Towards Equity: Developing a National Approach to Improving Social Justice through Higher Education in England

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education (HE) is charged with multiple goals, which are often in tension and conflict with one another (Castells, 2001). Two prominent goals are, on the one hand, improving social justice, and, on the other, improving the productivity and competitiveness of the national economy. The UK has addressed head on the political ‘compromise’ of widening access to higher education to promote social justice, and improving the economic capacity of individuals and the nation. For this reason, England (as the largest country within the UK) has been selected as a case study to explore how national policy tools can be used to navigate the compromise, and promote greater equity for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups by working through higher education institutions. Two contemporary national policy tools are considered, Access and Participation

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Plans and the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, demonstrating how they are designed to address inequalities in relation to who participates in higher education through fairness, and to promote equality of outcomes, or equity, through inclusion (Marginson, 2011). The second half of the chapter focuses on student retention and success in higher education, as this is essential to achieve equity.

The Compromise: Economic Returns and Social Justice

The two goals of economic development and social justice are frequently placed in opposition to each other, and achieving both is framed as a compromise, as they seek to align individualist and collectivist political philosophies: individualised wealth accumulation at the expense of others, and the re-distribution of wealth and resources to achieve greater equality for the benefit of all. Thus, the role of universities may be viewed as needing to embrace these tensions and contradictory functions (Castells, 2001, p. 212). Alternatively, social justice and economic growth can be viewed as mutually supportive, in which education plays a fundamental role, furnishing individuals and communities with knowledge and skills that facilitate both personal and societal economic opportunities and promote greater cohesion and equality, and simultaneously generating a surplus necessary to support the re-distribution of wealth and greater equality in society (Frainstein, 2001). While this approach can be critiqued as naïve, or accepting of capitalism, the so-called Third Way (Giddens, 1998) was influential at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, when the contemporary phase of widening participation began in England and the rest of the UK.

The Drive for Social Justice in Europe

The Europe 2020 strategy sets a target for at least 40% of 30–34-year-olds to complete an HE qualification by 2020 (European Commission, 2010). Fifteen countries have achieved their targets, while the majority are approaching them; Portugal is one of the countries furthest from achieving its target. Ireland and Luxembourg are also significantly adrift, but they both have particularly high national targets. As is discussed above, achieving participation targets is two-fold: it involves increasing the number of students who enter higher education, and increasing the proportion of those students who successfully complete their studies. Furthermore, it

can be argued that students from diverse backgrounds should not only have equal outcomes in HE, but that this should translate into success beyond HE in employment and other life chances too. This issue is discussed to some extent in relation to England in this chapter, but it is not the primary focus.

The 2011 Modernisation Agenda (Eurydice, 2011) states that it requires a joint effort of all Member States, higher education institutions and the European Commission to proactively work towards the objectives of increasing participation and achievement in higher education. In the US context there has been significant research about student persistence and attrition (see e.g. Troxel, 2010; Pascarella, 1985). Vincent Tinto, one of the leading figures in this aspect of higher education research, states that ‘Access without support is NOT opportunity’ (Tinto, 2008). He argues that diversifying the student population but failing to support these students to succeed does not contribute to overcoming social inequality or promoting social justice. Similar sentiments are found in many of the statements about the on-going priorities for the development of the European Higher Education Area, since the Prague Communiqué in 2001. The London Communiqué (2007) was explicit in stating the commitment to access and completion of higher education for diverse students ‘... the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations’, and students should be ‘... able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background’.

In the Yerevan communiqué (2015) there is greater emphasis on the quality and relevance of learning and teaching, fostering the employability of graduates throughout their lives and making higher education more inclusive to widen opportunities for access, completion and progression (European Commission, 2010). These commitments are re-iterated in the Paris (2018) Communiqué, and it is noted:

We recognize that further effort is required to strengthen the social dimension of higher education. In order to meet our commitment that the student body entering and graduating from European higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe’s populations, we will improve access and completion by under-represented and vulnerable groups. (p. 4)

EXPANSION, DIVERSITY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUITY IN ENGLAND

In contrast to most other countries the UK, especially England and Scotland, can be understood to be quite advanced with the agenda of widening participation, and to have achieved a degree of maturity (Thomas, 2020). Over the past 20-plus years many of the challenges associated with widening participation discussed by Amaral (in this volume) have been experienced in England, and national policy instruments have been developed with the intention of addressing the issues arising.

