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Editorial

Widening Participation in Higher Education

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Higher education (HE) has the potential to be transformative: for individuals, local communities and for the wider society. The extent to which HE succeeds, however, depends on many factors. At a minimum, for higher education to transform lives, individuals from a wide range of backgrounds must apply to and participate in HE [1]. Certainly this has been the rhetoric of successive UK governments dating back as far as The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) [2] and before that The Robbins Report [3], though the vision of what widening participation in the UK context really means has changed over time. Early commentators in the 1950s and 1960s, when only one in twenty of the population attended university, envisaged that access would be widened to the "bright poor", *i.e.*, those achieving particularly well in selective grammar schools. Later the focus started to shift to the issue of better access for women, as the HE sector started to expand and women, largely from middle class backgrounds who previously would not have gone to university, started to enrol. Most recently, for some it has come to mean not just access for the very able and well qualified from poor backgrounds but also those who could benefit from HE, despite having underachieved in school due to their disadvantaged circumstances and, implicitly, their poor quality schooling in many cases. This shift in emphasis in terms of the target cohort(s) of widening participation has resulted in many institutions adopting contextualised admissions, namely taking students' circumstances into account in admissions offers —a process which, it must be said, is often not entirely transparent. Yet despite these developments and many decades of both rhetoric and policy, current evidence still suggests that in the UK the likelihood of applying to, and participating in, HE continues to vary dramatically according to family background (e.g., [4–9]). In this special edition we publish four papers that look at quite distinct aspects of this major societal problem.

Analysis of large scale administrative data on students' progression through the education system has suggested that most of the socio-economic gap in HE participation in England can be explained by the fact that poorer students have lower levels of attainment at GCSE and Key Stage 5 [7,10]. This would seem to imply that interventions at the point of application or entry to university alone are unlikely to be able to completely close these gaps. Intervention to improve the academic achievement of poorer students, and hence their likelihood of applying and succeeding in entering HE—and ultimately within and beyond HE—needs to come far earlier in the system. This is not, of course, to say that universities should not play a major role in this endeavour, but it is important that we articulate what that role might be. Even if universities and schools work together to try and raise the achievement of poor children as they progress through the education system, this will take time; and, in the meantime, there already exists a more immediate potential solution, namely the contextualised admissions to which we referred earlier. There is a pressing need for both evidence and debate on the systematic and transparent use of contextualised admissions as a means to widen participation and improve fair access and this is precisely what Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui provide in their fascinating paper, which summarises what universities are doing in terms of contextualised admissions and provides guidance on what indicators universities should be basing contextualisation upon, along with insight into the performance of students who have been contextually identified within higher education.

Of course academic achievement is not the only determinant of HE participation and hence raising the achievement of poor children and using contextualised admissions systems are not the only solutions. Students need to aspire and have the self-belief to go to university: qualities that will likely motivate them in their studies once there. Students also need to navigate the application system, again requiring confidence, information and the knowledge and ability to access that information. Much less is known about the importance of what economists call "non-cognitive skills", sometimes known as soft skills, in shaping pupils' decisions about higher education. Whilst there is a large literature from economics, psychology and education which examines the relationship between pupils' attitudes and aspirations and their attainment [11], there is far less evidence that proves a *causal* link between a pupil's attitudes, and whether they actually go to university [7,12,13]. It is worth noting that this is the space in which many HE widening participation activities operate, *i.e.*, aiming to influence students' aspirations, expectations, knowledge about, and views of, the value of higher education. There is a need for more robust evidence on the effectiveness of these types of interventions in influencing HE application and participation decisions, with a view to providing policymakers and practitioners with insights into the types of policies that might be scalable, generalizable and successful in increasing participation amongst under-represented groups. In their paper, Anders and Micklewright provide some important insights that can start to shed light on some of these questions. Specifically they investigate one important aspect of young people's soft skills, namely their expectations about applying to university. They document how these expectations change markedly during adolescence and how they are mediated by socio-economic background. Crucially they also ask what role schools can play in affecting young people's expectations about participation in HE and, hence, what types of intervention might be successful.

Another potentially important factor in the decision to attend university is the cost. Although the introduction of tuition fees has not led to the widely feared reductions in higher education participation among poorer students, concerns about the financial barriers faced by poor students remain and we certainly need to better understand the ways that universities might support students from poor backgrounds financially. In her paper, Gill Wyness looks at the crucial issue of the bursary system and its operation. She asks who receives these bursaries and whether their allocation is currently equitable, a particularly important issue given the cost of the bursary system. She then asks an important policy question, namely what might one do to make the bursary system fairer in its operation and impact?

There is still a need for more research of course. From an economic perspective, there is a particular need to extend the existing evidence from the UK on the effectiveness of better information provision to students (e.g., [14–17]). That said, there is much we know already about widening participation [18,19]. There have been examples of schemes that appear to have had impact. AimHigher, in particular, was a nationally coordinated attempt to undertake a range of activities that can widen participation and improve fair access [20,21]. It is worth making two observations here, however. Many commentators bemoan the piecemeal nature of much this activity and the fact that universities often do not coordinate with one another. This might suggest another national or at least regional scheme would be beneficial. Next time, however, we should try to overcome the limitations of some earlier research into the effectiveness of widening participation (WP) activities. Previous research was limited by the fact that most WP activity did not have evaluation built in from the very beginning. This is essential to produce high quality causal evidence of impact. We would argue that we need to expand the evidence base in this area by: (1) evaluating a selection of well-designed WP initiatives; (2) building on the UK's growing expertise in the design, implementation and evaluation of school based randomised control trials (RCTs) to use RCTs to investigate the impact of WP interventions delivered in schools.

We must also go beyond conventional widening participation activities that are usually focused on getting poorer students into universities, or into particular types of more selective institutions. We also need to consider how well supported students from poor backgrounds are, once they have entered higher education: certainly they have higher drop-out rates. And beyond higher education, it is also desirable that graduates should enter the labour market and progress economically irrespective

of their social background. Yet this appears not to be the case. In their paper, Claire Crawford and Laura van der Erve find that graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds earn less in the labour market even if they are equally well qualified as graduates from wealthier backgrounds. Their paper raises some serious issues about whether university activity to widen participation should stop at the point of entry to HE, or whether it needs to continue beyond that point, to support students when they are at university and to help them make successful transitions into the labour market. This kind of activity will be needed if universities really are to "level the playing field" between those from different socio-economic backgrounds.

In summary, there is much scope for more, and more rigorous, research and the papers in this special edition are to be acknowledged as they continue to build evidence on how we can best go about widening participation and ensuring fair access.

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