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## **Access agreements, widening participation and market positionality: enabling student choice?**

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SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

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**Colin McCaig**

# **Access agreements, widening participation and market positionality: enabling student choice?**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter presents an alternative view of marketised higher education from much of this volume: not only does it focus on how HEIs use marketing strategies to position themselves ethically in relation to competing HEIs of the same type; it also uses the concept of widening participation (WP) as a specific arena of institutions' marketing strategies and discusses the impact on student choice. It will locate evidence for increasing market positionality among HEIs within both marketing theory and in the historical development of widening participation policy in the English HE sector. More specifically this chapter will discuss how Office for Fair Access (OFFA) access agreements<sup>1</sup> came to reflect the marketing positionality of institutions. It will present an analysis of bursary and additional support regimes and types of outreach activities that reveals a tendency for more prestigious and less prestigious institutions to engage in quite different forms of widening participation activity. It will conclude that, paradoxically, the increasingly sophisticated use of widening participation as an arena for market differentiation reduces rather than increases applicants' ability to make informed choices given the complexity of student support arrangements.

Widening participation focussed marketing activity designed to realise differentiation can be observed in many aspects of institutional behaviour, including marketing and the centralisation of admission practices (SPA, 2008; Adnett & McCaig, 2010 forthcoming), much of which can be construed as a logical response to the growth of state WP incentives. The following analysis concentrates specifically on how pre- and post-1992 institutions use access agreements to promote visions of widening participation that suit their own recruitment needs rather than to promote recruitment to the sector as a whole. In so doing such institutions perpetuate pre-existent differences between institutions in relation to access to HE.

## **The growth of English higher education**

Three major themes emerge from an examination of the history of higher education development in the English context: firstly, it becomes clear that the episodic expansion of the sector in response to the needs of national economy has always been accompanied by

calls to widen participation to underrepresented groups; secondly, in most episodes of expansion, the traditional research universities have been left unaffected by the requirement to widen participation or engage in reform of any kind; historically, technical colleges and mechanics' institutes met the demand for new advanced-level curricula and absorbed most of the increased student numbers. The third major theme has been the increasing role the central state in higher education.

The English higher education system, though highly stratified in terms of institutional history, mission and prestige, is a unitary one. Successive waves of expansion, most notably in 1965 when the government created 30 Polytechnics, has seen the number of higher education institutions reach 130 in England by 2010. At the time Polytechnics were created, largely from former technical colleges or mechanics' institutes, they were established as a *public sector* of higher education funded by local authorities; along with colleges of higher education (usually teacher-training colleges) and further education (FE) colleges this sector was intended to be responsive to regional and national employment needs. A binary divide, then, with universities awarding their own degrees on one side and Polytechnics and colleges delivering courses leading to degrees awarded by a state body (the Council of National Academic Awards) on the other, existed until 1992 when public HE and FE institutions were freed from local authority control and set out to diversify their missions.

The increasing role of the central state is crucial in any understanding of the development of higher education in England since the nineteenth century, particularly in relation to the increasing application of human capital concerns in response to national economic needs. Throughout the 19th century pressures to reform the universities by producing scientists, engineers and graduates suited to the new professions met with resistance from the traditionalists who believed that that a university education should have no market value; instead the universities' role was to develop a disinterested culture (Lyons, 1983). This was challenged towards the end of the 19th century by the development of civic 'red brick' universities (Briggs, 1983), the funding of which was later taken on by the state.

Two world wars in the first half of the twentieth-century further demonstrated the failings of the nation's higher-level scientific and engineering education. In response, successive post-war governments became more committed to education as a tool of work force planning, and the route towards a coherent and more centralised HE system was signalled by a series of governmental reports calling for expansion of places, particularly in science and engineering (Allen, 1988; Stewart, 1979). Overall successive governments' expanded higher education places from 50,000 in 1938-39 to 100,000 in 1958-9 (Allen, 1988:41).

## Centralisation and expansion

Economic expediency and the need for a more highly trained workforce, coupled with unmet social demand for higher education, were also reflected by political pressures. The incoming Labour government in 1964 believed that higher education was not only good for the nation, but could also produce material and cultural benefits for an ever growing proportion of the population. Labour's promise of "a programme of massive expansion in higher, further and university education" allowed them to be radical, yet firmly within the consensus of the times around the Robbins Report (Report of the Committee of Higher Education, 1963). The Robbins Committee's first priority was for instruction in necessary skills, but that was buttressed by the other, more liberal, major aims of the report; to produce, not just specialist but cultivated men and women; to further the advancement of the idea of learning as a good; and the transmission of culture.

