

# Success and impact in widening participation policy: what works and how do we know?

## Abstract

Efforts to widen the participation in higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups are common to many countries. In England, higher education institutions are required by government to invest in 'outreach' activities designed to encourage such groups. There is increasing policy and research interest around the effectiveness of these activities and how this might be evaluated. This paper reports the results of a project designed to explore concepts of 'success' and 'impact' with two generations of practitioner-managers working in this field, including extended telephone interviews with ten active in the mid-2000s, and online questionnaires from 57 engaged in the mid-2010s. The paper concludes that the drive to 'measure the measurable' may be undermining successful activities, while unhelpful inter-institution competition has replaced the co-operative ethos and wider social justice aims that dominated ten years ago.

**Keywords:** participation, access, England, partnerships, aspirations, attainment, targeting

## **Introduction**

This paper concerns itself with efforts over the last two decades in England<sup>1</sup> to increase participation in higher education among groups that have been historically under-represented. We use the term 'participation' here to denote admission and entry into higher education, while recognising that an extended conceptualisation of the term to include later elements of the student experience also exists. 'Access' is used here more widely – and in keeping with policy documents – to refer to the ability to participate within a fair and open admissions system. It therefore reflects the structural barriers and constraints that may impede progression, for example, through educational disadvantage or the operation of the higher education sector.

We begin with an overview of the relevant policy context before reporting the findings of a study that engaged with two generations (from the mid-2000s and mid-2010s) of practitioner-managers charged with improving participation rates. These findings are then used to generate insight into some of the current tensions and challenges, before concluding with recommendations for future policy and practice.

## **Context**

The modern era of interest in access to higher education in England arguably begins with the publication of the Dearing Review in 1997 (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCHIE], 1997). This put the many inequalities in participation into a sharper

statistical focus than had previously been possible and coincided with the election of a Labour government which quickly committed itself (Department for Education and Employment, 2000) to closing the 'social class gap' in admissions, especially to elite universities where it was most marked.

The main manifestation of the new policy direction was the Aimhigher programme, which ran from 2004 to 2011 with an overall expenditure in the region of £650 million (Moore and Dunworth, 2011; Harrison, 2012; Doyle and Griffin, 2012). Aimhigher initially operated on a three-tier basis, with national, regional and sub-regional operations charged with organising and co-ordinating a portfolio of activities targeted at groups that were historically under-represented in higher education in order to incentivise them to apply – an agenda which became known as 'widening participation' (WP). This paper concentrates primarily on young people from low income households who came to be the main focus of WP activity, although long-standing efforts to improve access for adult learners were also integrated into the original Aimhigher mission (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2004).

Since 2006, individual institutions<sup>2</sup> charging tuition fees over a threshold (currently £6,000 a year) have had a statutory obligation to undertake their own WP activities, monitored and approved by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in the form of 'Access Agreements'. With the reduction (in 2008) and subsequent cancellation (in 2011) of Aimhigher as part of successive governments' austerity programmes, institutional WP activities now form the mainstay, with £162 million being collectively invested in 'outreach' in 2013/14 (OFFA, 2015).

Institutions are now expected to set their own targets for the participation of disadvantaged

groups within their Access Agreement, leading to a more atomised approach than during the Aimhigher period (McCaig, 2015).

Despite the demise of Aimhigher, the Coalition (2010 to 2015) and Conservative (2015 to present) governments have maintained the earlier policy commitment to WP, albeit with a shift in tenor from social justice to social mobility – i.e. from a broad brief to tackle the origins and effects of structural inequalities within the education system to a narrower focus encouraging disadvantaged young people to access (especially elite) higher education as a route into professional careers (Milburn, 2012; Waller et al., 2015). For example, the commitment features in the recently issued White Paper (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2016, 14):

‘The Prime Minister has set two specific, clear goals on widening participation in higher education: to double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university in 2020 compared to 2009, and to increase the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students going to university by 20% by 2020. Our recent guidance to the Director of Fair Access to Higher Education (DFA) is clear that we expect significant progress on these two goals. In addition, we have asked the DFA to focus access agreements on some other key challenges including increasing participation among young white males from lower socio-economic groups, who are five times less likely to go into higher education than the most advantaged white males, and supporting participation by students with disabilities.’

Despite fifteen years of policy attention and the two significant funding streams outlined above, progress against the original aims has been mixed. As Figure 1 shows, there has been a steady growth in the proportion of young people receiving free school meals (a commonly-used marker for low income families, based on a standardised national means-test) who have participated in higher education, from 13 percent in 2005 to 23 percent in 2012. However, this has mainly only kept pace with the participation rate of their more affluent peers, such that the gap has declined from 20 percent to 17 percent. In part, this reflects a growing supply of higher education places, but it also reflects an expansion in the pool of young people qualified to apply for those places.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

While many more young people from low income homes are finding their way into higher education, the 'social class gap' has not closed significantly and the change in participation rates shows a strong correlation with improved school qualification pass rates (Harrison, forthcoming). This is supported by large-scale quantitative studies (Chowdry et al 2013; Crawford 2014) that have analysed official data tracking young people from school into higher education. For example, Crawford (2014) estimates that around 95 percent of the variation in overall participation rates is defined by attainment at 16 (i.e. formal qualifications gained at school<sup>3</sup>) and that this also holds true for entry into elite universities. Coleman and Bekhradnia (2011) agree in their study of the demand for higher education, marshalling data to demonstrate that young people with a given level of attainment progress at similar rates across socio-economic backgrounds. Differences in higher education participation are therefore, in very large part, dictated by the propensity to

achieve well at school and to progress into qualifications that permit applications to higher education. These are, of course, strongly related to socio-economic status and the accumulation of educational disadvantage over the young person's lifecourse.

