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Access and Participation in higher education in England

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Introduction

The evolution of widening access and participation in higher education in England must be seen in the context of broader social-economic, political and demographic shifts that have taken place over the course of the past century. It should also be contextualised in relation to the overall structural re-positioning of UK Higher Education Institutions (hereafter HEIs), in terms of their shifting relationship with the state and economy. The higher education system in the United Kingdom has dramatically evolved since the middle of the twentieth century, culminating in the development of mass higher education over the past two decades. In the previous elite system, under ten per cent of young people participated in higher education. The figure is now just over forty-five per cent.

However, the expansion of the higher education system has had differential impacts on institutions within the system, with some significantly more caught up in the wave of expansionism. At one level, this signals an expansion of opportunity, plurality and diversity in a hitherto exclusive system. At another, it also reflects social and educational divisions in the nature and composition of English universities. To this extent, elite and mass higher education co-exists

within an internally differentiated and stratified structure. This is evidenced mainly by the different student demographic within different English HEIs. Moreover, there are continued concerns that, while the absolute number of higher education participants has risen over time, there remain significant differences between social groups in their access to higher education.

The paper will first provide an overview of the development of access in higher education in the UK context, looking at the evolution of the system and various social and political influences that have influenced its development. It will also consider the wider social and economic framing of widening participation, and some of the dominant political and economic justifications behind this. The paper will then focus on some of the main trends and patterns of participation in the England, aiming to locate some of the social and demographic influences on participation, in terms of who is participating in HE, where and why. It will further relate the issue of widening participation to another salient higher education policy agenda, namely student tuition fees, and the potential impacts this has for the access agenda. It will finish by considering some of the actual policies recent governments have implemented for increasing access to higher education.

Historical overview of access to HE in England

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, higher education in England existing in a strictly elite form, and essentially performed an aristocratic function of reproducing a noble class elite. At the end of the nineteenth century, fourteen universities were in existence, with the student population approaching 20,000 (DCSF, 2008). Social and economic developments brought upon by the shift towards advanced industrialism, technological developments and the gradual rise of the professional classes, meant that demand for higher education gradually grew during the first several decades of the twentieth century. This saw the establishment of new civic universities, mainly located in large urban sites, and the doubling of the student population towards the middle part of the twentieth century (Trow, 1989; Scott, 1995). However, the relationship between higher education and wider society was still essentially detached, and the function of higher education was largely that of maintaining social and economic divisions. English higher education continued to model itself on being a key mechanism for social exclusiveness.

For much of the twentieth century, therefore, access to higher education in England and Wales had been limited. At one level, this reflects entrenched pat-

terns of social reproduction and regulation, reinforced by a largely selective UK educational system that pooled off students according to ability and perceived aptitude. Higher education in England was seen as a key component in this wider pattern of reproduction. It also reflects limited overall social demand for higher education at this time. Social demand is somewhat separate from economic demand, in so far as it is determined by the perceived desirability, and feasibility, around participating in higher education by students and their families. For much of the twentieth century in the UK, social demand was typically driven by higher socio-economic groups who looked to use the credentials acquired from higher education to access higher paid and higher status employment. Moreover, such participation formed part of an established process of cultural reproduction with higher education confirming existing middle class status.

Over time, with the expansion of the middle classes and a growing social democratic political consensus that viewed higher education as an emancipatory vehicle towards social and economic transformation, higher education opened up its walls to new members. During the middle part of the twentieth century, English higher education became subject to various political interventions that reflected a wider policy agenda for positioning it towards wider social economic objectives. One of the first major political interventions on higher education was the Committee of Higher Education's (1963) policy framework in the early 1960s, more commonly referred to as the Robbins Report, and is seen as a key cornerstone towards the development of mass higher education (Trow, 1989). At the time of this report, only six per cent of young people participated in higher education.

The Robbins Report established four key objectives higher education in England: instruction in skills suitable for work; the promotion of the general powers of the mind; the advancement of learning; and the transmission of common culture and common standards of citizenry. Crucially, the report advocated the opening up of the system to wider groups of academically able students who could benefit from higher learning, but who had hitherto been denied access. Higher education thus gradually became re-framed as a public good. This heralded a gradual expansion of student numbers, along with the creation of new universities and polytechnic colleges throughout the UK.