Robbins was responding to calls for expansion from two directions, the politically-desired science and technological imperative, and the twin social effects of 'bulge' (increased birth rate which increased demand for places) and 'trend' (more student staying on at school and taking A-levels following the 1944 Education Act which delivered secondary education for all, Ashby, 1983). Perhaps the main feature of the expansionist consensus was the perceived need to make higher education more accountable to the state: Robbins' recommendation that the funding of higher education came under the control of the Department for Education and Science was introduced in by the outgoing Conservative government in 1963 (Simons, 1991). This new public sector of higher education, with Polytechnics delivering CNAA accredited degrees, allowed the traditional liberal universities to continue unmolested even as places expanded (McCaig, 2000).

Expansion was also anticipated under the incoming Conservative government after 1970, with the number of the 18 year old cohort in HE predicted to rise to 22% by 1981 (from 7% in 1961 and 15% in 1971, Kogan and Kogan, 1983:22). However, economic difficulties changed the funding environment and expansion was curtailed and the 18 year old cohort attending HE fell from 14.2% in 1972 to 12.4% in 1978 despite steady rises in the numbers suitably qualified (Kogan and Kogan, 1983:25). Changing demographic factors noted by the 1978 Brown Paper *Higher Education into the 1990s* drew attention to the fact that there would be a decline in numbers of the 18 year old cohort from 1985 until the mid-1990s when demographic growth would begin again (DES, 1986:7).

## Expediency and the pressure to widen participation

Among solutions to address the falling cohort sizes discussed within the Employment Department was the (temporary) expansion of places for women, mature students and the working classes and for an increase in places to study vocational qualifications (DES, 1986; Employment Department, 1989). Thus expanding opportunity through widening participation, though encouraged by such

expediciencies, was largely a by-product of demographics and the changing nature of the demand for labour. The fact that, as the DES noted, many of the universities did not fear a dilution of standards suggests that they expected to attract the same proportion of students with the best A level results, while the colleges of education and the Polytechnics would again absorb these new kinds of students (DES, 1986).

As long as the public sector reacted to the new conditions and widened access to pick up the slack in demand, the universities could maintain their supply at the prestige end of the market. While this might have satisfied those concerned with the needs of the national economy and those wishing to preserve standards at the universities, it fell short of the demands of egalitarian reformers who increasingly throughout the 1980s began to equate widening access and participation with social justice. This took the form of academic pressure: the Leverhulme study for the Society for Research into Higher Education presented evidence that proved to be influential in justifying expansion and widening access into the 1990s and beyond (SRHE, 1983).

The Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1988 opened up new possibilities for course and institutional flexibility by abolishing tenure for academic staff at the established universities (Robertson, 1995:45). Expansion was also relaunched with a doubling of the age participation ratio (APR, of 18 year olds attending HE) from 15% to 30% between 1988 and 1992, presenting the higher education system with a new set of problems: a mass system would henceforth be funded on the same basis as an elite system, which would inevitably increase social demands for accountability. The Conservative government's solution to this new set of conditions was to begin the process of transferring the costs from the state to the individual by the introduction of student loans to cover maintenance. Another act, the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) introduced further competition into the system by abolishing the binary divide and allowing former Polytechnics and (some) colleges to become universities awarding their own degrees and compete openly for students (McCaig, 2000).

Widening participation as a political and educational phenomenon clearly developed largely in response to expansion, and was rooted as much in the needs of the economy as in social demand although the fact that the huge increase in participation had not widened the social base was increasingly seen as inequitable as well as a waste of potential. During the 1980s and 1990s the expediency of expansion was matched by social justice arguments that could be traced back to Robbins, and these were reflected by key policy changes. Widening participation premia (additional funder per student from selected underrepresented groups) were first introduced in the early 1990s and have been the subject of a period of sustained growth since 1997/98; WP performance indicators (PIs), introduced in 1999, have also been a factor along with other non-financial measures (for example the introduction of the

*Statistical Bulletin on Widening Participation*, issued by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, UCAS). More recently government has introduced targets for participation (Pugh, et al, 2005) that have made WP a mainstream activity for all kinds of institutions, particularly since the Labour party came into power in 1997 with a social justice agenda. While people from lower socio-economic backgrounds constitute around half of the population of England, they account for just 29 per cent of young, full-time, first-time entrants to higher education (National Audit Office, 2008), a proportion that has not grown despite the growth in places.

