

Where Shall We Widen It? Higher Education and the Age Participation Rate in Wales

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Abstract

This paper examines the range and quality of data sources available to calculate the representation of minority ethnic groups and different social classes in higher education. The focus is on widening participation in Wales, although some of the datasets and the implications of their re-analysis are more general. The paper also identifies a number of problems with many existing pieces of research in this field – including the routine, and ironic, exclusion of nonparticipants from studies of widening participation, and the small scale of much work. Using the limited datasets that are available for re-analysis shows that the qualified age participation rate for traditional undergraduate entry to university is near 100 per cent. Social classes and ethnic groups are, therefore, represented in proportion to their prevalence in the more general population, and in proportion to their prior attainment of entry qualifications. The solution to widening participation for these groups lies not in universities but in schools, colleges and the wider society.

Introduction

The UK widening participation agenda is predicated on the notion that particular social groups, defined perhaps by social class or ethnic background, are under-represented in higher education (HE). For example, the student body consists of a far higher proportion of students from professional and managerial families than unskilled ones. The causes are seen variously as reluctance to apply to university in some families who feel that this extended education is unnecessary or uneconomic, and widely publicised unfairness in the admissions process, whereby favour is shown to those from more privileged backgrounds or schools. This sit-

uation is now accepted as fact by many policy makers who are introducing schemes to ameliorate it (such as showing preference to candidates from state-funded schools or certain postal code areas) (Goddard and Utley, 2004). The situation is accepted as fact even by many researchers who are using case study methods to try and find out more about the causes. One such is Archer (2000), who justifies her small-scale work by simply stating that participation is lowest among those from unskilled occupational backgrounds. 'The British Higher Education system has undergone a period of considerable growth . . . yet participation among certain 'non-traditional' social groups remains persistently low' (p. 2). This work is not alone. In fact, it is typical of an entire genre of UK research that eschews numeric considerations, and simply accepts that the problems described by others are genuine ones.

However, at the time of writing, no large-scale dataset has been presented, and probably no such dataset currently exists, to establish that this under-representation is in fact so in Wales (or indeed any of the home countries of the UK). This paper uses such large-scale datasets as do exist to try and estimate the proportion of each social class (and ethnic group) with the requisite entry qualifications for HE. The findings suggest that there is no simple pattern of under-representation among socially disadvantaged groups in either applications or admissions to HE, once prior qualifications for entry are taken into account. Any under-representation is already in evidence in terms of the possession of entry qualifications at NVQ¹ level 3, and these in turn are based almost entirely on staying-on rates in schools and colleges, which in turn are based almost entirely on NVQ level 2 qualifications, and so on (see Gorard and Smith, 2004). If our purpose is to make HE reflect more closely the social background of the population as a whole, then the solution should not be sought in HE itself, but in schools, families and economic policies.

Methods

It is not possible in a paper of this length to present all possible data sources or indicators, or to explain the various methods in full. Readers are referred to publicly available information on all of these throughout. Numbers are rounded for ease of reading. The key datasets are the individualised student records (ISRs) held by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for all students, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) database of applicants, the annual schools census, and the population census 1991–2001. All of these are popula-

tion data in the sense of dealing with all individuals, but they have a high proportion of missing cases for some variables, especially social class and ethnic background.² UCAS applicant figures and HESA ISRs have a large proportion of cases with no occupational category. In fact, when these nonresponses are added to those cases that are otherwise unclassifiable by occupation (through being economically inactive, for example), then having no occupational category becomes the single largest classification. Mayhew et al. (2004), for example, present an analysis of participation by social class using UCAS figures in which 30 per cent of students are occupationally unclassified.

In addition, the record keeping for older ISRs permits individual cases to be duplicated without a unique identifier (where, for example, part-time students are enrolled in two institutions at once). ISRs are often also incomplete when a student has moved between Wales and England either during or between courses. In general, the records for full-time students are more complete and easier to analyse than for part-time students, even though the latter represent the majority of enrolments.

There is also a question of who the Welsh HE participants are. Around 70 per cent of students domiciled in Wales undertook their first year of their first degree in institutions in Wales every year from 1995 onwards (HESA Statistics). However, the definition of 'domiciled' in Wales must be allowed to vary between young students aged 17–21, whose domicile is usually their parental household, and more mature students. Of those students at institutions in Wales, around 60 per cent are domiciled in Wales, 30 per cent in other home countries of the UK, and 10 per cent are from overseas (including the European Union). These figures also show little variation since 1995, despite devolution of responsibility to the National Assembly of Wales and the subsequent (re-)introduction of student grants in Wales. For the purposes of this paper, 'Welsh' students are taken to be those domiciled in Wales, unless stated otherwise.

