Disadvantaged by degrees? How Widening Participation students are not only hindered in accessing HE, but also during – and after – university.

By Richard Budd[1]

Abstract
There is no shortage of literature addressing the range of reasons why more disadvantaged groups are underrepresented in higher education – and particularly elite universities – in the UK, and it is clear that this has little to do with any real deficiency in terms of ability. This paper begins with an overview of this issue but then extends the argument beyond widening participation at the point of access. It raises concerns emerging from two relatively underresearched areas in the literature which indicate that 'widening participation' – WP – students are faced with greater inequalities than their more affluent peers both during their undergraduate degrees as well as beyond them. Although the focus here is on the UK, this topic and many of its themes will be familiar to educationalists and HE practitioners in other countries.

Keywords: UK Higher Education - Widening Participation – Graduate Employability – Student Experience

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Introduction
It is perhaps appropriate to begin with the common sense observation that entry to university, the experience of being an undergraduate, and potential for success beyond the degree, are not the same for all people. Our performance at school, the universities we attend, the subject/s we study, and various other elements – not least the presence or absence of luck – in combination, lead us to experience university in somewhat individual ways. We then subsequently traverse different life and career trajectories. We might like to think that relative success is the result of a simple blend of ability and hard work, that is, that 'the system' is meritocratic. However, international comparative studies have shown that there is a relationship between social and educational equality. In effect, the distance between rich and poor is greater when there is a larger variation in educational attainment (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). In the UK, sociologists have long noted that education policies (such as the extension of compulsory schooling) have made insufficient headway in improving social mobility (Reay 2006; Waller 2011). In terms of raw educational outcomes, those from disadvantaged backgrounds already fall behind their affluent peers in cognitive tests at a

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[1] Department of Education Studies, Liverpool Hope University, Taggart Avenue, Liverpool L16 3JD. Tel: 0151 291 3108. Email: buddr@hope.ac.uk

young age (Feinstein 2003; Dickerson and Popli 2016) and then in formal school attainment results (Frederickson and Petrides 2008). A recent government agency report stated that 'the performance of pupils and students from low-income backgrounds continues to be the most troubling weakness in our education system' (Ofsted 2015, 13:20). Furthermore, the lowest performing students are white male, British, and low income; less than a quarter of this group achieve a passing grade in five GCSE[2] subjects at age 16 – seen as the national benchmark requirement for all pupils. This, naturally, has a knock-on effect on what post-secondary and then tertiary courses are available to them.

The activity of 'widening participation' - or WP – refers to strategies that seek to improve the access to, and participation of, a wider range of students at university, specifically those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are multiple ways of estimating relative disadvantage, from comparing raw earnings or (parental) occupational status to educational levels. The Higher Education Funding Council For England currently applies POLAR 3, which divides local areas into quintiles by university participation rates (HEFCE 2015), and universities also apply their own criteria. WP may be a UK-specific term, and while this paper focuses primarily on that national context, the theme is familiar more widely, from Australia (Anderson 1990) to the USA (Douglass and Thomson 2012). What in the UK might be termed WP students are also described as 'first generation', 'low-income', or 'non-traditional' students. In Germany the term '*hochschulfern*' is applied; this translates as 'far from university' in a metaphorical sense. It should be noted, though, that while the broader issues are likely to resonate across borders, much of the detail in one country will be particular to it. This is due to nation-specific blends of demographics, national culture, social in-/equality, funding arrangements, geography, and how their education systems operate across these dimensions. This paper will first consider the position of WP students in the UK in terms of access before focusing on two lesser-examined areas – their undergraduate experiences and their trajectories beyond that.

University Access in the UK

That people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the UK are underrepresented at the point of undergraduate access has been well documented, perhaps to the extent to which there is relatively little left to know beyond filling in some of the richer detail. It was observed some time ago that less affluent social groups made up a disproportionately small percentage of the student body (Mountford 1966). While this underrepresentation has been eroded through the expansion of the university sector and enrolments from the 1990s onwards, divisions still remain (Chowdry et al. 2013), and particularly at higher status universities (Boliver 2013). As The Sutton Trust (2010, 2) reported:

'Independent [i.e. private] school pupils are over 22 times more likely to enter a highly selective university than state school children entitled to Free School

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[2] General Certificate in Secondary Education

> Meals[3]…6 times as likely to attend a highly selective university as the majority of children in state schools not entitled to FSM…[and] 55 times more likely than FSM pupils to gain a place at Oxford or Cambridge.'