In 1999 the government required all HEIs to issue statements outlining what they were doing to widen participation, and in the same year launched the Excellence Challenge programme (later rechristened Aimhigher) designed to widen participation in higher education by raising aspirations among young people from under-represented groups with the ability to benefit from it (echoing Robbins). Much of the funding was delivered through university-led regional Aimhigher partnerships (of HEIs, colleges and schools) ensuring the engagement of the whole sector in WP for the first time. In 2001 all HEIs were asked for widening participation strategies that set out plans, targets and activities to be undertaken during 2001-2004. Changes to the funding of English HE announced in the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* DfES (2003) introduced the requirement for institutions that wished to charge more than the standard fee of £1225 per annum (they could and mostly did charge up to £3000 pa from 2006/07) to outline, in an access agreement to be lodged with the OFFA, the combination of bursaries and outreach that would offset the effects of the higher fee on applicants from underrepresented backgrounds. This combination of state interventions by the Labour government introduced real financial incentives for all institutions to not only take WP seriously but also opened up the opportunity for WP to become part of institutional market positioning.

### **The English higher education market**

Traditional marketing theory would anticipate that HEIs try to differentiate themselves from competing institutions. Gibbs and Knapp identify two key aspects of market differentiation: the product (in higher education, the programmes on offer); and the image of the institution. For the 'right image' it is important for institutions to be firmly located in a 'choice set' (Gibbs and Knapp: 2002); choice sets are those few clear cut and instantly recognised groupings, for example the 'prestigious research university' choice set, or the 'accessible to all' choice set. Location within a choice set makes it easier for consumers to make application or acceptance decisions. From the institutional perspective, prestigious HEIs may wish to *consolidate* a position within their 'choice set' by emphasising the high entry requirements for its programmes of study and emphasising the values of excellence and global reputation.

However, by definition not all institutions can be prestigious. Alternative competitive strategies might include re-engineering institutional processes in relation to admissions, outreach and WP policies in order to affect demand to *alter perceptions* about the institution (Gibbs and Knapp: 2002).

For example a post-1992 institution may wish to portray itself as more prestigious by withdrawing sub-degree qualifications such as Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and Foundation degrees and concentrating on degree and post-graduate programmes. Alternatively post-1992 institutions may choose to make a virtue of their inclusiveness and consolidate their position by offering more transitional support and encouraging applicants by offering different types of higher education experience. Maringe has identified a series of distinct but interrelated conceptualisations of marketing used by HEIs, of which two are of interest here (Maringe, 2005). One is the *production* view of HE marketing which sees institutions striving to promote the product (programmes of study) as widely as possible and at the lowest possible costs for the consumer (for example by offering part-time or distance learning programmes), or by increasing production by providing additional programmes of study that attract students with additional WP funding attached.

The other concept is the *selling philosophy* of marketing where the emphasis is not so much on the product but on the image of the institution (for example, as a prestigious institution). However, widening participation, with its attendant 'socially just' and 'open access' image also presents post-1992 institutions with an opportunity to engage in the *selling philosophy* even without having to move into another choice set. We can see examples of this kind of 'image selling' marketing strategy in recent changes to institutional admissions practices introduced since the *Fair Admissions* report by Schwartz in 2004 (DfES, 2004). A recent review of the impact of Schwartz four years on found that many institutions were absorbing once autonomous admissions functions within central departments primarily responsible for marketing or WP (SPA, 2008; Adnett & McCaig, 2010 forthcoming). More overtly, OFFA access agreements provide state-sponsored opportunity for institutions to demonstrate market differentiation and burnish their WP image. The remainder of this chapter looks in detail at how such agreements reflect marketing positionality.

### **Differentiation: the role of OFFA access agreements in shaping the English HE market**

There are two main tools of differentiation that OFFA access agreements contain: targeted additional financial support (over and above mandatory means-tested bursaries) for certain applicants on certain courses; and targeted outreach and support activities for applicants from certain underrepresented groups. Both can have a significant impact on the shape of



an institution's student body and send or reinforce key messages about the nature of the institution. Marketing theory suggests that market efficiency in higher education systems requires full information being available to consumers (Gibbs and Knapp: 2002). In HE systems where students contribute to their fees and maintenance costs (such as England, Australia and the US) the notion of full information should include bursary and other financial support levels for the purpose of comparison. However, the limited research carried out thus far suggests that the access agreement bursary/support regime introduced in England after 2006/07 is too complex for consumers to make application decisions based on the level of support available in the marketplace.