The larger sets from HESA and UCAS can be supplemented by figures from the Youth Cohort Study (YCS), National Child Development Study (NCDS), Labour Force Survey and three household surveys of around 10,000 adults in Wales (as represented by Gorard and Rees, 2002; Gorard, 2003a; and Gorard and Selwyn, 2005). The YCS and NCDS are repeated surveys with quite high dropout rates and relatively few individuals based in Wales. As may be expected, these different sources are available at different levels of aggregation and use somewhat different classifications for social class and ethnicity. Although most figures are presented for Wales, in some cases they have to be presented for the UK as a whole. Unsatisfactory though this situation is, it must

be emphasised that there is not some other, quite superior, dataset on which the claims underlying the widening participation agenda are actually based.

Many of the research conclusions on which the widening participation agenda is based appear unwarranted in two respects. Comparative claims are made without an appropriate comparator, and the figures used are not suitably proportionate. These are the general failings of UK educational research and ones that have led to serious misunderstandings in other areas as well (see Gorard, 2000).

For obvious reasons, UK educational researchers tend to research learners, who are easy to track, rather than purported 'non-learners', who are much more expensive to track. This means that adult non-participants are routinely excluded not only from learning but also from the very research that is intended to find out why. UCAS applicant figures alone give no idea at all about who is *not* applying to university, and yet numerous analyses are reported without making clear the implications of this deficit (e.g. Abbot and Leslie, 2004; Goddard, 2004). We cannot assess the claims of under-representation in HE using figures from HE alone. However, HE policy in Wales is routinely based on evidence derived from participants only. A recent study of student hardship conducted primary research only with existing or past students, which means that there was no way of telling who was being deterred from applying because of financial reasons (Rees, 2001).

We need also to track changes in the social class of the population from which HE entrants come, and changes in the distribution of entry qualifications by social class in that population. These figures then have to be combined in appropriate proportions (Gorard, 1999). And even this takes no account of the 'inflation' taking place in class categories, due partly to the feminisation of the workforce. Nonmanual occupations have grown in past decades, while both skilled and nonskilled manual occupations have declined, changing the meaning and relative privilege of nonmanual occupations. So, for example, an observation that the proportion of students from nonmanual backgrounds has remained the same over a number of years could actually be construed as evidence of wider participation.

This paper considers the proportion of different social groups who obtain standard entry-level qualifications for undergraduate HE, and compares these with the proportion of those same groups actually attending HE.³ This makes the point that we cannot consider widening HE participation without a more detailed consideration of *who* these additional participants are intended to be. Is HE participation lower in

the less affluent areas of Wales because of poverty of aspiration among the relevant age cohorts? Put another way, is there a higher proportion of each age cohort with the requisite standard entry qualifications for HE but not participating in the depressed area of Blaenau Gwent than there is in the relatively affluent Vale of Glamorgan, for example? Or is it largely the generally lower initial school qualifications in poorer areas that precede and largely determine the lower level of participation? The answer is crucial for policy purposes, but this issue is rarely addressed directly with even tentative figures. If the former explanation is true, then policies to persuade children from families in poverty of the benefits of HE such as means-tested grants, interest-free loans and so on, are appropriate. If the latter explanation is true, then such policies can have only limited effects because their 'client base' is so small. In this case, a much greater emphasis needs to be put on work preparing students of all ages for pre-university qualifications, and in ameliorating the position of the underprivileged in society (or else we will have to reduce considerably the standard entry-level qualifications for HE).

Patterns of participation by ethnicity

Although the chief focus of the widening participation agenda is on occupational background, it is worth briefly considering the situation in relation to ethnic background. Many of the same issues of comparison and data quality apply. The ISRs of those in HE show an increase year-on-year in the number of students of unknown ethnic origin, and for most minority ethnic groups the numbers involved are very small. Therefore, it is not possible to detect any *robust* patterns for specific minority backgrounds.