These figures are clearly striking, and there are a number of caveats here: FSM are not necessarily an ideal measure of poverty (Hobbs and Vignoles 2010), and state schools vary widely in terms of their pupils' attainment – some are selective and send entire cohorts to university while others send very few. Scholars have unpacked many of the trends around university access, with research showing how young people from the middle classes do better at school and are largely shepherded into well-ranked universities through the combined influence/assistance of parents, schools, and peers (Reay 2004; Donnelly 2014; Jones 2015). Students from working class backgrounds who do go to university – attending schools less oriented towards university, with parents and teachers less savvy about the rules of the higher education 'game' – are more likely to study at a local (less prestigious) university. This can be because they are less mobile for financial, family or other personal reasons, do not understand the sectoral hierarchies, and/or do not have the necessary grades. Some state school teachers may also discourage their brightest working class students from applying to Oxford or Cambridge, for example (Cunningham and Lewis 2012). These two universities, and elite universities in general, have developed a reputation for being not merely academically but also socially selective (The Sutton Trust 2011). This has implications for those working class students who do attend these universities, and this will be discussed in due course.

Universities are mandated by the Office of Fair Access (OFFA) to publish 'access agreements' that detail their WP recruitment measures and performance. This must be seen as a positive move as it encourages universities to do perhaps what some were, and all should, have been doing anyway. What universities actually do in this regard, be it undertaking outreach activities or conducting research into better understanding the situation and improving their WP recruitment, is left to their own discretion. There is no research which compares who does what, but a discourse analysis of access agreements found that the more selective universities describe the challenges of selecting the brightest students and maintaining their high status, while the less selective ones have a longer history of WP success and see maintaining recruitment overall as a key challenge (McCaig 2015).

Many universities operate a their own 'contextual' admissions systems to provide WP applicants with a better chance of gaining a place. The University of Bristol, for example makes a single A Level grade 'contextual offer' to such students, so a student identified as WP with two As and one B grade would be considered as presenting three As. It could be argued that this grade 'bump' is insufficient, but this is difficult to claim with confidence – perhaps the largest missing piece of the attainment jigsaw is the effect of poverty on upper secondary/university entry performance. If, as Noyes (2009) has

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[3] Free School Meals (FSM) are awarded to children of low income families at school and are commonly used as a proxy statistic for disadvantaged groups.

shown, students from the lowest economic quintile had a 32% chance of getting a GCSE grade C in mathematics (often a prerequisite to university entry courses), compared with a 70% chance for the top quintile, how do those groups compare at upper secondary level? Understanding this would allow (or force) universities to amend their contextual offers to a realistic level for WP students.

A potential 'fly in the ointment' in terms of WP is the prohibitive cost. The rise in tuition fees (underpinned by increasing state loans) in England[4] - first introduced at £1000 in 1998 and rising to £9000 from 2012 – did not, as some feared, seen a fall in student numbers, although the numbers of mature learners fell dramatically (UCAS 2012). Some may consider that fees (and the associated living costs of being a student) therefore do not discourage disadvantaged applicants. However, this should be tempered with the acknowledgement that the demand for degrees has long been known to be 'price inelastic' – relatively insensitive to price changes (Biffl and Isaac 2002). In other words, if a degree is seen as the best (or only) option, then people will (feel they have to) study anyway. Demand overall may not have fallen as fees have risen, but there are indications that some have been deterred from studying. Firstly, those in lower socioeconomic groups may be more debt averse (Callendar and Jackson 2005) and we do not know how many people simply are not applying to study in the first place. Secondly, 17% of domestic students who did apply for undergraduate entry in the UK in 2006 – before fees rose to £9,000 – decided not to study due to anticipated debt levels (Purcell et al. 2008). The same cohort reported that they were subsequently less able to apply for postgraduate study and their debts affected their job choices (Purcell et al. 2013). It was announced in March 2016 that state loans for Master's and doctoral study were to be made available for the first time from the 2018-19 academic year (HM Treasury 2016), and it remains to be seen what the effect of this is on postgraduate numbers, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Overall, the UK higher education sector is making progress in WP admissions but could be doing better. It is crucial to note that largest underlying problems are structural, in that the combination of social inequality and attainment at school makes attainment itself a somewhat invalid measure of how well suited (or prepared) one might be for an undergraduate degree. The next question, then, is how WP people perform if/when they overcome the access hurdle.