The expansion of the sector and the massification of higher education (Trow, 1970) did not result in equality of participation. The 1963 ‘Robbins Report’ (Committee on Higher Education, 1963), recommended, and resulted in, an expansion of the sector, and established the so-called Robbins principle that higher education places ‘should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment’, rather than determined by family background and reproducing capitalism and inequality. Subsequently in 1992 the Further and Higher Education Act significantly changed the higher education sector, and in particular 35 polytechnics became universities, and later other institutions applied for and were granted degree awarding powers and university status, thus a unitary rather than a binary higher education system was created. 1997 heralded the publication of the ‘Dearing Report’—the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Ron Dearing (NCIHE), the first major review of higher education since the Robbins Report. Although widening participation was not the primary focus of the Dearing Report, two sections (reports 5 and 6) presented evidence about the participation of different groups in higher education. This analysis, and other data and research from the time, showed that despite significant expansion of the sector in the 1980s and 1990s, students from lower socio-economic groups and ethnic minority groups in particular remained significantly under-represented, especially in the traditional universities, compared to the post-1992 institutions (Thomas, 2001).

These patterns of inequality in participation persisted despite the expansion of the sector and the creation of the unitary system. Students from families that have historically participated in higher education increased their demand for higher education, especially at the traditional and pre-1992 universities. These stratified choices were reinforced by perceptions by universities about the relative quality of students from different

types of schools and backgrounds. In contrast, new students, that is, first-generation entrants from lower socio-economic groups and black and minority ethnic backgrounds, tended to enter 'new' universities that had previously been polytechnics. Thus, expansion of the higher education system in England resulted in maximally maintained inequality, as the extra supply of places were taken up by middle class students, including women, who had been under-represented, but by the end of the 1990s were slightly over-represented (Thomas, 2001). There was also an expansion in mature age students (who were frequently women), and this was distributed across institutional types, with approximately one third participating in traditional universities and two thirds in modern universities (Coffield & Vignoles, 1997, p. 12).

An expansion in the number of undergraduates also resulted in an increase in the supply of graduates entering the labour market, and degree inflation (Berg, 1970) as the characteristic of higher education as a positional good is undermined. In response to these labour market challenges, traditional graduates aimed to differentiate themselves, but not as they had done previously simply by attending higher education, but by ensuring they graduated from elite institutions within the stratified system, and also by pursuing postgraduate study. Various studies show that students from non-traditional groups have poorer progression experiences in both the (graduate) labour market and postgraduate study, (Thomas & Tight, 2011, pp. 256–258). Furthermore, when students from these groups do participate in postgraduate study they are more likely to be taught postgraduate programmes than research degrees. Progression to postgraduate study is affected by financial factors (Stuart et al., 2008) and earlier decisions such as subject studied and institution attended (Wakeling & Kyriacou, 2010). The English higher education sector therefore also exhibited Effectively Maintained Inequality (Lucas, 2001), where students from families that had historically participated in HE favoured traditional, pre-1992 universities to differentiate themselves, particularly in the labour market, in the face of credentialism and degree inflation.

In England a further challenge to delivering equity in higher education has been the shift in responsibility for the cost of higher education from state to students. A partial shift in responsibility was a key outcome of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), as it was argued that individuals who benefit from HE should bear some of the cost. The then Labour government introduced to England tuition fees of £1000 and student loans to cover fees and maintenance costs, and thus introduced financial

disincentives and barriers to participation for students from lower socio-economic groups, in recognition of the individual financial returns from participating in higher education, but jeopardising the goal of social justice especially for some student groups (see Callender in this volume). The Higher Education Act 2004 introduced variable tuition fees, allowing institutions to charge ‘top-up’ fees, up to a value of £3000. These were increased incrementally, until the Browne Review in 2010, which raised fees to £9000 per year. The introduction of tuition fees in 2004 raised considerable concern about the debt students would incur and the negative impact this would have on the participation of students from lower socio-economic groups. This resulted in the instigation of a regulator—the Director of Fair Access—to ensure that higher education institutions used a proportion of their additional fee income to undertake activities to improve the access of students from lower socio-economic groups to higher education. Most universities therefore undertake outreach work in schools with low rates of progression to HE, and offer financial support for those most in need. These activities often involve HE students as ‘ambassadors’, and aim to increase school pupils’ understanding about the opportunities available in higher education, and how to gain entry. In addition, universities organise various visits and residential activities on campus to provide school pupils with further insight into the world of higher education, and to inform decision making about progression to HE and choice of institution and subjects to be studied. Student mentors often work with school pupils pre-entry, to encourage and support them on their journey towards higher education.