Another particular component of progress on the WP agenda since 2000 has been that increased participation from disadvantaged young people has been focused almost exclusively in lower status institutions (Harrison, 2011; Croxford and Raffe, 2014; Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2015), with clear differences in acceptance rates to elite universities even once application rates have been factored in (Boliver, 2013). This may suggest that there remain barriers impeding access for some students, for example, through fears about social integration (Reay et al., 2009), the (mis)use of personal statements within the application process (Jones, 2012) or the geographical location of elite universities (Mangan et al., 2010). In other words, while improvements in qualifications might be driving participation *in general*, it is not shifting the established social order within higher education, with relatively advantaged social groups dominating participation in elite universities.

This is reflected in the different WP 'missions' that institutions conceptualise for themselves and which are explicated within their Access Agreements (McCaig, 2015). For elite universities, their WP activities are generally focused on encouraging applications from high-attaining young people who would otherwise choose lower status institutions, placing them in competition with such institutions, as well as with other elite universities; a mission to 'reallocate' participation rather than to widen it. For lower status universities, which are often located in more deprived areas and tend to recruit locally, their focus is generally on

attracting young people who might otherwise enter the labour market or other forms of education or training.

This paper explores possible reasons why progress on the WP agenda has not been stronger by examining practices through the eyes of two generations of senior practitioner-managers. The focus of activities is questioned, along with how the 'right' individuals are targeted and how the underpinning epistemologies influence ideas of success. This is in the context of increasing firm guidance from government about the need for institutions to be confident that their money is well spent – for example, within the national widening participation strategy (BIS, 2014, 9)

'It is essential to understand which approaches and activities have the greatest impact, and why. An improved evidence base, and a robust approach to evaluation, are critical in helping the sector and partners to understand which of their activities are most effective and have the greatest impact on access, student success and progression, so enabling effort to be focused on these areas.'

### **Methodology, methods and analytical approach**

This paper is based around data collected through the *Assessing Impact and Measuring Success* (AIMS) project which was led by the authors of this paper. We both served as WP practitioners prior to becoming researchers in the field, enabling us to draw on our own experiences in devising the project. The primary purpose was to explore the underlying

epistemologies around WP among senior practitioner-managers and to make recommendations for future policy and practice. The data presented here are drawn from both strands of the project:

- **Strand 1** comprised semi-structured telephone interviews with former directors from all nine regions of Aimhigher and one former national director, undertaken in late 2014 and early 2015 (see Waller, Harrison and Last, 2015 for more details). The interviews lasted between 40 and 80 minutes and were audio recorded. Many of the participants had continued working within the WP agenda after their Aimhigher roles had ended and so were able to give additional insight over a lengthy time period. However, it should also be noted that they were reflecting on events that were up to ten years distant and so their recollections may have been imperfect; indeed, several of the participants made comments to this effect. Nevertheless, they gave rich and varied accounts of their period of service within Aimhigher, covering the activities they managed, their rationale, the process of partnership delivery and an assessment of success.
- **Strand 2** comprised an online questionnaire prepared using the SurveyMonkey system with a mixture of open qualitative and quantitative questions; the latter took a variety of forms, including tallies, ratings and 'dilemmas' where respondents were asked to choose between two options (see Harrison and Waller, 2015 for more details). A link to the survey was distributed by e-mail to the named senior individuals responsible for WP policy and practice within English institutions in late 2014. A total of 151 institutions were invited to participate and 57 did so,



comprising a 38 percent response rate. Responses were categorised into three institutional types: 19 'Old' Universities (having this status prior to 1992), 22 'New' Universities (gaining their status from 1992 onwards) and 16 Colleges (including specialist institutions [e.g. in the arts] and further education colleges that offer higher education). The response rates for the three types were 44 percent, 37 percent and 33 percent respectively, such that the sample bore a good resemblance to the wider population of English institutions. Engagement with the open qualitative questions was somewhat variable, with some respondents providing short answers, often in note form, while others provided longer and more detailed texts; we have attempted to give equal weight to the accounts as far as possible.