A further significant shift occurred in the early 1990s with the unification of universities with polytechnic colleges. This resulted in the formal re-branding of polytechnics as 'universities' in their own right, as well as being given the power to award Degree qualifications. As the system expanded in the early and middle part of the 1990s there were renewed concerns about the continued relative under-representation of lower socio-economic groups. This coincided also with a concern about the financial sustainability of higher education, as

well as the need to strengthen links between universities and the economy. The Dearing Report (NCHIE, 1997), addressed further the issue of higher education funding and student access, as well as measures to enhance graduates' employability. The report emphasised HEIs' increasing financial burdens and the need for greater financial contributions from individual students. The previous New Labour administration was further committed to increasing participation in the UK, but towards the end of its office began placing less emphasis on meeting its fifty per cent target of 18-21 years olds participating. This perhaps reflected a decreasing emphasis on the expansion of higher education per se, and more an opening up of the system to traditionally under-represented social groups. The current coalition government have also made a commitment to capping student number in the context of diminished public funding, while also making official commitments to opening up access to elite universities for students from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds (DFE, 2011).

The economic and social cases for widening access in the UK

The case put forward for improving access to higher education has been framed largely in both social and economic terms. Since the Robbins Report, there has been continued emphasis on positioning higher education as an economic good, particularly in relation to the relative performance of other advanced international economies. This has been reflected in much UK-based policy on higher education, whether in relation to access and widening participation, student fees, and curricula developments. Such approaches are often underpinned by a strong human capital viewpoint that tends to posit a clear, direct and immediate link between higher education and economic output. This has certainly framed much of the policy discourse on widening participation (see DFES, 2003), and such discourses are often linked inextricably to discussions around the future knowledge-based economy and the role of higher education in meeting its changing demands. This has been subject to extensive debate, and there are competing views about the overall economic and individual benefits of higher education expansion. The debate is divided between those who point to an overall economic demand for graduates (DFES, 2003) and those who argue that the supply of graduates is gradually exceeding demand (Keep and Mayhew, 2004; Wolf et al, 2006). Critics of mass higher education argue that people's increasing investment in higher education, and the substantial costs that this generates, are not being matched by a stable and equitable return in the labour market.

These critics also question the actual economic demand for greater numbers of graduates in terms of the whether increased graduate labour actually stimulates economic growth, or actually meets the changing needs of the 'knowledge-based economy'. The very notion of the knowledge economy also needs to be scrutinised more rigorously in terms of its actual prevalence and scale; and, more significantly, whether graduates constitute a well-defined occupational category of 'knowledge worker' (Lauder, 2011). This problem is further heightened by the complexity and diversity of the actual UK graduate labour market and the difficulty in defining a 'graduate job' (Scott, 2005). Such problems lie mainly in the fact that graduates are increasingly undertaking non-graduate jobs, which itself brings into issue the extent to which they are capitalising on their participating in higher education (Brynin, 2002; Green & Zhu, 2010).

Nevertheless, recent UK governments have continued to argue the case for the economic demand for, and benefits of, higher education. Graduates, it is argued, comprise a large bulk of the elite end of the labour market and their contribution is invaluable for economic growth (DFES, 2003; DIUS, 2008) Moreover, the debate has been further couched in equity and social justice terms, with an emphasis on freeing-up access to social groups who had hitherto not benefited from higher education. To this extent, the gradual massificaiton of higher education has worked in tandem with a social democratic agenda that sees higher education as part of a broadening of opportunity structures. Massification of higher education is sometimes seen as synonymous with the democratisation of the UK university system, with the state playing an active role in facilitating this process. The New Labour government was particularly concerned with the need to marry economistic agendas around economic competitiveness and up-skiling the labour force, with wider social justice agendas around equality of opportunity. These themes have been carried through by the current Conservative-led Coalition administration, albeit with a strong emphasis on combining both a state rationalising of resource costs and a market liberalisation of the sector.

Current patterns and trends in participation in higher education

The evidence shows that successive UK governments' agenda for promoting increased access to higher education is off-set by some significant structural patterns in participation on the basis of a variety of social and demographic factors. Various reviews of widening participation (HEFCE, 2006; DFES,

2004) have made a range of conclusions about the current state of access to higher education in the UK. These included: 1) that despite the narrowing gap between socio-economic groups in overall participation, nearly twice as many people from higher socio-economic groups enter higher education than those form lower groups; 2) that traditional and higher-ranked universities still have a disproportionately low amount of traditionally under-represented groups and perform poorly in recruiting under-represented groups; 3) that universities, colleges and schools still need to do more work to incentivise potential students for entering higher education, and to take more proactive measures to make higher education both an attractive and viable future option.