This is partly because, in addition to bursaries available to all applicants within residual income bands, institutions offer a variety of additional financial support scholarships for particular groups (e.g. for mature applicants, those with dependents, those from local low participation neighbourhoods, those from poor backgrounds that display merit etc) and then often to only a few applicants each year, making comparison between offers problematic (McCaig and Adnett, 2009; Adnett and Tlupova: 2007, Davies et al: 2008, Callendar, 2009a, 2009b).

Evidence in this part of the chapter comes mainly from a content analyses of two sets of a sample of twenty access agreements; one set from 2006 (original access agreements) and one set from 2008 (revised access agreements). The same sample of institutions was used on each occasion and contained ten pre-1992 institutions, all members of the Russell Group of research universities, and ten large post-1992 institutions (McCaig, 2006; McCaig and Adnett, 2009). The analyses suggest that, firstly, targeting additional financial support and outreach varies between HEI types; secondly, that the incidence of targeting increased between 2006 and 2008; and thirdly, that the shift of funding towards discretionary support represents a reduction in the amount of mandatory support for all students given the same overall spend.

While both institution types spent a similar proportion of the additional fee income by sample average (25% for pre-1992s; 23.5% for post-1992s), pre-1992s accepted far fewer applicants from lower social classes: a sample average of 18.9% compared with a sample average of 41.6% among post-1992s (McCaig & Adnett, 2009:23). Note that these proportions are significantly below benchmark for pre-1992s and above benchmark for post-1992s. This means that pre-1992s can offer far more generous bursaries and additional financial support to applicants from underrepresented groups (NAO, 2008). On average maximum bursaries from our sample of pre-1992 institutions in 2006 was £1625 per annum; for post-1992s it was £865 per annum (the minimum amount specified by OFFA was £300,

raised to £310 by 2008). Analysis of the revised 2008 agreements, however, showed a slight decline among both sectors' bursaries: the pre-1992s sample average was £1521, the post-1992s average £678 (a slightly larger decline) (McCaig & Adnett, 2009:28). The reason for this is a shift to additional financial support targeted at specific groups institutions wished to recruit, as we shall see (below).

These findings suggest that institutions are in fact engaged in a process of using agreements to shape the nature of their student body in the way marketing theory would describe. Indeed, prior to the introduction of the variable fees/bursary regime the DfES baseline assessment of institutions' planning found that many were already targeting underrepresented groups in an attempt at institutional repositioning (Temple, Farrant and Shattock: 2005, para 4.2, 4.3). Nor was this a surprise to government: the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, the government department responsible for HE policy since 2009) launched a review of tuition fees with a brief to explore the potential for further targeting of bursaries in the name of supporting fair access (BIS, 2009: 6) presumably as a means of ensuring greater differentiation. It should also be noted that government and the sector ignored a swathe of advice to introduce a national bursary scheme that would have obviated the inequalities and confusion for consumers highlighted by this and other analyses (see Callender, 2009a; 2009b; Chester & Bekhradnia, 2008).

Research into institutional differentiation research in the United States of America, with a longer history of tuition fee/bursary regimes, points to the dangers inherent in replacing mandatory aid with discretionary aid. Levels of aid granted on the basis of merit (rather than need) have become more important over time. In the US context, competition between institutions leads to a drive to enrol 'desirable' students (those with good SAT scores and grades) which can raise institutions' position in league tables (Heller, 2006). Thus discretionary merit aid, by offering disproportionate support to middle class applicants from families too well off to get Federal and State aid, can work against system-wide widening participation outcomes for underrepresented groups that bursaries were designed to support.

In the English context institutions are using an ostensibly generic WP resource (the additional fee income derived from the variable tuition fees) to reshape specific patterns of recruitment. These typically include scholarships and special bursaries on the basis of: merit or excellence; applications to shortage subjects; applicants from partner institutions; on the basis of age, (i.e. mature students); having responsibility for dependents; being in financial hardship; or demonstrating potential (McCaig & Adnett, 2009).

Such discretionary and highly targeted support, of course, adds layers of complexity to the bursary market applicants are supposed to be able to negotiate. A fully functioning market with perfect information would clear applicants and places, with those most in need of additional support able to access that support; however due to the variability in bursary/support regimes the English HE market cannot clear in such a way. Potential applicants may be aware that University X offers a bursary of £1000 per year of study (while University Y offers the minimum £310), but they almost certainly will not be aware that University Y is also offering £1000 for 25 locally based applicants over the age of 30 with family responsibilities willing to study a shortage subject. So how did this situation come about?