The underpinning methodology was thus a pragmatic mixed methods approach, blending qualitative data from Strand 1 with the mixed qualitative and quantitative data from Strand 2. Analysis focused on synthesising key themes between the two strands, paying particular attention to communalities and changes over time. Given the different forms of data, diverse job roles and shifting nomenclature, this was not unproblematic, but we were able to draw on our own knowledge and the wider literature to contextualise the data and identify useful insights while respecting the variety of the (sometimes contradictory) views collected. This paper therefore combines illustrative quotes from the Strand 1 interviews with descriptive statistics and illustrative quotes from the Strand 2 questionnaires; we have also identified points of contrast or disagreement where relevant. To help to preserve the anonymity of the participants, we have not assigned quotes to individuals, even as pseudonyms.

The findings reported in this paper are therefore derived from subjective accounts from the two contrasting groups of participants, filtered through our own lens as experienced researchers and former practitioners. As such, our claims to knowledge are limited and we are open to the possibility that others might draw different conclusions from the same data.

### **What works in WP practice?**

Participants in both Strand 1 and Strand 2 were asked, in somewhat different ways, which specific WP activities they felt to be most successful; our analysis here focuses on differences in the conceptualisation of success and the principles believed to underpin it.

Aimhigher was originally conceived as a programme for increasing applications to higher education among a variety of socio-economic and geo-demographic groups that were generally constructed by government as having a 'poverty of aspirations' that were preventing them from seeing education as a means of improving their lives (e.g. Department for Education and Employment, 2000; Department for Education and Skills, 2003a,b). Within this deficit discourse, it was felt that these groups were likely to have negative perceptions about higher education, lack information about options and not to see HE as an appropriate pathway, while being actively dissuaded by a variety of structural 'barriers' (Gorard et al., 2006). The Strand 1 participants therefore described how the early Aimhigher period was marked by experimentation to determine a successful portfolio of activities that would raise aspirations (see Moore and Dunworth, 2011 for examples of such activities).

There was disagreement, however, around the purpose of raising aspirations. For some Strand 1 participants, it was an end in itself and they saw Aimhigher's role as providing inspirational experiences outside of the school curriculum to enable prospective students to overcome these social, economic and cultural barriers, while attainment was constructed as a concern for schools or other organisations. Others had seen aspiration-raising in a reciprocal causal relationship with attainment, such that more positive attitudes towards higher education would fire motivation to work harder and to accumulate the essential credentials that provide a pathway to higher education. Similarly, improved school results made new opportunities appear achievable and increased aspirations further still. Of this group of Strand 1 participants, some were explicit about this mutually reinforcing relationship, while others conceptualised it more in terms of aspirations and attainment being intertwined missions for Aimhigher. Indeed, there was a clear shift in the language used within Aimhigher policy documents from a focus on aspirations to attainment (Harrison, 2012).

A common prerequisite for success described by Strand 1 participants was the need to engage with younger age groups, given the pervasive and ingrained nature of educational disadvantage:

*"It wasn't even good enough to go and work with some 13-plus kids – a lot of these things that you're dealing with are so deeply embedded that you need to be doing things from the very earliest years in primary school and maybe even before that."*

This was seen as key area of activity for several Strand 1 participants, with some describing work with primary schools to broaden horizons around graduate careers through storytelling projects and engagement of student mentors from their own communities.

The tension between aspiration and attainment is also seen clearly within the Strand 2 data. Participants were asked to rate how successful they felt their activities had been across a range of possible measures of impact on a four-point scale (very successful/quite successful/rather unsuccessful/not applicable). They were generally confident with respect to increasing knowledge, raising aspirations and challenging stereotypes about higher education, with over 50 percent believing that their institution had been very successful. However, very few felt that they had had similar impact in terms of raising attainment at either 16 or 18 – just 2 percent and 4 percent respectively, and Colleges in both instances. In fact, 38 percent felt that their institution was not concerned with improving results at 16 and 26 percent held the same view about 18; these outcomes were simply constructed as being out-of-scope for their portfolio of activities, with little difference in responses between institutional types.

This tension, therefore, remains unresolved. On the one hand, quantitative analysis suggests that attainment is the key determinants of higher education participation (e.g. Crawford, 2014), while there is mounting evidence that disadvantaged young people do not suffer from the low aspirations ascribed to them in the public discourse (Whitty, Hayton and Tang, 2015). On the other hand, the majority of institutions reported focusing on a relatively restricted range of aspiration-raising activities, with many seeing attainment-raising as being explicitly outside their mission. Indeed, it is unclear that aspirational gains

translate simply into improved attainment, which may explain the low confidence from the Strand 2 participants; Gorard and See (2013, p.128) conclude from their systematic review that ‘there is insufficient evidence for a causal link to justify any intervention to raise aspirations in order to raise attainment’.