There are, of course, a number of problems when analysing trends in participation in higher education. This partly reflects not only the accuracy, and completion, of national datasets on participation rates, but also with disaggregating segments of the student population. National data in England and Wales is mainly complied through the Higher Education Statistical Agency which carries out a comprehensive overview of rates of participation and which are typically fed back into the UK Department of Universities, Innovation and Skills (DIUS) (since re-named Department of Business, Innovation and Skills under the new Coalition government).

General participation rates nevertheless indicate that the overall pattern of participation has remained relatively stable over the past decade, increasing very slightly during the latter part of the previous decade (DIUS, 2006). This suggests that demand for higher education has remained relatively over the past decade, compared to the early stage of mass higher education in the early to middle part of the 1990s when student numbers significantly expanded. Gains in participation have been somewhat minimal since the time that the previous UK government took office despite numerous policy initiatives, and costs, geared towards widening participation (see next section for further discussion). There is further evidence of an overall higher proportion of female students participating in higher education, the most recent figures showing up to ten per cent difference in participation between male and female students (DIUS, 2006). Thus, female participation rose from forty one pent around forty five per cent in the years from 2000 to 2006, compared to a slight decline in male participation from just under forty per cent to thirty five per cent during the same period. This in part perhaps reflects the changing patterns of achievement of female students at earlier stages of the English educational system, as well as wider structural changes in the nature of employment; in particular, the overall wider integration of females' skills and opportunities in the labour force.

The impact of earlier educational attainment on participation is even more evident amongst different socio-economic groups of students. White and Black

Caribbean males within the lower socio-economic categories are significantly under-represented, particularly compared with Asian Indian and Asian Chinese students (DIUS, 2006). The former group of student are achieving lower attainment levels in formal qualifications, namely in the England and Wales' General Certification in Secondary Education at 16. This is not necessarily a sole determinant of entry to higher education, but attainment at this level is likely to have a significant impact on future participation. Up to two-thirds of student with 5 or more GCSEs are in higher education by the age of 19 than those without.

At one level there has been an absolute growth amongst students from lower socio-economic backgrounds over time, reflecting wider access to higher education since the development of mass higher education. However, for much of the earlier part of mass higher education from the 1990s to early part of the 2000s there was a significant relative growth of students from higher socio-economic groups compared to relatively small increase of the latter group over a wider period of time. Thus, from the period of 1991 to 2000 there was an absolute increase in participation by student from non-manual socio-economic groups (socio-economic group III) from thirty-five to forty-eight per cent, compared to a rise in lower socio-economic student participation (groups IV and V) from eleven to eighteen per cent (DFES, 2004). Over this period there is therefore a relative gap of thirty per cent in participation by socio-economic group.

However, it would appear that the past decade has seen an overall narrowing of the participation gap between socio-economic groups with the gap estimated to be around 21 per cent (DIUS, 2006). In 2006 the number of students from higher socio-economic groups was just under forty per cent, compared to around eighteen per cent for student from lower socio-economic groups, narrowing the relative gap by just over twenty per cent. However, it is difficult to infer from this narrowing of participation an increased latent demand for higher education amongst lower socio-economic groups. Nor should we necessarily infer success in successive governments' policy agenda for improving access. The data would indeed suggest that the growth in participation as been nominal for lower socio-economic groups. It would appear also that demand has dropped somewhat for higher socio-economic groups, partly as a possible response to increasing financial costs of participating in higher education. There is also likely to be significant economic variance within this broader socio-economic group, with some students perceiving the costs of participating more acutely than others.

Given the evidence for only minor increases in participation by lower socio-economic groups, there still therefore appears to be clear aspiration defi-

cits towards higher education for large proportions of young people; and again this might latently reflect a low demand for higher education within lower socio-economic groups. This may also be reinforced by these students' overall labour market orientations, which tend to be towards low and semi-skilled work and for which higher educational qualification are neither a requisite nor of any particular relevance. The influence of students' social class is therefore significant in terms of shaping attainment at earlier patterns of attainment, as well as the perceived social and economic value of higher education credentials. This is likely to crucially determine a student's propensity towards participation, irrespective of the perceived, or actual, accessibility for entering the system.