Over time, and as the English approach to widening participation has matured, the focus of the access regulator and the higher education sector has shifted from funded-projects and specialised units to widen access, to embrace the student lifecycle, taking into account not just who enters university, but also issues of equality of outcomes relating to continuation, completion and attainment in higher education, and progression into the labour market and further study. There have also been gradual modifications in the views about what needs to change, early institutional efforts at widening access tended to focus on student deficits, and looking at adjusting, or correcting, their academic aspirations, skills, qualifications and destinations. Currently institutions are exhorted not just to work across the student lifecycle but also to create changes to their own policies and practices, to create more inclusive structures and cultures that facilitate the

success of all students through a whole institution approach (Thomas, 2017). These developments in both focus and approach are presented in Fig. 5.1 (see also Jones & Thomas, 2005; Thomas, 2018).

The remainder of this chapter focuses on research about improving the retention and completion rates of all students, particularly those from under-represented groups, and on how this has been achieved through national approaches.

RESEARCH ABOUT IMPROVING THE SUCCESS OF TRADITIONALLY UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Much of the previous research about the factors contributing to students' early withdrawal, or to account for their success, focuses on one or two levels, but not usually three. Here a multi-dimensional, or layered, model is outlined considering the role of students, higher education institutions and the state.

Fig. 5.1 Widening participation maturity model

Students

Many studies focus on the students, and what their short-comings are that prevent them from being successful. For example, Casanova et al. (2018) analysed the decisions of 2970 first year students from a single university in Portugal either to persist/transfer to another course within the same institution, or to withdraw. The study found academic achievement within HE to be a highly significant determining variable, while other factors have a mediating effect, in particular sex, type of course (long or short), studying at first-choice university and mother's educational level. The study concludes:

... it is important to improve reception for students entering university and to identify their learning difficulties. This, together with measures to diagnose and bring students' knowledge up to the appropriate levels, may be important to protect against failure, considering that prior skills and academic achievement are decisive for success and permanence. In addition, students who cannot get onto to their desired degree could get help from teaching staff in terms of specific study techniques and explorations of the vocational projects and employment possibilities open to them thanks to the degree they are starting, improving motivation in students who have to adapt to second choices. (Casanova et al., 2018, p. 413)

This type of analysis is widespread, and indeed these and similar variables are frequently identified as being associated with lower rates of study success, and this is corroborated by Vossensteyn et al. (2015), who go onto note that it is not necessarily these student deficits that are to blame, but rather structural disadvantage:

Much of the research examines the impact of student characteristics on study success, and their intersectionality. It is often not these factors *per se* that affect study success, but their correlation with other factors, such as lack of access to other resources (structural disadvantage). (Vossensteyn et al., 2015, p. 21)

Drawing on this and related literature, the key student characteristics associated with study success or otherwise are socio-economic background, gender, age, ethnic origin, prior academic attainment, student motivation, and educational pathway from school to higher education. In particular, students with lower socio-economic status backgrounds are less

likely to complete their higher education programmes (e.g. Georg, 2009; HEFCE, 2013). Male students have lower participation rates and study success in many countries (e.g. HEFCE, 2013), although in subjects where one gender dominates, the minority gender is more likely to withdraw or transfer to an alternative study programme (Severiens & Dam, 2012). Mature age students (who are defined differently between countries) are more likely to withdraw than young students are, following the typical trajectory from school to higher education. In most countries students who are ethnic minorities compared to the majority are less likely to successfully complete their higher education studies, for example, Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Heublein, 2010.

Previous academic attainment is the strongest predictor of continuation and completion of higher education in England (HEFCE, 2013), and studies in Germany, UK, and Spain demonstrate that students who were low achievers in high school are more likely to leave higher education early (Department for Innovation, Business and Skills, 2014; Heublein et al., 2003; Lassibille & Navarro Gómez, 2008). Student motivation, self-efficacy and related indicators have also been shown to impact on the probability successful completion. In Finland for example, it was found that students who were committed to the content of the study programme, its academic culture, the more instrumental aspects of their study programme and/or their career interests, were more likely to complete their study programme than students who only had low commitment to the programme or career interests (Mäkinen et al., 2004).