The activities described as successful by Strand 2 participants tended to have a strong overlap with more traditional marketing and recruitment activity, including taster days and school visits. In many instances, the balance between raising aspirations for higher education and for individual institutions was unclear. Interestingly, two Strand 1 participants had reflected on the dangers of the almost inevitable competition between institutions for students targeted by WP activities:

*“It [aspiration-raising] often became more of a recruitment activity with universities trying to prove why it was better to come to them than the one down the road.”*

*“I think that if you [...] have several institutions falling over each other to do the same thing, then the chances are, you know, that it’s hardly going to motivate and it will actually become demotivating.”*

There is, therefore, a risk that contemporary efforts will fail to influence the size of the overall pool of potential applicants and simply serve to reorganise the allocation of those already *en route* to higher education; in other words, improving one’s summer school or taster day activities may increase the institutional intake from disadvantaged groups without shifting overall participation rates across the country. In particular, the very modest

progress on WP made by elite universities may reflect an over-emphasis on securing applications from already high-attaining young people to the detriment of activities to increase the pool of those attaining highly – i.e. a reallocation between elite universities rather than from lower status institutions.

### **Who gets access to WP activities?**

One of the Strand 1 participants reflected on what they perceived to be a lack of focus within Aimhigher activities:

*“We were targeting too many people in too many [schools/colleges] many of whom we didn’t need to – shouldn’t have been – targeting anyway.”*

This quote is useful as it illustrates two key concepts in social policy analysis (Harrison, 2012). Firstly, there exists a group of people who *“didn’t need to”* be targeted – those disadvantaged young people who were already on the pathway to higher education, even if they were not aware of it at the time. These constitute ‘deadweight’: resources expended to change behaviour when the individual is already very likely to exhibit the desired behaviour in due course. Deadweight represents a waste of limited resource, with little impact on the phenomenon in question. Secondly, there is a group of people who *“shouldn’t have been”* targeted – those in a position of relative advantage. These constitute ‘leakage’: resources intended for a disadvantaged group that end up supporting an advantaged group. Leakage is a double problem for social policy; not only are the resources

wasted but they reinforce the inequalities that they are intended to tackle, as highlighted by another Strand 1 participant:

*“One of the [young people on a summer school] was the daughter of two professors. It was a fantastic summer school, but I’m not sure it would have resulted in that person going to university as I suspected that they were going to go anyway – it was pointless.”*

The ideal target group for WP activities is therefore those disadvantaged young people who have the potential to enter higher education (or an elite university), but who would not do so without an additional intervention. Concerns about deadweight and leakage date right back to the early days of the WP agenda (e.g. Thomas, 2001) and eventually spawned official guidance (e.g. HEFCE, 2007).

Many of the Strand 1 participants discussed Aimhigher’s concerted efforts to use geo-demographic data to reliably target disadvantaged communities and schools with which to work. This was considered by some to be a solved problem, although there were misgivings about the role of schools in identifying specific individuals – what one participant called the *“problem of teacher judgement [which] includes more people who shouldn’t be there.”* This theme was continued into Strand 2, with 32 percent of participants expressing concerns about the ability or willingness of schools to identify the ‘right’ young people, even once clear criteria had been set: *“sometimes schools may have their own agendas as to who might benefit from interactions”*, with *“unscrupulous”* teachers who use WP activities to give additional input to high-flying pupils or those likely to portray the school in a good light.

This was conceptualised in respect of the pressures on schools to maximise their standing, which may be at odds with the WP agenda. For example, one Strand 2 participant explained that

*“We have had instances where school coordinators have become angry when we have declined to offer an activity when they have refused to engage in targeting disadvantaged learners.”*

Schools therefore add an extra layer where deadweight and leakage can undermine efforts to target WP activities for maximum impact. This is not a new problem and several of the Strand 1 participants reflected on schools who received Aimhigher funding, but who used it for their own purposes which had no relationship to WP (e.g. purchasing a new fish tank) – or were even antithetical to it (e.g. extension classes for advantaged pupils). One participant drew a strong distinction between schools with an ethos of ensuring their pupils progressed and those without, while another suggested that high-achieving schools sometimes resented effort being placed in what they considered to be low-achieving pupils. These problems remain, with one Strand 2 participant stressing the *“quality of partnership and shared agendas”* as vital components in ensuring that schools target appropriately. Several Strand 1 participants noted that schools made less use of free school meals eligibility as an individual marker of disadvantage than they would have liked.

One particular component in the English context is the use of ‘low participation neighbourhoods’ as a tool for targeting and monitoring activity. This methodology (known as POLAR) uses historical data to define geographical areas where young people have had a



below average likelihood of attending higher education (HEFCE, 2005; 2010; 2012). Over time, POLAR has accumulated other uses, including as a tool for comparing the performance of individual institutions or against the targets that institutions set for themselves in order to satisfy OFFA (Harrison and McCaig, 2015).

Indeed, 93 percent of Strand 2 participants reported that their institution used POLAR within internal performance indicators to measure how successful their WP activities had been at recruiting disadvantaged young people. However, the level of granularity within POLAR is such that many advantaged young people live within disadvantaged target areas, and *vice versa*. There is some evidence from dilemma-style questions that this use of POLAR is driving perverse incentives, with 60 percent of respondents feeling that increasing applications from a disadvantaged area or school would be considered a success by their institution, regardless of the individual applicants' own situation. Furthermore, 53 percent believed that recruiting an advantaged student from a disadvantaged area was equally (39 percent) or more important (14 percent) to their institution than a disadvantaged student from an advantaged area. In other words, over half of the practitioner-managers responding to the survey felt that, for their institution, recruiting from a target neighbourhood was the immediate goal (due to the targets set with OFFA), rather than recruiting disadvantaged young people or changing application choices; the scope for leakage here is readily apparent.