The relative difference in participation by socio-economic groups is perhaps further strongly reflected in the social composition of students in different universities. HEIs in the UK can be classed broadly into three main groups. The first are made up of older, more established and research-intensive institutions, including so-called 'Russell Group' universities. Over half the top research departments in the Research Assessment Exercise are located in these universities. Entry requirements to these institutions are high. The second comprise a range of universities that were established before the 1992 Act, including a number of 'new wave' institutions created after the Robbins Report. These tend to be middle-ranked universities with lower overall ranking in the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (now called the Research Evaluation Framework, REF) and somewhat lower entry requirements than the higher ranked universities. The third are the coalition of modern universities, formally polytechnic colleges before the 1992 Act gave them University status. The majority of these are not research-intensive, have lower entry requirement and also offer a greater range of less traditional and academically-based courses.

The evidence clearly points to disproportionately low levels of access to more prestigious and elite English HEIs by lower socio-economic group students. The evidence shows that there is an uneven in-take of students from different socio-economic groups to different universities, indicating a far higher proportion of students from higher socio-economic background in higher ranked, elite institutions (DFES, 2004). It is also clear that the new, post-1992 universities are more successful in attracting students from lower socio-economic groups. This is partly due to their lower entry requirements, but also due to these institutions offering less traditional, academic courses. Furthermore, many of these institutions are located in large inner city areas which allow for relatively easy access for students from lower socio-economic regions who may choose to study locally for the duration of their studies. What such evidence again highlights is the relative positional institutional differences of stu-

dents within the English higher education system in terms of what and where they are studying. Thus, by disaggregating students in terms student profile and institution, we can see disparities emerge in terms of access to different institutions. Such disparities may have significant bearings on these students' labour market opportunities and outcomes, and research in the UK clearly shows that graduates from different institutions have relative success in 'cashing in' on their studies on the basis of the type of institution they graduates from (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Power and Whitty, 2006).

Expansion of higher education and resource costs issues: student fees

One of the key contemporary challenges in UK higher education is around managing its own financial sustainability. This has been exacerbated by increasing student participation higher education and declining units of resource, stemming largely from the financial shortfall hitting all UK HEIs. A solution to this problem has been the introduction of student fees for students studying undergraduate courses in England and Wales. This is not a new development, as fee contributions were introduced in the UK in 1998 following the Dearing Report's recommendations a year after the present New Labour government came to power. The earlier reform was based on a flat rate of fee payment (£1,175), up-front at the point at which students entered higher education. That was increased following in 2004 Higher Education Act to a higher rate of fee of £3,225, and payable after graduate when the graduate is earning above an income threshold (£15,000).

The 2004 Act allowed individual institutions flexibility in terms of what fee payment to charge, although the majority of UK higher education institutions charged at the highest possible rate with just a very small minority of institutions lowering their fee rate to incentivise students from entering them. This policy also provided scope for universities to charge variable fee rates for different groups of student, depending on their needs, and with the potential effect of improving access for more vulnerable students. The current UK Coalition government commissioned a review into higher education (DES, 2010), a result of which has seen the raising of the existing fee cap and universities given discretionary flexibility to raise the fee limit to a maximum of £9,000 with effect from autumn of 2012. The majority of English universities have chosen to set their fee levels at this maximum competitive level (DES, 2011), although graduates again will not pay any upfront costs and the earnings threshold on which graduates repay their fees has been raised to £20,000.

The justification for introducing student fees is predicated on several main grounds. First, both policy-makers and senior managers in UK universities argue that there is an increasingly significant financial shortfall affecting universities. While the state remains the principle benefactor to UK higher education, the existing levels of public expenditure channelled into higher education needs to be complemented by additional sources of revenue if this shortfall is to be plugged. Compared to other countries, the level of public expenditure for higher education in the UK remains relatively high. However, this still remains inadequate to provide the appropriate level of resource infra-structure for mass higher education over the longer-term. Furthermore, higher education is just one area of the public service provision, including schools, further education institutions and hospitals, each of which are also under significant budgetary constraints. Continuing the status-quo option of full public expenditure for universities has been seen to be highly unsustainable for the sector in the longer-term.

Secondly, and as a response to above issue, there is a perceived need to maintain standards of excellence and first-class status in light of increasing global competition from other higher education institutions, and particularly for developing world-class knowledge and research. Compared to other countries, levels of private contribution from students are still relatively low, compared to countries such as US and Australia. At the time of legislating the first increase to the flat fee rate in 2004, the then Department for Education and Skills argued there is no alternative substantial funding revenue stream that can match state funding and private contributions from individual students. Thus, alternative revenue generated from graduate Alumni funds, commercial involvement and efficiency savings are insubstantial compared to the more sustained and guaranteed revenue from student fees.