A key concern however is how these findings are interpreted and translated into action. In the conclusions cited above from Casanova et al. (2018) it is apparent that the recommendations are largely aimed at the higher education institution introducing targeted interventions to ‘identify their learning difficulties’, ‘bring students’ knowledge up to the appropriate levels’, ‘get help from teaching staff in terms of specific study techniques’ and ‘improve the motivation in [sic] students who have to adapt to second choices’. The responsibility placed on the institution is to act upon the student, rather than to adapt its own systems and practices.

The Role of Higher Education Institutions

As noted above, one of the leading researchers about student retention and success is Vincent Tinto; his model is widely used and highly respected (Kember, 1995). His writing on the topic is starting with his initial model

in 1975, an expanded model in 1993, and more recent amendments and additions. According to Tinto's theory the decision to 'drop out' arises from a combination of student characteristics and the extent of their students' academic, environmental, and social integration into an institution. Student departure arises from a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, dispositions (intentions and commitments) and integration with other members of the academic and social systems of the institution (Tinto 1993). Students' entry commitment affects the extent of their social and academic interaction within a learning institution, and the extent of their integration, which in turn has an impact on their goals and institutional commitment. Within HE institutions two systems are identified, the academic and the social. In order to continue in HE, students need to be integrated into both systems. This includes participation in formal academic activities, and informal social interaction with peers and academic staff, including taking part in extra and co-curricular activities (Kuh et al., 2010). Other US researchers such as Braxton et al. (2000) have focused on the role of the institution, and in particular academic staff and learning pedagogies, in nurturing academic and social integration (see also Tinto, 1997).

My own research in the UK builds on Tinto's work and applies it to the UK context (Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al., 2017). The What works? Student retention and success programme (2008–12, reported in Thomas, 2012) explored effective approaches to improve student retention and success through seven projects involving 22 higher education institutions. Mixed methods were used to explore interventions, combining qualitative and survey research about student experiences with institutional data about retention and progression. The findings showed the importance of student engagement and belonging through their learning, but did not prescribe specific interventions. Rather effective interventions were found to be within the academic sphere and to have a set of common characteristics, to be: mainstream, proactive, relevant, well-timed and using appropriate media, collaborative and monitored. In addition, changes are required at the institutional level to facilitate and support change in academic programmes, including the use of institutional data, and staff development, recognition and reward. In summary, the study concluded that:

At the heart of successful retention and success is a strong sense of belonging in HE for all students. This is most effectively nurtured through

mainstream activities that all students participate in... The academic sphere is the most important site for nurturing participation of the type which engenders a sense of belonging. (Thomas, 2012, p. 6)

The evidence firmly points to the importance of students having a strong sense of belonging in HE, which is the result of engagement, and this is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities with an overt academic purpose that all students participate in (Thomas, 2012, p. 12). This approach to improving student retention and progression is informed by the concepts of engagement, belonging and inclusive learning, teaching and assessment. The What works programme of research found that student belonging is an outcome of:

- Supportive peer relations.
- Meaningful interaction between staff and students.
- Developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners.
- An HE experience which is relevant to interests and future goals.

These outcomes are closely aligned with ideas about active student engagement in their learning (see e.g. Osterman, 2000). Academic engagement is related to ‘effective learning’, and may be synonymous with, or necessary for ‘deep’ (as opposed to surface) learning (Ramsden, 2003, p. 97). Indeed Chickering and Gamson (1987) identified seven principles of effective practices in undergraduate teaching and learning in the US context, which have widespread applicability in the UK context (Gibbs, 2010). These are:

- student-staff contact;
- active learning;
- prompt feedback;
- time on task;
- high expectations;
- respect for diverse learning styles;
- co-operation among students.

These principles align well with the findings from the What works programme, which found that the following factors contribute to belonging in the academic sphere.