Access agreements were not designed to strengthen the market in higher education: the then Secretary of State, Charles Clarke, MP "hoped that price should not affect student choice of whether to go to university, where to study or what course to take" (Callendar: 2009a). However, many pre-1992 institutions chose to apply the requirement to offer bursary support to students with non-needs based bursaries offered on top of the basic mandatory £310 bursary, thereby creating a bursary/support market based on their own recruitment patterns and needs that other institutions were not slow to take advantage of.

### **Additional financial support and outreach changes between 2006 and 2008**

Comparative analysis of the 2006 and 2008 agreements shows that pre-1992 institutions remain more likely to offer additional financial support in the form of targeted bursaries and scholarships. However, there is evidence to suggest that post-1992s have shifted some of their standard bursary support to funding additional financial support in the manner of pre-1992 institutions in their 2006 agreements and become more sophisticated in their marketing (McCaig & Adnett, 2009). Targeted discretionary bursaries and scholarships on offer from our sample of pre-1992s grew from a maximum of £1468 to £1527 per annum between 2006 and 2008; however, post-1992 institutions maximum support grew from £633 to £1147 per annum (McCaig & Adnett, 2009:30) thereby significantly closing the gap with, or aping the marketing strategies of, pre-1992s.

The profile and criteria for the selection of those of groups offered additional financial support also varied by HEI type, as does the types of activities offered. Generally, pre-1992 institutions focused on *individuals with potential* to succeed, while post 1992s focused on tackling *socio-economic barriers* to accessing higher education. Overall, pre-1992 institutions appeared to become more plural between the 2006 and 2008 agreements in the range of categories supported, with more offering additional financial support for mature students and for those enrolling in shortage subjects, merit based and financial hardship.

The patterns identified in the 2006 analysis remained, however by 2008: pre-1992s were more likely to offer additional support for shortage subjects, those demonstrating 'potential' or merit, those on PGCE courses and for those with financial hardship; while post-1992s were more likely to offer support for students enrolling from local schools and colleges linked by formal progression arrangements and those undertaking vocational programmes. Overall post-1992s engaged with a wider range of age groups and a wider range of social groups and were more likely to be engaged with learners with disabilities.

This is supported by findings from other research, (e.g. McCaig, Stevens and Bowers-Brown, 2007) which also found clear variation by institution type in the nature of WP engagement with underrepresented groups. Data from the Educational Providers Survey (part of the National Evaluation of Aimhigher) in 2006 reveals that not only do post-92 institutions engage with a wider range of social groups (e.g. work-based learners, parents/carers, looked-after children), they are also more likely to engage with most of the groups that pre-92 institutions also engage with (the exception being people from lower social classes, HEFCE, 2006).

In access agreements, pre-1992s are more likely to concentrate on activities relating to the potential applicant to higher education (mentoring, summer schools, tariff points achieved), and especially those with financial circumstances that might discourage entry to HE. These may come from those who are first generation of their family to go onto HE, those from low participation neighbourhoods or lower socio-economic classes; pre-1992s also concentrated their efforts on high achievers amongst those from groups associated with low entry rates, i.e. those who would enter HE but be more likely to choose a post-1992 institution in the absence of such interventions by pre-1992s. These would include taster events, mentoring, residential schools and outreach activities with schools, emphasizing help for *individuals* from underrepresented groups.

By contrast post-1992 institutions were more likely to highlight curriculum development and progression arrangements between the institution and the local colleges and schools (such as compact schemes) and also to enhance vocational progression in conjunction with Local Learning Networks (LLNs). Post-1992s were also more likely to offer pre-entry information advice and guidance (IAG), events for parents and carers, sector related HE taster events and promoting vocational routes to HE all of which are aimed at underrepresented *groups* or supporting national economic needs; often this amounts to the same thing as students from underrepresented groups are more likely to enroll on vocational HE programmes (Archer, 2003; Sutton Trust, 2004).

Given this systemic and vocational focus, post-1992 institutions remained more likely to engage in a range of activities that none of the sample pre-1992s were engaged in: the mapping of apprenticeship routes to HE, collaborative curriculum development, mapping of vocational/non-traditional routes to HE and offering non-residential schools. Widening participation for post-1992s can therefore be characterised as concerned with encouraging a wider uptake of HE in vocational subject areas and meeting the needs of employers; while for pre-1992s WP can be characterised as about identifying, encouraging and selecting talented individuals suitable for high academic achievement.

