe that things have got better or not depends on whether you wish to show that the glass is half empty or half full. However, better or not, it is still apparent that there is a large gap between the different social groups and it is this that widening participation needs to bridge.

7. In order to widen participation, we need to understand the reasons for the current differences. One welcome development over the past two years has been the recognition that the disparity in participation is by and large not a problem caused by higher education nor one which higher education is able to resolve. Higher education has an important role, of course, in raising the duration of a pupil's time in education through initiatives such as summer schools and Saturday schools. However, it is very much a subsidiary one. Chart 3 shows the disparity in staying-on rates at school for ages 16+ between different social groups.

¹ Statistic quoted in the report of the National Commission Of Inquiry Into Higher Education in 1997.

Chart 3

Staying-on rates in full-time education by social class



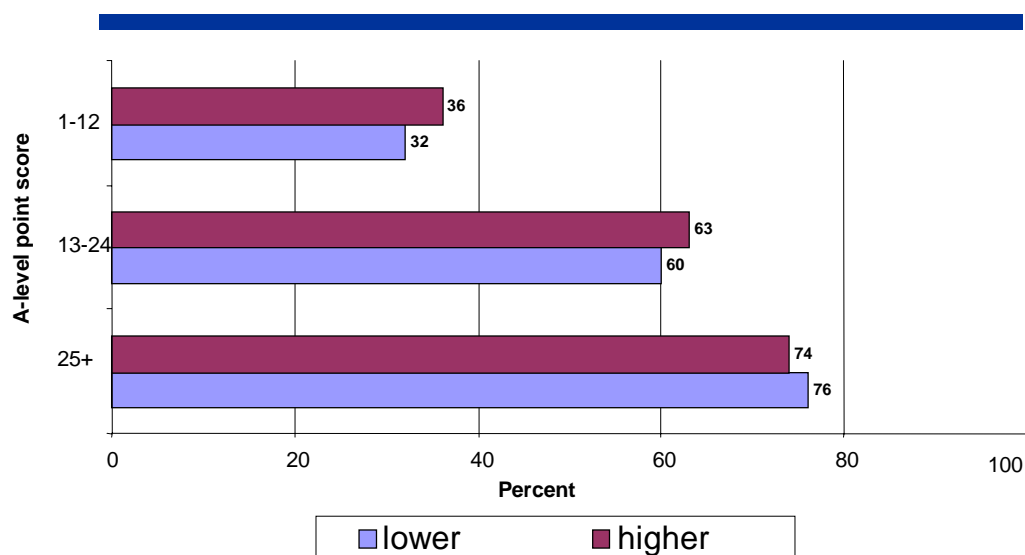
Source: Youth Cohort Surveys (2000) for 16,17,18, and 19 year-olds

8. The chart shows that at every age, 16, 17 and then 18+, there is a greater falling away out of education by pupils from the lower social groups. If this were addressed, and students from lower social groups were to stay on in greater numbers and achieve the level 3 qualifications required for higher education, then participation would be widened. This is illustrated in Chart 4, which shows that once they have achieved the relevant qualifications, students from all social groups are equally likely to participate in higher education. And there is other evidence that, once in higher education, students of all social groups with similar school achievements behave in a similar way². How well they do in school (and at A level in particular) is the key determinant of whether they go on to higher education, and how well they do there.

² For example, their drop out rates are similar – HEFCE Memorandum to the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee.

Chart 4

Participation in HE at age 18 by A-level point score and parents' SEG



Source: DfES. Calculated from Youth Cohort Study data.