- (a) Staff/student relationships: knowing staff and being able to ask for help. Many students find it difficult to approach academic members of staff, but they value being able to ask for clarification, guidance, and feedback. Students who feel that have a less good relationship with academic members of staff are more likely to think about leaving. Good relationships are based on informal relationships that recognise students as individuals and value their contributions.
- (b) Curricular contents and related opportunities: providing real world learning opportunities which are interesting and relevant to future aspirations motivate students to engage and be successful in higher education.
- (c) Learning and teaching: group based learning and teaching that allows students to interact with each other, share their own experiences and learn by doing. A variety of learning experiences, including work placements, and delivered by enthusiastic lectures were found to be important too.
- (d) Assessment and feedback: clear guidelines about assessment processes and transparency about criteria and feedback to assist students to perform better in the future. Students who have a clear understanding about the assessment process and expectations have higher confidence levels and are less likely to think about leaving early. An understanding of assessment should be developed early, and students need to have positive relationships with staff so that they can ask for clarification. Feedback on assessment needs to be helpful to students, and they need to be guided in how to use it to inform future assessment tasks.
- (e) Personal tutoring: as a means of developing a close relationship with a member of staff who oversees individual progress and takes action if necessary, including direct students to appropriate academic development and pastoral support services.
- (f) Peer relations and cohort identity: having friends to discuss academic and non-academic issues with, both during teaching time and outside of it, and a strong sense cohort identity. Friends and peer relations can have a range of positive impacts on student experience, but this is only recognised by some students and staff. Facilitating social integration in the academic sphere is particularly important as it develops cohort identifying and belonging to the programme; some students do not have opportunities to develop friendships in other spheres. Academic staff can promote social integration through induction activities,

collaborative learning and teaching, field trips, opt-out peer mentoring and staff-organised social events.

- (g) A sense of belonging to a particular place within the university, most usually a departmental building or a small campus, or a hall of residence.

These findings indicate that responsibility for improving retention and success does not just lie with students, but institutions and their teaching and support staff have an obligation to provide the necessary conditions, opportunities and expectations for such engagement to occur (Coates, 2005; Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 2009). Thus institutions can create engaging opportunities (Reason et al., 2005, 2007; Thomas, 2012). Thomas (2012) found that some specific learning and teaching interventions improved retention rates by up to ten percentage points (Thomas, 2012), see also Braxton et al. (2000) and Rhodes and Nevill (2004). What the UK/English research indicates is the importance of the higher education institution to improving student retention and success. This therefore begs the question of what, if any, is the role of the state.

The Role of the State

The literature provides limited evidence about the role of the state in improving student retention and success, but this can be supplemented by the empirical findings from the Higher Education Drop-Out and Completion in Europe (HEDOCE) project (Vossensteyn et al., 2015). A number of contextual issues are important (Thomas & Hovdhaugen, 2014), such as the current rates of participation in higher education, as it might be anticipated that as participation increases, so rates of success decline. The selectivity of HE systems varies significantly across Europe, and this has a direct effect on retention and withdrawal, reflecting different levels of prior academic attainment, and greater student diversity and preparation for higher education (Heublein et al., 2003). Similarly the flexibility of the system varies, in particular the extent to which students can move between programmes and institutions (Houston et al., 2011; Hovdhaugen & Aamodt, 2009), and the other opportunities that are available. A key contextual issue is the cost of higher education; fees and arrangements to cover living costs vary considerably between European countries (OECD, 2011). The evidence about the impact of fees and student finance on drop-out/retention and completion

is ambiguous (Vossensteyn et al., 2015), but engaging in employment has a negative impact on study success (Vossensteyn et al., 2013), particularly when students work a high number of hours (Beerkens et al., 2011; Hovdhaugen, 2014). Despite this lack of evidence about the role of state in improving student retention and success, Vossensteyn (2015) found in the survey of national experts from 35 European countries that in 28 countries study success is high or very high on the policy agenda.

The study collected details of national policies and approaches used to address study success from a ten year period, 2005 to 2015, and approximately two thirds of the countries reviewed had study success policies. In total more than 170 policies that explicitly and intentionally address study success were identified. These were categorised into three broad policy areas: ‘funding and financial incentives’, ‘organisation of higher education’ and ‘information and support for students’, as described below.