Around 6 per cent of HE students in Wales are from minority ethnic backgrounds [6.4 per cent in 1998 (HESA Higher Education Management Statistics) and 5.7 per cent in 2000 (National Assembly, 2000)]. However, this figure includes those students not previously domiciled in Wales (around 40 per cent of the total) and excludes those studying elsewhere (just over 30 per cent of the total). The proportion of home students domiciled in Wales from minority ethnic backgrounds is between 3 and 4 per cent and increasing [3.1 per cent in 1998 (UCAS, 2000), 3.3 per cent in 1999 and 3.7 per cent in 2000 (HESA Higher Education Management Statistics)]. According to the quarterly Labour Force Survey and other sources, about 2 per cent of Wales' 18–30-year-old population is from minority ethnic backgrounds. In the 1991 census, 2.2 per cent of the population of Wales aged 10–14 was classified as non-

white. Therefore, one could argue that the HE system *over*-represents these groups. But this does not take into account the fact that ethnic minority students generally obtain higher qualifications at NVQ levels 2 and 3, making them differentially eligible for HE acceptance. Neither does it take into account potential inequalities between subjects, institutions, regions and specific backgrounds. We can say, though, that existing figures give us no reason to assume that ethnic minorities, in general, are under-represented in the HE system of Wales. [See also (Gorard et al., 1997)].

Patterns of participation by social class

The situation for patterns of HE participation by social class is not quite so straightforward. Table 1 provides one of the basic comparators needed to assess the central tenet of the widening participation debate. It shows the proportion of the population in each occupational class category using the old Registrar General's classification (Gorard, 2003b). These figures make it clear that occupational groups are not evenly divided. *Ceteris paribus*, we would expect there to be around twice as many individuals in HE from class II (lower professionals) as from class IV (part-skilled manual occupations), for example. Again, this is not always made clear in media and policy reports.

Table 2 shows very little change over time in the social class composition of the UK student body. The growth has been largely in terms of those students of unknown occupational class. A comparison with Table 1 shows that for social class IIIN (nonmanual occupations), participation in HE is roughly in line with the distribution in the population as

TABLE 1
Wales economically active heads

Occupational class	% All households	% Aged 0–15
I	6	6
II	29	28
IIIN	11	10
IIIM	31	32
IV	15	15
V	5	5
Other	3	3
Total	100	100

Source: Census (1991).

TABLE 2
Accepted for home degree

Class	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
I	16	15	15	14	14
II	41	40	40	39	40
IIIN	12	11	12	12	12
IIIM	16	16	15	14	15
IV	7	7	7	8	8
V	2	2	2	2	2
Not known	8	9	10	11	11

Source: National Statistics (2001).

a whole. For classes I (higher professionals) and II, there is a substantially higher proportion in HE than in the population. For classes IIIM (skilled manual), IV and V (unskilled), there is a lower proportion in HE. This discrepancy forms one basis for the widening participation agenda.

Table 3 shows the proportion of the 18–19-year-old cohort attending HE (the ‘age participation index’) since 1940. This shows both considerable growth in participation overall, and greater growth in participation among social classes IIIM/IV/V than among I/II/IIIN (see also Mayhew et al., 2004). In 1940 an individual in one of the higher social classes was four times as likely to go to HE as one from the less prestigious social classes. As recently as 1990, the odds remained at nearly 4:1. By 2001 an individual from the higher social classes was 2.6 times as likely to go to HE – still a considerable difference but at least an improvement. Looked at another way, those in higher social classes are now over six times as likely to continue to HE as they were in 1940, whereas the figure for those in less prestigious social classes is over nine times. Since 1990, classes I/II/IIIN have improved their position by a factor of 1.35 (or 50/37), whereas classes IIIM/IV/V have improved theirs by a factor of 1.9 (19/10).

The most substantial improvements in relative odds for the less advantaged social groups took place between 1970 and 1980, and then every year from 1989 to 1993. Whatever the problem in the current situation is, it is now better than it was historically, but the odds of participation for the less advantaged groups have not improved since 1993 (Fig. 1). The longer-term historical and social trend towards educational equity since 1944 has stalled.

The greatest increases in Participation Rate Ratios (see HEFCW, 2000; Shuttleworth et al., 2001) have been in the unitary authorities

TABLE 3
Age participation index (API)^a by social class, 1940–2001

Year	I/II/IIIN	IIIM/IV/V	Overall
1940	8	2	–
1950	19	3	–
1960	27	4	–
1970	32	5	–
1980	33	7	12
1985	35	8	14
1990	37	10	19
1991	35	11	23
1992	40	14	28
1993	43	16	30
1994	46	17	32
1995	47	17	32
1996	48	18	33
1997	48	18	34
1998	45	17	32
1999	45	17	32
2000	48	18	33
2001	50	19	35

Source: National Statistics (2001).