9. It could be, of course, that higher education institutions are putting potential students off by their character or by what they offer. It could also be the prospect of student debt that is putting them off. The evidence to support these conclusions is weak. As far as student debt is concerned, the introduction of fees and maintenance loans in 1998 caused no change in the pattern of student enrolment in higher education, either in absolute terms or differentially by social group³. It is still too soon after these policy changes to be able to draw definitive conclusions, but other evidence seems to support the view that demand for HE is relatively insensitive to price. In New Zealand, for example, participation by the most disadvantaged groups (Maoris and Pacific Islanders) increased after prices went up, as did demand in this country after maintenance grants were replaced by loans in the late 1980s. Australia and Ireland provide other examples where changes in the cost of HE (both up and down) do not seem to have affected demand⁵.

³ This finding – from internal HEFCE research that will be published shortly – is based not strictly on social class but on social classifications, based on small areas.

⁵ It should be noted, however, that there is survey and focus group evidence (eg 'Attitudes to Debt' a report for Universities UK and HEFCE by Professor Claire Callender and the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, 2000, ISBN 1 84036 094 1) that pupils from poor families are more debt-averse than others, and therefore report themselves as less likely to participate in HE if it involves debt. However, it remains to be seen if these reported attitudes translate into behaviour. There is no evidence so far that it has. It could also be that financial considerations are affecting the institutions that poorer students attend — see "Supply and Demand in Higher Education" – HEFCE 2001.

10. It is sometimes suggested that young people from poor backgrounds — especially those without an academic bent — are discouraged from entering higher education because the courses that are offered are unattractive to them and irrelevant to their needs and inclinations. However, because non-participation in HE follows non-participation in school, it would be necessary to show that decisions to leave school at 16 were taken because of a view about the nature and offering of higher education — it is there that the main differences occur. It seems implausible to think that it should be so. And the evidence from focus groups and other surveys suggests that the strongest single factor which leads young people from poorer backgrounds to decide against staying on in school and going on to higher education is the desire to earn money, followed by a feeling that higher education is just not the sort of activity that people of their class would engage in⁶. It is these attitudes that we need to understand better and to tackle.

11. One particularly illuminating finding that has emerged from the work done by Louise Archer is that young people from poorer backgrounds believe strongly that the rates of return they will secure from higher education depend to a large extent on which institution they go to. Many are convinced that they would not be able to get into a sufficiently good institution to achieve a high rate of return. This provides a link between concern with widening participation and fair access. If it were demonstrable that access to high-prestige institutions was not closed to young people from poor backgrounds, then a key to widening participation would be to provide education and information. This would ensure that pupils are aware of the benefits of higher education and that it is in their interests to achieve well at school and to be ambitious in the institutions they apply for.

12. There is one footnote on the question of widening participation. If we are to widen participation, this implies necessarily that we must expand the system at the same time. Especially with a growing population, the alternative would be to deny higher education to appropriately qualified people from better-off backgrounds in order to make way for those from poorer backgrounds. Even if this were the right thing to do, it would be politically so brave as to be unlikely.

Fair Access

13. What do we mean by fair access? A reasonable definition would be that no institution should exclude applicants on anything other than academic grounds, and in particular that extraneous matters like family circumstances, social class or ethnic origin should not enter into decisions about admission. Most obviously, fair access refers to admissions processes. Institutions must ensure that there is nothing in these that unfairly prejudices the ability of any applicant to be selected on merit⁷. However, this might be regarded as too narrow a definition. For example, an institution might have a perfectly fair access policy in these terms, but be so unwelcoming that it deters people from some social groups

⁶ Louise Archer (2003) 'The 'value' of higher education', Chapter Six in Archer, L., Hutchings, M. & Ross, A. (2003) *Higher Education and social class: issues of exclusion and inclusion* (London, Routledge Falmer).

⁷ A well-known and obvious example was the discovery in the 1990s that the computer programme used by St George's Medical School to manage their admissions coded ethnic minority applicants in such a way as to make it less likely that they would be selected.