The (WP) Student Experience

The 'student experience' has long featured in the academic literature. It has encompassed learning and engagement (Entwistle and Entwistle 1991) and was then extended to encompass matters such as finance (Shorrock 2004). More recently it seems to have become a catch-all for the entire package that universities 'sell'. The 2011 government Paper that preceded the rise in tuition

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[4] Wales and Northern Ireland have lower fees for domestic students, and Scotland has none.

applies the term frequently in reference to a range of markers, from pre-course information to teaching and assessment, financial arrangements, and career preparation (BIS 2011). It now seems to encompass 'the entire student lifecycle…from first contact to becoming alumni' (ITSE 2016). What is clear from the literature (and common sense) is that 'The Experience' varies greatly depending on who the student is, where they have come from, where they study, and the degree they take. How this affects WP compared to 'traditional' students can be viewed in terms of how their expectations and experiences compare, and how well they do.

There is a range of dimensions to consider within the transition from pre-university to the degree itself, and how universities operate and are organised is likely to very different from their previous school experiences (Pampaka, Williams, and Hutcheson 2012). The extent of culture shock will depend on the contrast between their past and present experiences and also their prior knowledge of university (Maunder et al. 2012). Students with graduate family members, attending schools oriented towards university, and exposed to university outreach, will be more familiar with new modes of teaching and the student lifestyle than their WP counterparts (Budd 2014). WP students are also more likely to come through vocational routes, and the transition into university learning could be more problematic than those following academic supper secondary pathways. The contrast will also vary between universities, and particularly between subjects; STEM[5] and related disciplines often have more contact hours and less undirected study than the social sciences and humanities, for example. Part of the expectation can be in relation to the student body – as in its composition – itself. Given the social imbalance in recruitment to elite universities in the UK, there is some evidence that working class students are ex- or implicitly discouraged from applying to those universities due to an expectation that they will be in a minority (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010). For those WP students who do get the grades and successfully negotiate the entry process, this minority status can create problems. Some may adopt a middle class perspective and lose a sense of connection with their roots or, alternatively, rail against the 'new' culture, creating tensions with their fellow students; some will be able to negotiate a more successful combination of the two (Ibid., Budd 2014).

In terms of how well WP students do academically, national level studies found that the relationship between pupil performance at school and success at university is complex, varying across a range of factors such as subject and gender. It appears that high grades are a consistently good predictor of degree outcomes (HEFCE 2003; Chowdry et al. 2013). Some researchers have examined the performance of students at a few elite universities, which in the main reflect the national level analysis but also exhibit some diversity between them as well as raising some interesting questions. Across three studies in this area, students from independent/private schools perform less well at university than their state educated peers. It is important to note that the state sector is broad and variation between schools can be considerable,

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[5] Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

and top universities will tend to draw from the 'stronger' ones. Ogg et al's (2009) study at Oxford highlighted a private/state divide, while Thiele at al (2014) found elsewhere that comprehensive/high achieving state school students do best, followed by independent school students, and disadvantaged students and/or those from the poorest performing schools were the least likely to do well. A different trend emerged at a university in Scotland, where those with high grades from below average schools were the most likely to score highly (Lasselle, McDougall-Bagnall, and Smith 2014). So while there are trends across school types, they still vary within universities. Hoare & Johnston (2011) found that students with contextual offers at the University of Bristol did as well as those without, although – as mentioned earlier – contextual offers do not extend recruitment to those with mediocre grades. Generally speaking, though, this appears not to bode well for WP students unless they have overcome the odds and performed very well at school, and this indicates that the relationship between inequality and education requires further attention. The observation that private school students do not perform as well at university as their state educated peers could indicate that those pupils' grades are inflated beyond their 'real' ability through superior teaching – or that state educated pupils don't perform as well as they could. However, it is also possible that university students who attended private schools may not (feel they need to) pay as much attention to their studies as their state educated peers, and this relates to issues that connect with employability – see below.