API is defined as the number of home-domiciled young (aged less than 21) initial entrants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses of HE expressed as a proportion of the averaged 18 to 19-year-old UK population.

(UAs) with the lowest levels of participation in 1995–96, such as in the south Wales valleys and UAs in the north-east of Wales. In 1995–96, 16 per cent of 18 to 20-year-olds living in the least ‘income-deprived’ wards in Wales entered the HE sector. This compares quite dramatically with only 5 per cent of 18 to 20-year-olds living in the most ‘income-deprived’ wards (Gorard and Taylor, 2001). The number of 18 to 20-year-old students starting HE undergraduate courses from the least ‘income deprived’ wards increased from 16 to 19 per cent of 18 to 20-year-olds in those wards. The increase in participation for the same age group from the most ‘income-deprived’ wards was from 5 to 7 per cent of 18 to 20-year-olds in their population. The rate of improvement in the participation rates of 18 to 20 year-olds from these two sets of wards was, therefore, 11 per cent of students from the least ‘income-deprived’ (193:155) and 17 per cent of students from the most ‘income-deprived’ wards (72:51). Although participation of students from the most income-deprived wards lags behind the participation of students from the least income-deprived wards, they are slowly catching up.

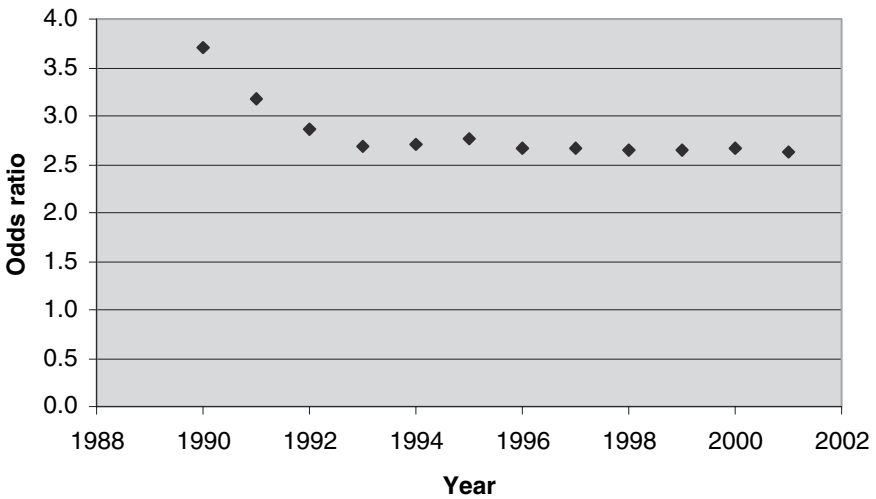


Figure 1 Relative odds of participation in HE for I/II/IIIN versus IIIM/IV/V.

TABLE 4
Higher education applications 2001–02

	Wales	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK
I/II	53	52	55	42	52
IIIN–V	37	36	35	48	36
Not known	10	12	10	11	12

Source: UCAS database.

Qualifications and social class

Before we can judge the HE system as still being unfair today, we need also to consider the distribution of the entry qualifications across social groups. Tables 4 and 5 show that across the UK home countries the reason that social classes I and II predominate in HE is that they predominate in applications for HE. These figures make it clear that the inequity, if it occurs, does not take place in the admissions process. In fact, acceptances to HE (Table 5) are slightly more balanced in terms of social class than applications (Table 4), and slightly more balanced in Wales than most of the UK. If anything, the admissions process favours classes IIIN–V, but this difference is very small compared with the

TABLE 5
Higher education acceptances 2001–02

	Wales	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK
I/II	50 ^a	50	51	44	50
IIIN–V	37	35	35	46	36
Not known	13	15	15	10	15

Source: UCAS database.

^aCompared with 53 the previous year.

growth from application to acceptance of those whose social class is unknown.

The annual schools census in Wales does not ask for parental occupation, and the most commonly-used indicator of disadvantage that it provides instead is eligibility for free-school meals, which is not used for applicants to HE. The UCAS figures for entry qualification to HE exclude the majority of each age cohort who do not participate. Therefore, it is not possible to compare directly the qualifications attained at school by different social classes with participation in HE. We can only estimate the relevant figures from sample surveys, often with high non-response or longitudinal dropout, and sometimes with incompatible measures of class or qualification. Coupled with the many cases in HE not classified by occupation, the situation for analysis is highly unsatisfactory. Yet, it must be stressed that this is the only kind of direct evidence available for the otherwise relatively evidence-free widening participation agenda.