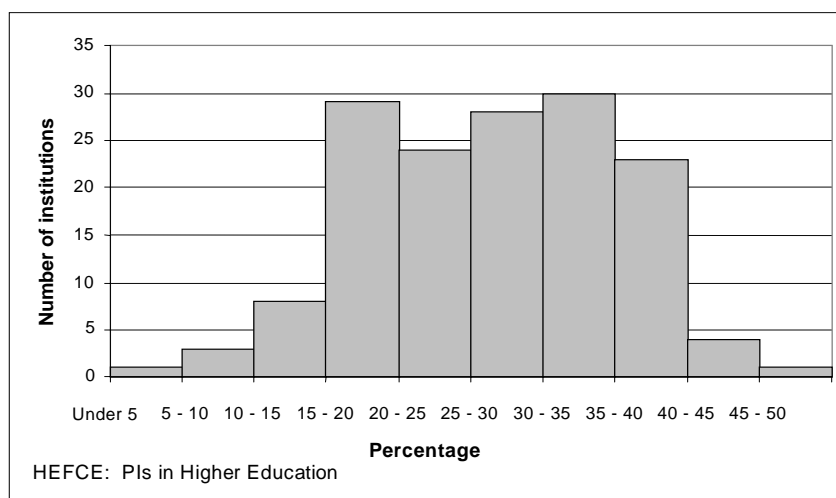
or of some ethnic origins. And even if the institution does not put them off, some people may be put off for other reasons⁸. It could be argued that in order to achieve fair access institutions should be making more active efforts to attract such people. The social mix of students actually achieved, and therefore their success in attracting applications, as well as institutions' admissions processes, are elements in fair access.

14. There is no doubt that our higher education institutions are very different in their social composition. But then our higher education institutions are very different in almost all respects.

15. Chart 5 shows the spread of the lower social groups between higher education institutions. Some have nearly 50 percent of students from such groups, while others have less than 5 percent.

Chart 5

Spread of percentage of students from lower social groups by institution

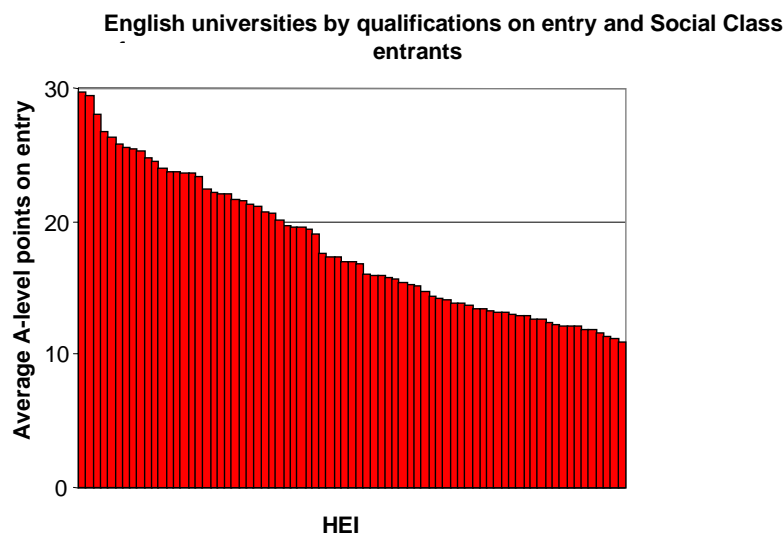


16. All other things being equal, this would appear to provide evidence that access is not fair. Those institutions at the left-hand end of the scale are much more socially exclusive than those at the right-hand end. But all else is not equal. Over the years, in this country, we have developed a clear hierarchy of institutions in terms of the academic demands they make for entry. Chart 6 shows the average A-level points achieved by students attending each institution, and it will be seen how different they are in

⁸ For example, students from poor backgrounds are known to travel less far on average to attend HE. See HEFCE Report on Supply and Demand in Higher Education (2001).