- **Funding and financial incentives:** Financial policies often include incentives to encourage (or discourage) specific activity. Such policies can directly target students, for example, through tuition fees, grants, scholarships, or loans; financial incentives can be used to influence students’ study success behaviour, for example by linking financial reward to credits gained. They can also influence HE providers—but here such policies tend to work indirectly by ‘inviting’ HEIs to develop their own policies.
- **Organisation of higher education:** This policy area refers primarily to teaching and learning but can also include structural characteristics such as the duration of programmes or the types of degrees offered. Policy detail can be delegated that is, devolved to HEIs. Organisational regulations can address the quality of teaching and learning (and its accreditation, etc.), and also things such as student-teacher ratios, number of contact hours, assessment regulations, pathways towards a degree or ‘soft selection mechanisms’ such as applicant interviews, and so on to influence who has access to HE courses.
- **Information and support for students:** These policies relate to different stages in the student ‘life-cycle’. Prospective students (and those transferring or thinking about leaving) are provided with information to inform their decisions. Information and support, pre- and post-entry provide course, study and career information, and address academic development and attainment, personal well-being and professional development.

*National Approaches to Improving Success in Higher Education
in England*

The English continuation rate, (which refers to progression from first year of study to second year for full-time students, and is used as a more immediate measure of student completion) is high, currently around 93% (HESA, 2020—<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation-1819>). There is a 4.4 percentage points difference between the non-continuation rate of the most and least represented groups in higher education (OfS, 2020—<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/gap-in-non-continuation-between-most-and-least-represented-groups/>). The rates have remained stable over the past decade or more, although the system has expanded in size, increased in diversity and introduced higher tuition fees. It should be noted however that there are significant variations between institutions, and between student groups. Broadly therefore the English system can be judged to be effective with regards to study success. Comparative analysis of different national approaches (Thomas, 2019) points to the importance of a number of factors within the national system, that act as ‘enablers’ which stimulate and support higher education institutions to proactively improve study success.

In England there is widespread agreement about what study success is; it is almost universally understood as the completion of a degree in a prescribed time period (with up to one year variance from the standard time allowed, i.e. three or four years for full-time degree programmes). The completion rate is defined as ‘the proportion of starters in a year who continue their studies until they obtain their qualification, with no more than one consecutive year out of higher education’; this is complemented with the continuation rate, which is a more immediate measure, calculating the proportion of higher education providers intake which is enrolled in the year following entry. (National Audit Office Report on Retention, 2007, p. 5.). These definitions are not contested, although national bodies and institutions do recognise and aspire to additional elements of study success. For example, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2013) has encouraged institutions to consider not just continuation and completion, but also attainment and progression into employment and further study (and work to improve these outcomes for all students is currently being taken forward by the Office for Students).

Institutions and other stakeholders in the sector recognise the value of an extended notion of success, taking account of issues such as personal goals and aspirations, and ‘distance travelled’ or ‘value added’.

In England there is pressure to maintain and improve study success, especially in parts of the sector where it is lower than the national average, or in relation to students from less advantaged groups, in particular through Access and Participation Plans.

Access Agreements/Access and Participation Plans

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the first Director of Fair Access were established by the Higher Education Act 2004, and they began operation in the same year to regulate the work of institutions with regards to promoting social justice. Originally the focus was on access, and ensuring institutions provided support and encouragement to improve the participation of students from low income and other under-represented groups, and in particular to invest in outreach activities and student financial support, and to provide clear and accessible financial information to students, parents, carers and advisers; subsequently the focus shifted to include other stages of the student lifecycle. ‘Access Agreements’, introduced for the academic year 2006–2007, were used as the primary mechanism to ensure institutions met these obligations. In these documents, institutions were required to identify areas for improvement, set themselves achievable targets, and an action plan. Access Agreement documents were submitted to the Director for Fair Access for approval, placed in the public domain, and monitored by OFFA annually. Research found that the process of developing and implementing an Access Agreement had a positive impact on institutional policies, planning and behaviour (Bowes et al., 2013), with most HEIs achieving or exceeding their targets. The process of producing and implementing an Access Agreement has impact on both institutions approach to increasing diversity and improving student success, and to the outcomes for students.