The final main argument for student tuition fees is that participation in higher education generates both social and 'private' individual return, and should therefore be a 'shared investment' between individuals and the state. This last argument resonates strongly with human capital framework, and is premised upon the assumption that those who have participated in UK higher education will experience direct economic benefits when they enter the job market. This has often been referred to as the 'graduate premium'; that is, the relative pay differential between graduate and non-graduates over the course of paid employment, which has been estimated to be around £400,000 (DFES, 2003). Again, there has been much debate about the overall extent of this differential. Sceptics have argued that the UK government has exaggerated the overall extent of the graduate dividend, failing to breakdown differential returns *between* graduates on a range of factors including location of work, employment sector, subject of study, gender, social class and ethnicity (Brown et al, 2005).

The current policy on student financial contribution to their study is therefore likely to have some significant implications for access and widening participation in higher education. A number of potentially positive, as well as adverse, effects have been identified (Barr, 2003). The first potentially positive effect of variable fees is its scope for redistributive benefits flowing from student fee income and which allows higher education institutions to regulate access and widening participation more efficiently. As Barr argues, one of the common mis-understandings of student fees has centred on re-payment procedures, which in the UK is currently on a payment-after-graduation basis and not upfront on the point of entry. The income-contingent nature of fee re-payment allows some degree of flexibility, both for graduates and institutions. Students further have a range of other sources of support to cover their costs of participating in higher education, mainly in the form of state-sponsored loans, again re-payable on graduation. There are also a range of student support measures in place in both England and Wales, mainly in the form of additional maintenance grants, designed to assists students from low income families.

The additional revenue generated from fees therefore offers institutions the potential for releasing these funds back into providing additional support and subsidies for students who might have greater difficulties in accessing higher education. This allows scope for certain groups of students to potentially be targeted more strategically in terms of receiving fair and coherent additional support mechanisms. However, whether the differentials in financial assistance for different groups of student offers an adequate compensation for larger financial disparities between these different students, as well as for the longer-term earning potential of higher socio-economic students, is debatable. Concerns still abound that even the additional financial support packages that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds receive do not compensate in broader disparities in economic capital between students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

There may also be other some problematic downsides to raising student fees. Research by Callender & Jackson (2005, 2008) has concluded that growing financial pressures experienced by students, real or perceived, are likely to act as a disincentive for certain groups of student to enter higher education. There is an increasing body of students who fall outside the entitlement threshold for additional government or institutional-level support, but who also might not have sufficient familial financial support to cover the various immediate and day to day costs for participating in higher education. Such groups of student, mainly from low to mid income families, may not be the classic non-traditional student that the government is trying to encourage entering higher education, but may nevertheless form a significant minority of students who

are on the threshold of participation/non-participation. Callender & Jackson's research showed that, on entering higher education, a significant majority of students (just over half the student population) take-up part-time employment whilst at university, often to detriment of their university experience.

Other research in Wales by Fitz et al, (2005) shows that the effects of fees are relatively negligible on students' choices to participate in higher education: students' choices around entering higher education are based on a wider set of cultural and educational dimensions that frame their overall propensity towards participating in higher education. The imposition of fees forms one consideration out of a wider range of factors, most of which are linked to students' overall educational biography and trajectory, and which crucially shape the perceived appropriateness of higher education participation. It might be a case, therefore, that students who express concerns around fees simply do so to confirm or reinforce an existing ambivalence towards entering higher education in the first place. Familial and community attitudes towards participation are likely to play a hand in shaping students' disposition towards participation in higher education. Again, this reflects a differential social demand, relating back to deep-seated patterns of social reproduction and expectation that exist outside government policy on access or tuition fees. Such patterns have also been confirmed by other research on student decision-making (Fuller et al, 2008), particularly around the continued influence of peers, network groups and other family members. Ambivalent and indecisive groups may also be more prone to choosing not to enter higher education, and significant numbers still appear unaware of the details and potential implications of changing funding arrangements.