Chart 6

A-Level Hierarchy

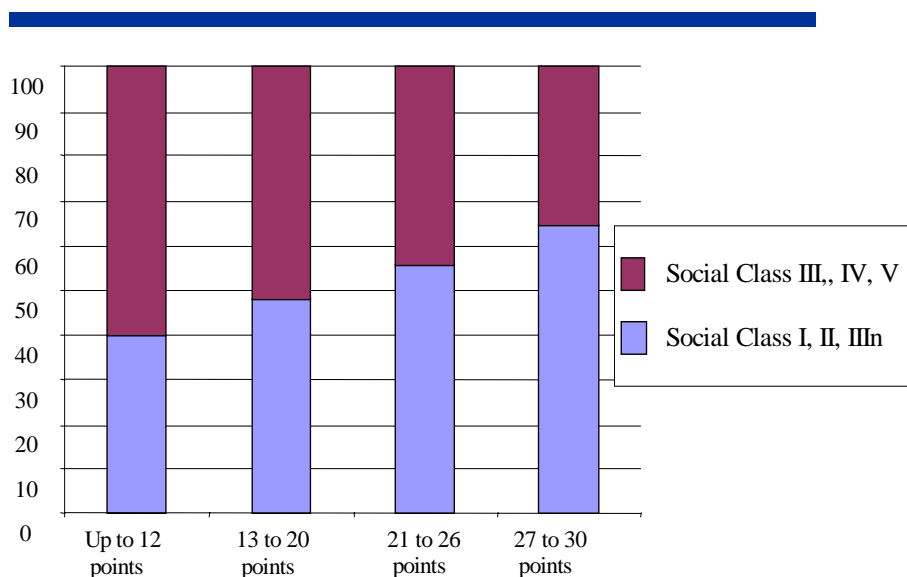


Source:HEFCE from HESA Data

17. This situation arises because in this country students are entitled to apply to any university they wish — and they take advantage of this to a greater extent than students in other countries — and institutions are entitled to select for admission whichever students they wish. This has resulted in the clear hierarchy demonstrated in Chart 6. By and large students apply for the most demanding institutions they think will accept them and institutions select the best qualified students that apply to them. Because school achievement is so closely linked to social background, this makes it inevitable that some institutions will be more socially skewed than others. Chart 7 shows the relationship between A-level scores and family background. The difference in performance between social groups continues a pattern that began with GCSEs. There is a very strong bias at this stage which makes it inevitable in a meritocratic system that those institutions making the highest academic demands will also be the most socially skewed

Chart 7

A-level points by social class



Derived from HEFCE PI Report 2002

18. The academic differences explain most of the social differences between institutions. Even if university admissions processes were completely fair, the social profiles of the most academically demanding institutions are likely to be unbalanced. By and large nobody seriously suggests that university admissions processes are deliberately unfair, and indeed, what research evidence there is confirms that they are not⁹.

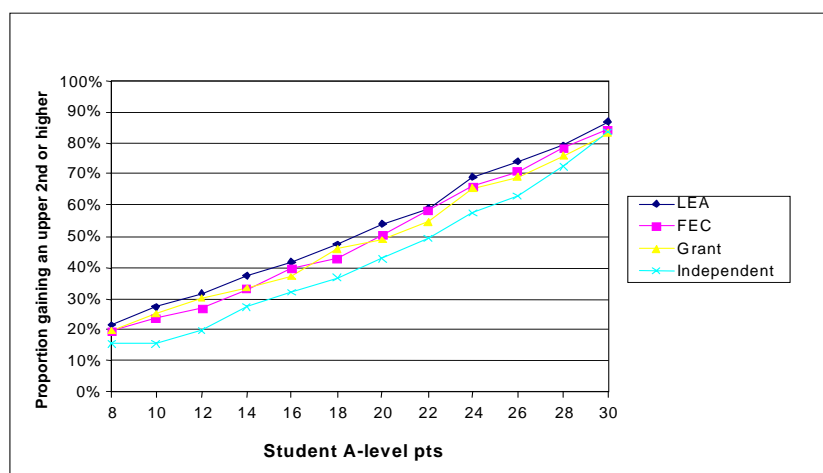
19. Most universities base their admissions policies on A-level grades, informed by reports from schools and, in some cases, interviews. But they need to be explicit about the basis for their decisions. Generally they are not, but if pressed most would say that they are admitting those students that they believe have the potential to do best in their institution¹⁰. They have to make a judgement about which students have the potential to do best, and generally A levels are a reasonable pointer. But A levels do not tell the whole story. For example, it is now well established that pupils from independent schools do less well in university than pupils from state schools with similar A level grades, as is shown in Chart 8.