The overwhelming majority of applicants to university are accepted on the basis of their prior qualifications [around 95 per cent according to UCAS (1999)] and two-thirds are accepted on the basis of A/AS levels alone. The first thing to notice about the relationship between these prior qualifications is their very strong association with social class. According to the YCS, 51 per cent of social classes I/II obtained the equivalent of two A-levels at age 18–19 in 1993. According to the National Audit Office, around 56 per cent of the same group obtained NVQ3 or its equivalent. The figures are 28 per cent for social classes IIIM/IV/V, 8 per cent for classes IV/V (YCS in 1993) and 13 per cent for class V. These two facts in combination mean that we should expect HE places to be taken disproportionately by those from the higher social classes. This is what we find (Tables 6 and 7). Given that social class I is only one-fifth of the size of social class II, their combined weighted average age par-

TABLE 6
Age participation index – UK

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
I	55	71	73	78	79
II	36	39	42	45	45
IIIN	22	27	29	31	31
IIIM	11	15	17	18	18
IV	12	14	16	17	17
V	6	9	11	12	12
Overall	23	28	30	32	32

Source: Education-line at http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/r6_046.htm.

TABLE 7
Age participation rate in Wales and the UK – 2000

	Wales	UK
I/II	50	53
IIIN/M	27	30
IV/V	14	8

Source: Callender and Kemp (2001).

participation index (API) for 1995 is 51 per cent (or 50 per cent for Wales in 2000). This is almost exactly the same as the qualification index. This means that social classes I/II are represented in HE entirely appropriately in line with their prior qualifications. The participation rate for social class V in 1995 is 12 per cent, again in line with, or even above, their qualification index from the National Audit Office or YCS.

This summary is in line with figures from the DfES (2003) which point out that 18 per cent of people from manual or unskilled backgrounds gain two A-levels by the age of 18, and that this proportion is exactly the same as the proportion in HE. Therefore, the qualified API is 100 per cent. At the higher end, of those gaining 25+ UCAS points, 97 per cent from higher social classes and 94 per cent from lower go on to HE. Of those with 13–24 UCAS points, the gap is 92 per cent to 88 per cent. So, prior attainment is the main driver of participation in general. Of course, there may still be an imbalance in the kinds of institution and courses applied to, but it is in the application stage that any residual difference appears. The allocation of places is not a problem for equity. Of greater concern is the participation of those not so easy to

analyse, such as those of nontraditional age or with alternative vocational prior qualifications.

There is no way of telling from HESA statistics how many potential students are deterred from studying by the costs involved (Gorard and Taylor, 2001). The proportion of students leaving or completing their course who report finance as the problem is very low in Wales (around 0.6 per cent or 148 students per year). This is in relation to what is reputedly one of the lowest dropout rates in the world (second only to HE in Japan). The most likely explanation for this is that, because of the link between high level qualifications and socio-economic advantage, all of those potential students eligible and qualified for entry to HE are anyway relatively advantaged (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000). There does not exist a large body of socio-economically disadvantaged people who are currently eligible for entry to HE but do not participate (although financial considerations might influence their choice of subject, expected length of course, and institution).

In 1989 the proportion of suitably qualified 18–19-year-olds who attended HE was 65 per cent. By 1992 that had risen to 90 per cent, and is now higher again. A recent report by the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills suggested a qualified age participation rate of 97 per cent. This is what the analysis above confirms. 'Lower academic attainment at age 18 accounts for most of the lower participation in HE by 18-year-olds from poorer social classes' (National Audit Office, 2002, p. 11; see also Connor and Dewson, 2001).

Conclusions

Clearly, such an aggregate analysis cannot take into account the nature of institutions, subjects and degree outcomes in terms of students' social class or ethnicity. The entry requirements for different courses vary considerably (from an average of 30 A-level points at Cambridge to 11 points at the University of Paisley), and these are closely related to the prestige and quality rankings of the institutions concerned (Abbot and Leslie, 2004). This can lead to social class differentials in specific subjects (Goddard, 2004). But the acceptance rates, even for these 'exclusive' subjects, are currently equivalent or better for the less prestigious social classes. For example, applicants from both professional/managerial and routine occupational background have an 86 per cent chance of acceptance for Law, whereas students from a professional/managerial background have an 85 per cent chance of acceptance for Veterinary

Science, compared with 90 per cent for students from a routine occupational background.