In 2018 Access Agreements were replaced by Access and Participation Plans (APP), which have to be approved by the Office for Students (OfS, which is the independent regulator for higher education, introduced by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, bringing together a number of organisations and functions, including regulating widening participation, into a single body). Access and Participation Plans take an even more explicit focus on the student lifecycle—access, success

(incorporating retention and attainment) and progression to (graduate) employment and further (postgraduate) study, and are intended to be more challenging for institutions, requiring them to assess their performance in relation to these dimensions and six specific target groups (including socio-economic status, age, ethnicity and disability). While some of the details have changed, the process is similar, but OfS has greater powers than OFFA, and in the first year of operation three public universities had specific conditions relating to access applied to their registration as higher education providers.

The evolution of the focus of Access Agreement and Access and Participation Plans reflects the development of the widening participation agenda more generally in the UK. While initially the focus was on access to higher education, during the 2000s concern extended to success of students within, and beyond higher education. Thus, the focus was both on fairness by changing who participates in higher education, and shifted to inclusion, by considering not just access, but also completion, which Marginson (2011, p. 23) defines as the key elements of equity. This change in emphasis began in the 2000s, but it was reinforced by analysis by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 2013 (HEFCE, 2013). The study differentiated four outcomes of higher education that could be measured for students: achieving a degree (retention and completion); achieving a first or upper-second class degree (attainment); achieving a degree and continuing to employment or further study; and achieving a degree and continuing to graduate employment (as opposed to any employment) or postgraduate study. The analysis of nationally held institutional data in relation to students from a range of non-traditional groups against these outcome measures demonstrates that students who are less likely to attend higher education are also less likely to be successful against all of these measures (HEFCE, 2013). These insights have informed and heightened concern about differential outcomes for equity groups (see e.g. Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015 and UUK/NUS, 2019).

Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework

Subsequently the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) was developed as a UK-wide government initiative designed to assess ‘excellence’ in undergraduate teaching in higher education across the UK, but it has been more widely adopted in England. It was launched in 2016, but the process was developmental and is still being reviewed

(DfE, 2019), with details for 2020 and beyond still rather sketchy (Kernohan, 2019). A TEF award is required for all higher education providers who wish to charge up to the highest maximum fee level (currently up to £9250 per year); hence the greater level of take up in England. In essence, the process utilizes a number of metrics, and providers also submit a narrative and additional evidence, which may include internally generated evidence, to demonstrate performance against a number of criteria. The metrics data is provided by the OfS, and includes data about students' satisfaction in relation to teaching, assessment and feedback and academic support collected via the National Student Survey; continuation rate data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency; and employment outcome measures (collected via the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education until 2018, and subsequently by the Graduate Outcomes survey). All of this data is benchmarked: the aim of benchmarks is to facilitate fair comparison between providers, so a range of factors, such as student characteristics and subjects offered, are taken into account to calculate what level of performance each provider ought to achieve. Key variables are subject mix, entry qualifications, age, and ethnicity of students, while other demographics such as gender, disability and an indicator of socio-economic status are taken into account in some benchmarks. Variation from the benchmark is presented for each metric, and a difference of more than 2.0 is considered significant and flagged, and this feeds into the initial assessment of the quality of the teaching.

An important aspect of the TEF is the emphasis on positive outcomes for *all* students, and the metrics data is broken down in relation to particular under-represented groups, and again this data is benchmarked and flagged. Data is provided in relation to age, disadvantage (low SES using a geographically based measure), ethnicity, disability, and sex. As noted above, the majority of higher education providers in England have participated in TEF, and while there are many criticisms of the process and it uses indicators that do not (directly) measure teaching quality and excellence (Gunn, 2018; Shattock, 2018), it does make a contribution to equity, drawing attention to differences between student groups. Thus, it encourages institutions to review, and if necessary improve the experience, continuation and outcomes of students from under-represented groups.

Taken together, Access and Participation Plans and the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework place widening participation, or fairness and inclusion, at the heart of institutional priorities, rather than on the margins, and create a system-wide framework for improving

the outcomes of all students. The work of the OfS to widen participation and increase equity has two strategic objectives and seven key performance measures (KPMs). The first strategic objective relates to impact, and states: ‘All students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.’ (<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/>). There are five KPMs that are intended to measure the effectiveness of OfS with regards to this, and that institutions must contribute to directly:

- i. Reduce the gap in participation between the most and least represented groups.
- ii. Reduce the gap in participation at higher tariff providers between the most and least represented groups.
- iii. Reduce the gap in non-continuation between the most and least represented groups.
- iv. Reduce the gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1 s) between white students and black students.
- v. Reduce the gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1 s) between disabled and non-disabled students.