In both cases the main focus of activities and underrepresented groups targeted seems to be involvement with specific institutions rather than general aspiration-raising and thus exemplify the selling philosophy of institutional marketing. This focus is also apparent in the sophisticated maneuvering of bursary pricing among institutions in the absence of a national bursary scheme that would have reduced complexity for consumers (Callender, 2009a; 2009b; Chester & Bekhradnia, 2008).

## Discussion

Overall the introduction of OFFA access agreements, recent changes to admissions policies and outreach priorities seem to have reinforced the notion that there are two distinct types of institutions working towards their own conceptions of widening participation. In access agreements pre-1992 institutions offer larger bursaries to fewer potential students, and engage with fewer disadvantaged groups in a more restricted way. Pre-1992 institutions thus use state WP funding to reinforce their choice set image as 'selecting' institutions with high entry standards, but willing to take high-achieving students from poor and underrepresented groups. Partnership outreach work is more often with non-statutory bodies concerned with identifying excellence among the underrepresented, such as the National Association of Gifted and Talented Youth and the Sutton Trust. In marketing terms, pre-1992 institutions use widening participation to soften their reputation as austere, elitist institutions closed off to the needs and desires of the majority. Such institutions appeal to the meritocratic instinct: they sell the message that, if you are good enough you can get in here, whatever your background.

Meanwhile, post-1992 institutions as 'recruiting institutions' use state WP funding to increase student numbers which they do by promoting their product, and even by tailoring their product by designing programmes that are attractive to a wider cohort of potential students. They offer lower bursaries and less additional financial support, but to a wider group of potential applicants and from roughly the same proportion of additional income derived from variable fees as pre-1992s (McCaig and Adnett, 2009). Outreach is similarly plural and more

likely to involve collaborative work with state funded partnerships such as Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks designed to foster vocational progression routes. The emphasis here is necessarily about raising awareness and fighting cultural resistance to accruing debt to fund higher education participation, rather than spending on direct recruitment to the institution (though of course they benefit as most WP students study at their local post-1992 institution). In marketing terms, widening participation allows such institutions to present themselves as socially aware providers of opportunity for all social types in a supportive student-friendly environment and responsive to the needs of the local/regional economy.

This latest example of central state involvement, combining financial incentives (the ability to charge more per student) with a weak form of accountability (the need to use access agreements to justify the additional money in WP terms) reinforces the historical tendency to reform English HE while at the same time retaining institutional autonomy for the most prestigious universities. In the last 15 years we have witnessed another of the episodic periods of expansion of the sector noted earlier (again largely in response to the needs of national economy), and once again this has been accompanied by calls to widen participation to underrepresented groups. However, because the government and powerful research institutions among the HE sector chose not to introduce a national bursary scheme, providing means tested support to any applicant offered a place anywhere in the system, the state has provided the setting for a sophisticated marketplace in which widening participation is invited to play a prominent part.

Institutions have therefore adapted the state interest by focussing (in some cases refocusing) their marketing strategies, in effect playing the game. Was this inevitable? Access agreements offered an opportunity for all institutions to portray themselves as WP institutions and they would have been foolish to turn this down. However, the state's hands-off approach to access agreements has resulted in such a degree of complexity for consumers that many of these market signals seem to have (so far at least) gone unnoticed. Another effect has been that, overall, as in previous periods of expansion, the traditional research universities have been left unaffected by the requirement to widen participation or engage in reform of any kind, beyond offering a few bursaries to poor but bright applicants; once again it is the post-1992 institutions that have adapted to calls for a new kind of HE by providing the most imaginative outreach and support package and by engaging in vocational curriculum design. Meanwhile, prestige institutions use state WP funding to market themselves as meritocratic bastions of quality and tradition - but have they done anything to enable student choice?

## Key terms for index

Widening participation; access agreements; WP premia; fair access; binary system; centralisation; HE admissions practices; marketing strategies; differentiation; additional financial support; bursaries; discretionary scholarships; Aimhigher; Lifelong Learning Networks

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<sup>i</sup> The Office for Fair Access, OFFA, was established by the Higher Education Act (2004) which also introduced variable tuition fees. Institutions wishing to charge more than the standard fee rate (£1225 per year of study) had to submit Access Agreements to OFFA outlining how they would use some of

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the additional fee income to support applicants from underrepresented groups who might be otherwise deterred (OFFA, 2004).