### **Working out what works**

The evaluation of WP activities has vexed practitioners and policymakers from the outset, especially in the light of unreliable and unavailable data (Passy and Morris, 2010). However, there are other important issues of epistemology that remain unresolved. There is, perhaps, a natural desire to understand complex systems and to purposefully influence them. An individual's progression through the education system and into adult life is one such system and it is vested with strong symbolic value by society due its roles in determining power hierarchies, economic competitiveness and personal liberties. This, along with an interest in value-for-money in a period of public austerity (BIS, 2014), may begin to explain the strong pressures applied to WP practitioners to prove 'what works' in terms of the activities they offer.

Proving impact was a key issue for Aimhigher across its lifespan. The Strand 1 participants reported that a consensus on successful activities emerged naturally through the sharing of experiences and good practice within and between regions. However, the practicalities of a complex organisational framework often muddled the waters and created a 'partnership of least resistance' where sub-optimal activities were tolerated to maintain harmony:

*"What was good value was pretty well known by 2006. It didn't influence behaviour terribly because you've always got enthusiasts who want to do the sorts of activities that they enjoy."*

*"Some things go down well because they fit in better with the school timetable and ethos and that makes them popular, rather than because they are necessarily effective."*

Strand 1 participants tended to report a shift over time towards a reduced palette of activities that were easy to evaluate (at least in simplistic terms) over those that might offer particular opportunities for personal transformation or behavioural change. Indeed, it was found that as the pressure to evaluate activities and hone the Aimhigher 'offer' was increased, it led to a falling-away of the broad-based partnerships that had characterised Aimhigher in the first place:

*"[The pressure to evaluate] went on and on and the diversity of the types of activities went down and down as people just started trying to meet the targets or only do things that could easily be measured."*

*"There was a definite drop-off in attendance [from partners] as time and the tinkering went on and people realised there was not going to be so much in for them."*

The pressure was generally felt to be towards identifying individual activities that were going to change a young person's trajectory towards higher education – a 'silver bullet' that would increase their aspirations (or, much more rarely, attainment) sufficiently to create a demand when none previously existed. However, some Aimhigher directors resisted this approach, at least in part, arguing instead for a structured programme operating over a longer time period:

*“We needed to put together a whole series [...] of different activities which had progression built into them and which went across institutions and which offered different things for kids at different stages right the way from primary to the transition into higher education.”*

Part of the rationale for this was the inherent unpredictability of activities and their individual outcomes, which could be dependent on organisers, attendees or location:

*“You could put on a bespoke activity that you think worked fantastically and you could put another one a week later that you thought was a miserable failure.”*

*“A masterclass in Lancaster would not be the same as a master class in Plymouth, for argument’s sake. There are so many influencing factors that impact on the young people. Unless you are making a comparison of individual masterclasses it is very difficult to determine the impact in general.”*

Furthermore, it was felt that some of the most effective activities were bound closely into the work of the school. This presented problems in terms of the reductive form of evaluation that Aimhigher was being asked to work within; the lines between school and WP activity were blurred, while the school was likely to protect its own interests:

*“The more successful we were at integrating in school programmes [...] the harder it became to disaggregate the Aimhigher effect.”*

*“Of course, it’s much more difficult to justify that you’ve done, as schools – and headteachers in particular – will never want to give you the credit for raising attainment in their school as they want the credit for themselves. So it’s even harder to measure.”*

In particular, several Strand 1 participants talked about a reduction over time in activities with younger children and their parents, as these were particularly difficult to evaluate given the timescales involved (which could be up to ten years) and the indirect nature of the intervention being made.

Turning to the Strand 2 data, it is readily apparent that the evaluation of WP activities and programmes continues to be an unsolved problem. Only 10 percent of respondents rated themselves as ‘very confident’ in the evidence base underpinning their activities, although another 58 percent were ‘generally confident’; the remainder were ‘quite confident’ with the exception of one respondent who was ‘not confident’. As a result, 91 percent were looking to improve their evaluation practices.

[FIGURE 2 here]

As shown in Figure 2, pupil questionnaires were the most widely used forms of evaluation, followed by time series analyses, questionnaires with teachers and longitudinal tracking, all of which provide simple and readily-quantifiable data. Interviews with pupils and teachers were generally only on an ‘occasional’ or ‘rare’ basis, which was surprising given the rich lifecourse data that they can yield. The least likely to be used were the most rigorous

quantitative approaches and those most likely to illuminate causal relationships. Colleges were more likely to rely on pupil questionnaires than universities, while New Universities made a greater use of time series analysis, presumably focused on around monitoring applications from particular schools/areas.