Beyond the Undergraduate Degree: Work (and Postgraduate Study)
How do WP students fare after they graduate? A 2012 UK government report on the social composition of the professions stated that 'the glass ceiling has been scratched but not broken. The professions still lag a long way behind the social curve' (Milburn 2012, 3). It describes how journalism is becoming more exclusive, medicine and politics are not prioritising the issue enough, while the legal profession is making progress but its senior ranks are still socially exclusive. The report particularly notes the connection between private schools, Oxbridge, and the professions, a relationship that is unlikely to favour the socially disadvantaged.

In order to understand this phenomena, it is necessary to consider the importance of university status, the political climate, and what students do while they are at university. In the first instance, studies have shown that the more selective universities in the UK afford their graduates better employment/salary options (Chevalier and Conlon 2003; Leuze 2011). In a sense it is a logical assumption to make – the brightest students enter the best universities, at least on paper. Part of this may simply be a legacy issue, being the remnants of a system that predates massification and the now more widely accepted perception that 'grades considered alone…are a blunt selection device' (2014, 310). Either way, it seems that university status still serves as an entrenched shorthand for employers.

External and internal factors also contribute to – or exacerbate – social inequality on the graduate labour market. At the macro level, as governments

encourage more people to attend university in the belief that this boosts economic growth, this creates a paradox known as the 'opportunity trap' (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). That is, the supply of graduates exceeds demand and this pushes the price – their salaries – down for all but the elite. This means that the 'graduate premium' – the economic returns for a degree – should fall over time, and evidence suggests that this is happening in the UK (Naylor, Smith, and Telhaj 2015). Students appear to be increasingly aware of this, and extra-curricular (ECA) activities and internships or volunteering are becoming seen as a means to boost one's employability (Budd 2016) or 'positional edge' (O'Connor and Bodicoat 2016). Extending the seminal work by Reay et al (2010) that highlighted problems associated with the minority status of working class students at elite universities, others have established that the more affluent students may be both more aware of the instrumental value of ECA and internships – and more able to take advantage of them (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). Not only do they know the rules of the game (and working class students may not), but they have the financial backing to engage more extensively in these activities and the social networks to access the best internship opportunities. More recent analysis from the same project suggests that these social contacts also provide preferential access to jobs, while working class students may trust in a more 'honourable', or meritocratic approach (Abrahams 2016). Those students who are less successful on the labour market will also be less able to repay their loans, although repayments are currently income contingent and written off after 30 years.

As a final note here, an area which is beginning to attract attention is the social composition of postgraduate study. Perhaps unsurprisingly, lower socioeconomic groups are have lower rates of progression to, and are underrepresented in, the postgraduate community. Students who attended private secondary schools, and those from selective universities are also more likely to progress beyond undergraduate level. (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson 2013; Morgan and Direito 2016), a salutary observation given that these universities also contain over 90% of postgraduate research students (HESA 2013).

Conclusions

In short, it seems that the prospects for people from disadvantaged backgrounds in relation to university is bleaker than for those from the middle classes. Firstly, they perform less well at school for a combination of reasons that does not point to any deficiency of ability, but rather to a range of more complex external factors that mitigate against higher achievement. Secondly, if they do go to university, they are less likely to attend the high status universities that provide better job prospects. Those that do enter these universities may find themselves in an uncomfortable minority, less able to play the game than their more affluent peers, and as such, still disadvantaged on the labour market. A recent UK Government Green Paper on higher education, signifying the direction of university policy, calls for universities to further boost social mobility (BIS 2015), and senior politicians in February this

year made strident calls for the most socially disadvantaged groups to have better access to university (Johnson 2016). While this is laudable, it could be argued that they are some way behind the research in this area. Universities do clearly have a role in improving access, but at the same time we need to address social inequality and make fundamental changes in the way the school system functions. Also, getting into university alone is not a guarantee of success. Massification and widening participation on the one hand are increasing the opportunities to study for wider social groups, but on the other hand this is creating an employability arms race that WP students will always be relatively ill equipped to win.

Acknowledgements

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