Policies on promoting fair access to higher education

In light of the on-going challenges around improving access for traditionally under-represented students, particularly in the context of increasing financial pressures for students, the British government has developed some specific policy measures to improve access to higher education. The Department of Education and Skills (now the Department for Universities, Innovation and Skills) set up The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in 2004, aimed at promoting and safeguarding access to higher education for under-represented groups with the ensuing on-set of variable course fees from 2006-2007. A key function of the OFFA is to regulate the access procedures of HEIs, effectively approving access agreements set out individual institutions. All institutions charging tui-

tion fees must stipulate an 'access agreement' that is formally approved by OFFA, which can further refuse an agreement where performance targets are deemed to be inadequate. There are clear financial incentives for HEIs to improve their access arrangement, and the Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) who oversee OFFA are seeking to play a more significant role in influencing individual institutions' behaviours, principally through channelling additional funding to institutions based on their widening access initiatives and success rates. As part of the new fee arrangements established by the current UK government, if universities are to charge fees at or above than £6,000 they need to provide detailed access agreement to OFFA including specification as to how they are directing additional funds to target students from lower socio-economic groups.

The success of different UK universities in both establishing and meeting access agreements and targets varies and appears to be largely based on the status, rank and entry requirements of the institution. And there has been some further evidence that up to a quarter of all English universities are not meeting their own targets for widening participation (OFFA, 2011). The major, top-ranked, research-driven institutions (The Russell Group) tend to perform below the expected benchmarks stipulated by OFFA. This is compounded by the subject disciplines offered within such institutions, which tend to be of a more academic nature and appeal to students from more traditionally academic backgrounds. Conversely, new post-1992 universities are better at outreach activities, and have more robust links with community agents such as schools, further education colleges in promoting access. They tend also to have more flexible forms of provision, including more Foundation-level degrees, more part-time and work-based courses.

There have been a number of further individual initiatives designed to promote greater access for lower socio-economic students, one of these being the national 'Aimhigher' programme that was aimed at targeting individuals with the potential to progress to higher education. A core aim of this programme was to raise the aspiration of young people from areas where participation in higher education is low. Part of this initiative involved individual HEIs forging closer collaborations with their communities, in particular local schools, colleges and further education institutions. Such collaborations tend to involve visits to university campuses, residential summer schools, masterclasses, open days, mentoring schemes and student representative promoting university education to disadvantaged young people. All these were therefore designed to raise the awareness of, and aspiration towards, higher education amongst particular groups of under-represented student. This has since been removed by the current government who have placed a stronger emphasis on

institutions developing more institutionally-led schemes that are more specific to individual institutions and their own contexts.

There are a number of key additional factors at work which might further affect decisions around which educational institutions can intervene. A report by the Department of Education and Skills (2004) made a number of key recommendations around enhancing access. These included: raising the attainment level of pupils before they leave formal education; raising the overall aspiration levels of non-traditional, but nevertheless able, groups of students; broadening the range of application of able students to the top-ranked universities; and also improving the admission process, making it a fairer and more merit based. In short, it is argued that individual institutions need to do more to incentivise under-represented groups, largely through increasing knowledge and making themselves more accessible. This is, however, likely to be in some tension with the current government's drive towards granting institutions greater freedoms to recruit as many high-achieving students as they wish, the majority of whom will be from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

Conclusions

We have seen that access to higher education remains a dominant policy agenda in the UK higher education sector. At one level, increased access and widening participation is part of a wider socio-demographic shift that is itself closely linked to the evolution of the higher education system in the UK, as well as other socio-economic changes. The higher education system in the UK has evolved from an elite, largely socially and educationally selective one, to a mass system where just-under fifty per cent of young people are now participating.

The policy framework for expanding participation and widening access has been clearly laid out by the UK government. It resonates with that of other national governments, and partly reflects a social democratic commitment towards improving equality of opportunity and outcome. In the UK, there has also been a dominant economic framing of widening participation, predicated largely on human capital grounds: higher education is an investment that generates social and private returns. The UK, like other national economies and key economic competitors, needs a strong higher education system to maintain its position in the global knowledge-driven economy. However, the extent to which the goals of international excellence, economic competitiveness and democratic inclusiveness can be successfully married has not always been

fully scrutinised. Moreover, the supposed positive relationship between increased participation in higher education and overall economic gains may also need to be seriously questioned.

The overall social demand for higher education has increased in light of wider socio-economic changes, such as the expansion of the middle classes and gradual shift towards post-industrial employment. This has coincided with and, to some extent triggered, the exponential rise in student numbers over time. However, patterns of participation in the UK consistently show disparities in the level of participation by social group, reflecting both variable social demand for higher education and wider patterns of differential educational achievement. It still appears that higher education is part of an established learning trajectory for certain groups of students, patterns of which have been largely consistent over time.

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