Strand 2 participants were also asked which form of evaluation they felt to be the most reliable in terms of evidence produced and there was overwhelming support for longitudinal studies, with 58 percent choosing this option. The qualitative comments suggested that this enthusiasm for longitudinal studies was grounded in approaches that tracked individual young people through school and towards higher education (although they did not know if the person went to another institution), collating information on their attendance at WP activities, their qualification attainment and data from questionnaires. Such a tracking approach was pioneered during the Aimhigher era and several of the Strand 1 participants saw this as an enduring contribution to the sector – indeed, the software developed under their stewardship is now available nationally (see [www.highereducationaccesstracker.org.uk](http://www.highereducationaccesstracker.org.uk)), and referred to by around a fifth of the Strand 2 participants as part of their existing or future evaluation plans.

This approach clearly has a useful role to play in enabling institutions to collate information about their target group(s) and to potentially identify a critical episode where the young person's aspirations or attainment shifted. However, there are also several epistemological dangers:

- If an attitudinal shift for the young person is contemporaneous with a WP activity, it is not necessarily due to that activity, especially as the data points are likely to be widely spaced in time – a correlation/causation issue. Conversely, if the change is delayed, it may be missed.
- Without information about young people outside of the target group, it is impossible to assess any unique contribution deriving from the WP activities. This is particularly problematic given that the target group are likely to be deriving additional interventions through the Pupil Premium (the main national policy tool since 2011 for addressing unequal attainment in schools by providing additional funding for children from low income and other disadvantaged backgrounds) and Gifted and Talented (enrichment activities to develop notable abilities, whether academic, sporting or artistic) schemes, as well as other social justice initiatives.
- Young people are targeted by institutions on the basis of their perceived potential to attend higher education – it is not a random process and introduces a very strong selection bias into the data. There may be a temptation to compare the target group with background aspiration, attainment or progression statistics for the school/area, leading to the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- Finally, simple tracking studies cannot address the deadweight issue outlined above. Our collective knowledge about young people's trajectories into higher education is not yet sufficiently nuanced to be able to predict which need intervention to help them to join the pool of potential applicants and which are already on the conveyor

belt, even if they are not yet aware of it. Targeting the highest achieving children from disadvantaged schools is unlikely to shift overall progression figures if these represent the 23 percent already reaching higher education (BIS, 2015), although it may impact on where they apply.

While the value of longitudinal tracking studies was widely promoted among the Strand 2 participants for monitoring their activities, there were thoughtful dissenting voices. For some, it was important to develop more rigorous quantitative approaches to overcome some of the epistemological problems outlined above, although the practicalities of these were acknowledged, such as by this participant from an Old University:

*“Randomised controlled trials [are best] in theory but isolating from other influences is challenging.”*

Two participants reflected on the growing pressure (BIS, 2014) to use these sort of ‘robust’ methods and their own epistemological and ethical misgivings that were leading them to resist that pressure. Others were moving in the opposite direction and seeking to develop qualitative and case study techniques in order to answer questions around *why* particular activities were or were not effective, including both with non-applicants and with current students who had been members of a target group.

Indeed, the most considered comments from the Strand 2 participants stressed the need for multiple approaches and for more confidence in asserting the value of qualitative data, as demonstrated by these quotes from Old and New Universities respectively:



*“We think it depends on the success measures you are using and the objectives of a particular activity and programme. Where possible we adopt a flexible methodological approach to allow us to investigate the specificities of particular activities. Across a broad range of activities, we have found a combination of questionnaires and focus groups / interviews to provide an effective core base of evidence.”*

*“We might too readily go on to the back foot when we are challenged on the evidence. Perhaps we have plenty of evidence but too little analysis of what it tells us and too little articulation between the various data sets we have.”*

Several Strand 2 participants reiterated concerns aired by Strand 1 participants around the difficulties of measuring impact over long timescales or of individual activities within a structured programme, where their evidence base suggested that the effect was cumulative and/or unpredictable at the individual level.

More broadly, the qualitative comments from Strand 2 suggested that there was some conflation of monitoring (e.g. checking targeting algorithms or investigating the proportion of targeted young people progressing) and evaluation (i.e. attempting to uncover which activities or programmes are effective – and why). This harks back to the Aimhigher experience cited earlier, where enumeration was privileged and the easily measurable given priority. The result of this pressure to codify ‘what works’ continues to unfold. Within the Strand 2 responses, only a small minority described some of the activities that the Strand 1

participants had identified as important in challenging inequalities within a wider social justice context – e.g. working with younger children, engaging parents, providing careers/qualification advice or integrating work-based elements. It is possible that these have been evaluated and found wanting, but it seems more likely that in most instances they have been abandoned due to the epistemological challenges outlined above.