⁹ See, for example, Modood and Shiner 'Help or Hindrance? Higher Education and the Route to Ethnic Equality' (British Journal of Sociology of Education No 2 2002). In modeling the probability of receiving an offer, they found that Social Class was not a significant factor. Ethnicity was, but only when an interaction variable with institution type was introduced, which showed that most ethnic minorities were significantly less likely to be made an offer at pre-92 universities. There was, however, no reported exploration of an interaction between Social Class and institution type, so it is not clear whether such a specific effect also exists for Social Class.

¹⁰ This is not the only possible basis for selecting students. In 'The Shape of the River' William G. Bowen and Derek Bok offer three possible bases besides academic potential. 1. That the applicants, even if they may not do better than others while at university, have the potential to develop and become leaders of their community or profession later in life. 2. That the admission of one applicant in preference to another would create a better mix of students on a course or in an institution (this criterion is probably more applicable in some subjects than others, and may well fall foul of the Human Rights Act in this country). 3. That the admission of one candidate rather than another is more likely to increase the university's endowment in due course.

Chart 8

A-level points and degree success by school type



20. This is not an attack on A levels. A levels remain an extremely effective way of identifying academic potential, and we would be foolish to undermine them in any way¹¹. But it is clear too that universities need to use a certain amount of discretion in making their judgements. In the past there has been concern that when using discretion they have tended to favour the better-off students. It is unfortunate that now, when some are exercising discretion with evidence to back up the exercise of that discretion, they are coming under fire from independent schools which believe that universities are discriminating unfairly against their pupils. Universities need to be careful though. It would be intolerable if some students were excluded from universities in favour of others because of bias, prejudice or unsupported theories¹². The knowledge that, on average, pupils from certain types of school do worse at university than others is useful general information, but it does not help in individual cases to decide whether to admit one applicant in preference to another. Admissions tutors badly need additional tools in order to be able to discriminate between applicants.

21. The Sutton Trust has funded a pilot of the American scholastic aptitude test (SAT), in British schools, conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research, which showed promising results. It is certainly clear that something further is needed, and the SAT is one tool which may be helpful for this purpose.

22. This discussion illustrates that the question of fair access, and of what would constitute a robust admissions process, is extremely complex. We have to be very careful. We need firstly to understand where the problems lie. Secondly we need to be honest about the implications of all this. There are things that universities ought to be doing to widen participation and achieve fairer access, but if we misdiagnose the problem we will prescribe solutions that may do more harm than good.

¹¹ We know, for example, that A Levels are a very good predictor of the degree class that students will obtain. (Bekhradnia & Thompson 'Who Does Best at University?' - HEFCE 2002).

¹² Examples of unsupported theories are that pupils from schools without a track record of achievement at A level or of sending pupils to university will do better than their peers with similar A level grades; and that the same applies to pupils whose parents have not themselves been through higher education.

23. It would be possible to achieve one notion of fair access by imposing, for example, quotas of different social groups on institutions. Effectively, if we did this, we would remove the right of institutions to select those applicants whom they judge to be the very best. Selection would have to be on some basis other than ability. This would make the whole application process extremely haphazard from the student's point of view since, by and large, students at present form a view of where they stand in the intellectual pecking order and make their applications accordingly. The basis for applications would need to be completely rethought.