APP and TEF operate by encouraging or requiring institutions to address student retention and success in relation to students from under-represented groups. This is supported by recognition that learning and teaching are integral to study success, and indeed much of the institutional funding is used to improve the learning, teaching and assessment experience to improve student engagement, belonging, retention and success (Thomas, 2012). This commitment to learning and teaching is reinforced by national initiatives: the government has contributed to the funding of a number of national organisations to improve learning and teaching: the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (2000); Learning and Teaching Support Network (2000); Higher Education Academy (2004); Leadership Foundation (2004); and Advance HE (2018). These organisations, in various ways, have sought to develop and champion high-quality learning and teaching in higher education, including its contribution to study success, through staff training and development, recognition and accreditation, and pedagogical research (Brooks et al., 2014).

The combination of policies in England address study success from different angles, but they are largely reinforcing rather than in tension with

each other. While the introduction of high student fees (approximately £9000 per year) has a negative impact on the participation of students from some equity groups (see Callender in this volume) which needs to be addressed urgently, the impact on study success is more ambiguous. The direct relationship between student numbers and institutional income, together with quality assurance tools that have a focus on the outcomes of non-traditional student groups, is driving higher education institutions to care about improving study success for these students, and the additional fee income which must be spent on equity is providing the required funding. There is little evidence to suggest that increased tuition fees have contributed to greater student withdrawal (SMF, 2017) and Bradley and Magali (2016) found that the introduction of tuition fees reduced the risk of withdrawal.

It should be acknowledged however, that England has a fairly tight admissions system (institutional autonomy has been retained and admission policy is not regulated) which contributes to higher rates of study success. Furthermore, there is a widespread and embedded expectation that completion is possible within three years except for in exceptional circumstances. Institutions and students are not funded for more than the length of the course plus one year, and students and their families do not expect to study for longer than the normal time period. This provides a good basis for retention and completion. National policy, guidance and funding have been directed to maintaining and improving the retention of students in the context of expansion and increased diversity, and improving employability, and more recently the attainment outcomes of students.

CONCLUSIONS

Study success is high on the higher education policy agenda across the UK, and in England in particular. This concern about study success has developed in response to two other policy directions: widening access and the introduction of tuition fees. Overt efforts to diversify the HE student population, or widen access, sparked concern about not just who enters higher education, but also about continuation, completion, attainment and employment outcomes for these non-traditional students. The introduction of tuition fees raised fears about both access to HE, and outcomes, for students from lower socio-economic groups. Steps were therefore implemented at the national level to ensure that tuition fees and

greater reliance on student loans (rather than non-repayable grants) did not have an unintentionally negative impact on study success in general and for students from lower socio-economic groups in particular. Concern about the success of students, especially those from targeted equity groups, has informed the development of further policy tools. For example, Access and Participation Plans, which directly require HE institutions to address the success of students from non-traditional groups; and the TEF which embedded data about the outcomes of students from these groups.

Analysis of the English approach demonstrates a number of strengths of the national approach to widening participation, especially with regards to student retention and success:

1. Clear and widely accepted definition of retention and completion, and target groups.
2. Several policies are aligned to incentivise, require, and support institutions to improve success, these relate to institutional funding, teaching quality, and provision of information and support to students.
3. Institutional performance is measured, and this information is in the public domain.
4. The policy mix encourages institutional responsibility for student success, and is under-pinned by a developing evidence base.

England has arguably been less successful in terms of increasing the participation of students from non-traditional groups, especially to pre-1992 universities that occupy a higher position in the stratified higher education sector. It is therefore not surprising that key performance measures of the Office for Students address participation rates in general, and at high tariff (or elite) institutions in particular. England is only just embarking on the challenges associated with equalising the attainment of graduates from different backgrounds, and this is reflected in the two national KPMs relating to the attainment of black and minority ethnic students and disabled students. The further challenge, that is not included in the KPMs is around progression into graduate employment and post-graduate study, is to reduce the impact of Effectively Maintained Inequality in labour market outcomes, and to genuinely promote social mobility and justice. Many of the positions of power and authority in the UK are still occupied by ‘posh boys’ (Verkaik, 2018).

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