Far more common were activities spanning a conceptual space between access and recruitment, notably including the school visits and taster days that the Strand 1 participants had generally concluded were of limited value. This perhaps reflects the shift in government terminology from 2010 onwards, which reintroduced the idea of ‘outreach’, as the prime responsibility for the WP agenda shifted from Aimhigher to individual institutions. This blurring was particularly marked among New Universities, where the qualitative comments often stressed concepts such as “*equality of access*” to their activities (i.e. that all young people could take part), rather than targeted provision. In contrast to Aimhigher’s mission around challenging structural inequalities, this would appear to have more to do with maximising admissions – indeed, 48 percent of Strand 2 participants felt that applications to their own institution were more important to their institution than applications to higher education in general; the new world of competitive outreach stands in stark contrast to the collaborative ethos of Aimhigher.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has used data collected from past and present practitioners-managers working within the field of higher education access and used these data as a lens to examine the limited national progress on closing the 'social gap' in England. As noted earlier, while the proportion of young people from lower socio-economic groups progressing to higher education has increased quite rapidly, this is in the context of a general expansion of the sector and improvements in school qualifications offering entry to higher education.

We have noted that issues with targeting the 'right' young people have persisted over many years and argued that there is now a danger that this is worsening through pressure to recruit from certain geographic areas rather than from lower socio-economic groups, as well as through a blurring of the lines between access activity and recruitment activity – a new world where measurable 'outreach' has replaced complex and vexed 'WP'. There continues to be a strong emphasis on raising aspirations rather than addressing inequalities in attainment directly, as well as a falling away of activities that had, during the 2000s, aimed at broader social justice issues. We conclude, therefore, that there are continuing questions about the portfolio of activities offered by universities and their targeting.

Furthermore, there is generally an absence of a clear epistemology for assessing success. This is partly due to the complexity of undertaking – identifying activities that 'work' over a period of years with myriad confounding factors, and where successful partnership working further compromises the ability to attribute success to a single agency or activity. However, it is also partly due to various misalignments of epistemology, including a conflation of 'monitoring' with 'evaluation', a desire to 'measure the measurable' and a lack of familiarity or confidence with more advanced quantitative techniques. Practitioners appear to be in

something of a bind, feeling that they must conform to the 'what works' agenda or actively resist it, rather than developing an appropriate epistemology that allows for robust evaluations (of various types) in complex social fields.

Based on these data, we conclude that there are a number of risks confronting government policy in England at the current time, as well as a key confusion. While there is a stated objective to challenge inequalities in access and participation, especially to elite universities, the means of achieving this is largely delegated to individual institutions. There is a danger that the current portfolio of activities is not fit-for-purpose, but it is privileged because of its measurability and its congruency with recruitment activity in a competitive marketplace.

Inter-institutional competition for disadvantaged young people does not increase the overall numbers progressing; it risks falling into a 'zero sum game' where the quality of an institution's WP activities relates to their ability to secure entrants from a finite pool of applicants, rather than increasing the size of that pool. This appears to be particularly marked among elite universities where social inequalities are most stark and where individual Access Agreement targets are most likely to lead to competition.

Based on the findings described in this paper, we recommend that the government focuses more attention on seeding the active collaboration between institutions that was lost with the demise of Aimhigher, while recognising the recently-convened outreach networks (HEFCE, 2014) and the newly-announced funding focused on areas with lower-than-predicted participation (HEFCE, 2016). Attention should also be given to lessening the perverse incentives of area-based targets, potentially by setting shared sub-regional targets, in order to reduce leakage and deadweight. Finally, we find the accounts of earlier

practitioner-managers convincing with respect to the need for earlier and wider efforts to engage with educational disadvantage, especially given growing evidence for the pivotal role of attainment in participation, although we acknowledge that these activities are similarly vexed with respect to demonstrating impact. Nevertheless, we therefore recommend that more directive guidance or regulation is required from government to shift institutions towards directing their activities towards raising attainment, towards younger age groups and towards career-led activities as these are more likely to challenge social inequalities and lead to a long-term widening of the pool of young people from lower socio-economic groups qualified to demand higher education.

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Figure 1: Higher education participation rates for young people, by free school meals eligibility (Source: BIS, 2015; DFE, 2016)