24. Fortunately, this seems highly unlikely¹³. What is more likely is that institutions will be given an idea of the social profile that they 'ought' to have, given the average ability of their intake, the subject studied, and so on — essentially the HEFCE benchmarks at present — and then judged according to how close they are to these. However, it should be noted that, according to HEFCE, these are not targets, and even with this caveat, we need to be a little careful.

25. The benchmarks are quite good for their purpose of comparing indicators, but they are not perfect. For example, they rely on UCAS data, which record 30 points only as the maximum a student can obtain at A level. But there are some universities — two in particular — where the average entrant may have 4 or 5 A levels, perhaps all at grade A. That might well mean that the benchmarks are misleading or inaccurate in these cases. What is more, they are based purely on previous exam results and subjects studied; they take no account of other factors or of potential that the raw scores may not reveal.

26. There is one detailed aspect of the admissions processes in this country that makes higher education admission more uncertain and less robust than it need be: most applications are decided before the A-level scores of the applicants are known. Most applications are decided on the basis of predicted A-level scores, together with school reports and pupils' statements. This provides a further, and apparently unnecessary, aspect of the process where unfairness or bias could creep in. Moves to a post-qualification admissions system would certainly ease the job of institutions as they try to deal fairly between applicants.

¹³ In an interview with the Education Guardian on 4 March, Margaret Hodge, Minister of State for Higher Education, said that the Government had no plans to impose quotas on institutions.

Conclusion

27. The Government's concern with widening participation and fair access is really very largely a concern with young, largely full-time, traditional students. It barely touches on the question of lifelong learning and the increasing number of mature students who participate in education throughout their working lives. Arguably, this is the more pressing educational and economic concern, but the questions of widening participation, and particularly fair access, are important for social reasons. Those who undergo higher education when they are young achieve the greatest benefits through their lives, and there is a strong belief that the more prestigious the institution the greater the benefit¹⁴. In social policy terms, therefore, widening the participation of young people, and fair access, are extremely important.

28. It is apparent that higher education itself has a limited role to play in widening participation. It is important, but it is by no means the major player. Aspirations and achievement have to be worked on at a much younger age for this to translate into widening participation. Nor, despite what remains to be done, should we lose sight of what has already been achieved. There is very much greater participation in higher education than there was, and the number of those affected by the differences in participation by the different social groups is very much smaller than in the past.

29. The Government is right to concern itself with the question of fair access. In terms of the individual it is not sufficient simply to participate in higher education. That is important, but the institution they go to is also important, and in social policy terms, frustrating though some find it, the Government's concern with the 'top' universities is understandable.

30. There does appear to be a problem in that, disproportionately, students from poor backgrounds enter less prestigious institutions, which provide less benefit than others further up the hierarchy. In part, this is again because of differential performance at school by different social groups. But, as discussed earlier, that does not appear to tell the whole story.

31. Institutions need to ensure that they get the applications. They also need to be more confident than it is possible to be at present that they are identifying students with the potential to succeed best at their institution. This will not be achieved by imposing quotas on institutions. That could be done, but it would imply a very different notion of fair access. It would also imply far-reaching changes in the nature and characteristics, not just of individual institutions, but also of the whole HE system.

32. In pursuit of a more acceptable definition of fair access, institutions should ensure as far as possible that they admit those applicants most likely to do best academically. To achieve this, the most urgent need, besides ensuring that more young people from poorer backgrounds get to the starting point, is to give admissions staff more effective means than they have at present to identify potential. A levels play an extremely important role, but alone they are not sufficient to do the job that is required of them at the margins. Other diagnostic tools are needed.

¹⁴ Good research on this is not available, and there are suggestions that the differences between universities — other than a small number of the most prestigious — are relatively small and decline over time. However, this is not a conclusion that can be reached with confidence, and there is no doubt that the most prestigious universities do indeed confer disproportionate advantage.