It seems that there is no evidence of large-scale inequity in HE admissions and that social classes are currently represented in HE in reasonable proportion to their prior qualifications. What then are the implications?

First and foremost, it seems that the widening participation agenda is in danger of addressing the wrong issue. Through misunderstanding of the numbers involved, some policy makers and evidence providers have combined to try and solve a problem that does not exist. There may well be unfairness in the admissions procedures for some institutions or departments, but this is not reflected in the overall figures. Even if it is decided that HE institutions should admit applicants irrespective of qualifications, then the problem still does not lie with the proportion of applications-turned-into admissions but with the numbers of applications themselves.

The opportunity cost is in terms of not trying to solve the problems that do exist. We could, instead, use the resources saved to address much more directly the issue of why the discrepancy in prior qualifications appears. On one reading of the evidence from the NCDS, the UK portrays a high level of meritocracy, with social mobility apparently uniform across all classes (Nettle, 2003). Bond and Saunders (1999) go so far as to suggest that the reason people of working class origin fare worse in education and employment is unrelated to their class position as such. According to them, NCDS data show that individual ability and motivation are key, whereas class origin is almost irrelevant once these are taken into account. These conclusions are not popular, and are themselves the subject of dispute. Nevertheless, there is a high correlation between the results of cognitive ability tests and later social class, and between social class and qualification, and (as seen above) between qualification and HE participation.

Perhaps, instead, we should devote resources to reducing inequity in sixth form retention and attainment, or in compulsory schooling. Perhaps, we should spend our widening access funds at the pre-school level (Feinstein, 2003), or on reducing poverty and disadvantage more directly. Education is probably an inefficient, and certainly a very slow, form of social engineering. Given that it is possible to predict with alarming accuracy the qualifications of individuals at age 16 and their chances of staying on in education simply from what is known about them at birth (Gorard, 1997), we probably need to direct our resources more

towards families and wider society. By the time they are 16 to 18 years old, many nonparticipants would not include the possibility of further or higher education in their 'subjective opportunity structure' (Gorard and Rees, 2002). As we have seen, they would also tend not to have what are currently considered to be appropriate entry qualifications. They would not, therefore, be aware that they faced a choice to participate in HE or not. Consequently, they would not report being deterred by the costs of HE, or unfairness in the selection process. They may not be tempted by financial incentives.

Paradoxically, as participation in HE increases, it may lead to greater polarisation between a majority of individuals able and willing to attend HE and a decreasing minority forever excluded. The question has to be asked – if we work to increase the currently under-represented groups, then who is it that is *meant* to be left out (Watson, 2004)? Perhaps what we could do instead is use the widening participation agenda and the political willingness to deal with at least one part of the Cinderella sector that is adult education, and the funding that flows from it, to address the much more widespread inequalities in adult and continuing education. In summary, if just about everyone who is already qualified to attend university does so, then we need to create greater equity of access qualifications. As already noted, this can be done at school but is probably already being addressed by school-level policies. What we have a chance to do as well is to use the fashionable enthusiasm for widening participation to make some changes to adult and compensatory education where a real improvement is possible at very little relative cost.

Notes

1. National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) levels form an agreed equivalence for differing qualifications in the UK, including academic and vocational routes. Level 2 includes the equivalent of five high grade General Certificates of Secondary Education, often the entry requirement for academic sixth form study. Level 3 includes the equivalent of two A-levels, the most common entry qualification for higher education.
2. The population census data can be used to calculate the proportion of higher education (HE) participants from the local population of deprived areas (see, for example, Gorard and Taylor, 2001). However, the local census data are not for identified individuals, and it is a fallacy to assume that individuals attending HE from deprived areas in some way match the aggregate characteristics of the local population. They do not. It is also a fallacy to assume that geography, in this areal sense, is any more than a proxy for the true determinants of participation.
3. Undergraduate study, for the purposes of this paper, refers to NVQ level 4 study in a university, college of HE or college of further education. It refers to full- and part-time study for students of any age. However, the availability of figures restricts the analysis in some places to consideration of full-time first degree and/or students aged 17–21. The paper does not extend the analysis to foundation degree, below NVQ level 4, but

sees the growth of these as part of the action on widening participation recommended in the conclusion of the paper.

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