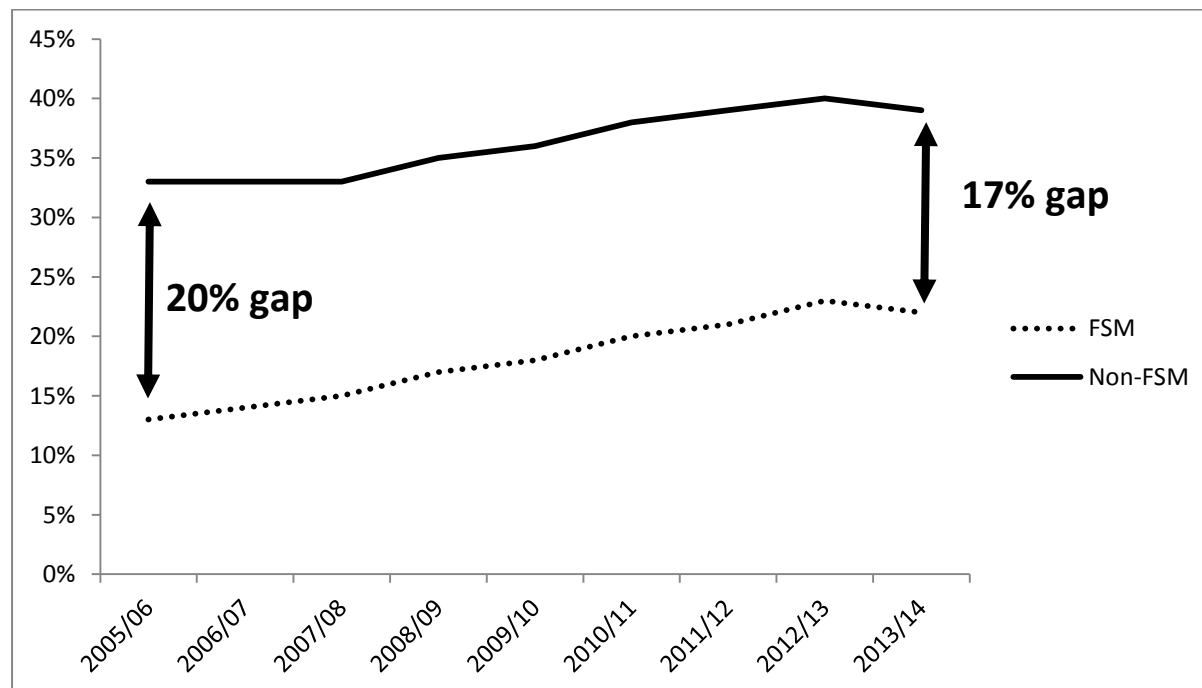
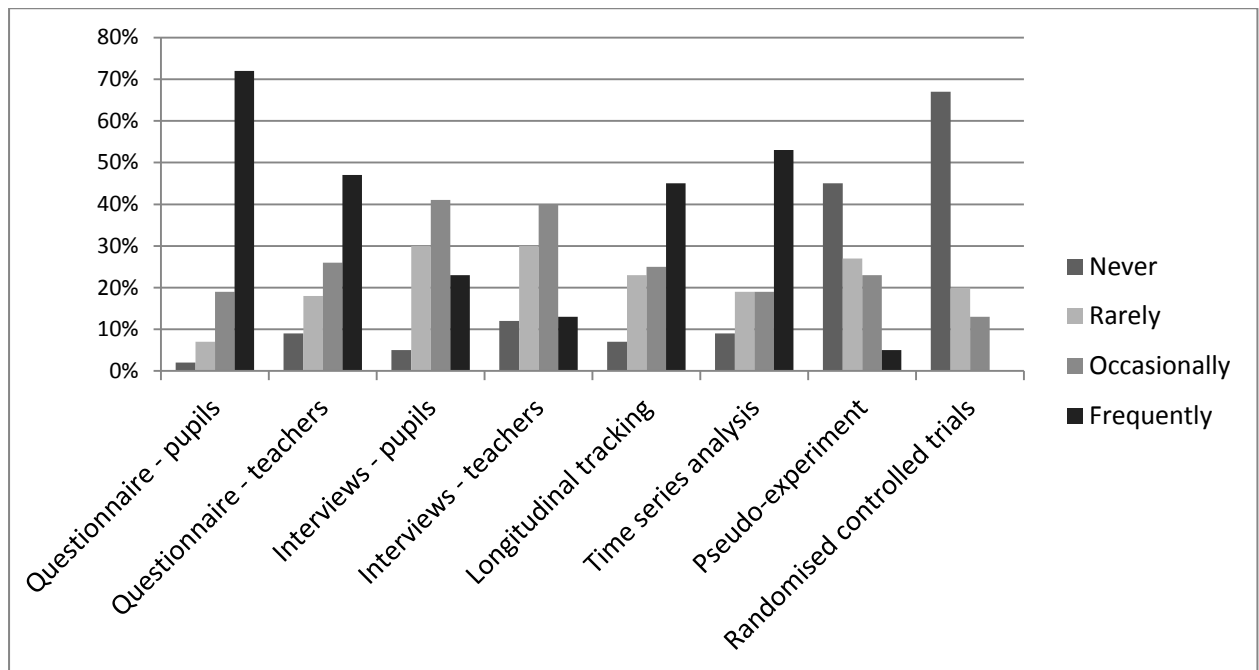


Figure 2: frequency of use of different forms of evaluation



<sup>1</sup> Within the UK, policy responsibility for higher education is partly or wholly devolved to the four constituent nations. This paper will focus on England, although much of the evidence will have wider applicability.

<sup>2</sup> In England, higher education is mainly offered by universities, but there are also a number of specialist and further education colleges that offer higher education in their own right, so the inclusive term 'institution' is used herein.

<sup>3</sup> Most English students qualify for entry to higher education through two or more A Levels which are taken at the age of 18, although vocational alternatives (e.g. BTECs and apprenticeships) also exist. GCSE examinations taken at 16 are a strong predictor for the propensity to progress to A Levels and therefore to participate in higher education.