

# It's about time we challenged the views of those who wrongly claim that only a handful of universities deliver social mobility

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*No one yet knows the full impact that the fee changes will have on many underrepresented communities. Pam Tatlow argues that the diversification of student bodies amidst fee changes must start with a challenge to the elitism that pervades the social mobility debate.*



Notwithstanding warm words from Ministers or the critiques of those who believe that higher education should be funded from general taxation, the reality is that no-one yet knows the impact on participation of the 2012 fee changes. Detailed analysis of enrolments will provide some answers but will not be available until 2013.

The analysis needs to look at socio-economic class but also other equality measures. It's worth remembering that the High Court recently found that the Secretary of State had failed in statutory Public Sector Equality Duties by not fully considering gender and ethnicity in the equality impact assessment published prior to the December 2010 fees votes in Parliament. Post enrolment analysis definitely needs to account for 'double disadvantage.'

Research from the Institute of Fiscal Studies has already concluded that for every £1000 that fees increase there is a deterrent effect that is only partly mitigated by an increase in fee loans. It would also be wise to consider how record levels of youth unemployment impact on participation. Economic downturns usually stimulate demand for higher education. Will this be true for those who are more risk and debt averse? And will variable fees really make a difference to anyone other than the Treasury?

The 2012 UCAS applications for full-time students provide an important clue to the future. The 11 per cent decline in applications from mature students could turn out to be significant. The socio-economic profiles of first-time mature students are much more diverse. If this trend were to continue we might expect to see some long-term impacts in terms of widening participation and social mobility.

Widening participation and social mobility are not interchangeable but they are linked. Widening participation is about creating access to higher education for individuals from backgrounds or groups who are traditionally less likely to participate – but we also need some reliable measure of social mobility itself. This is most definitely not assessed by the number of free school meal students who enter the 30 most selective universities, as the Department for Education continues to suggest; nor will it be progressed by the Education Department's 'Dux' scheme.

Now you won't find 'Dux' paddling in a pond – but you could find one Year 9 pupil and one teacher from every state school wandering around a small number of universities in the summer term funded by the taxpayer with the alleged aim of 'raising aspiration' by applying to study in a Russell Group university. For the Department that abolished the Educational Maintenance Allowance this seems a rather bizarre use of public funds. We can no doubt expect to see a rash of well-placed media stories about pupils from inner city schools being wowed in ivory towers.

This very limited (and limiting) view of social mobility is certainly not used by the OECD. Nor should the impact of higher education on social mobility be measured simply by the number of students in higher education. But it is possible to review the socio-economic backgrounds of students when

they enter university and compare them with their occupations for example, three and a half years after they graduate – something which the HESA stats and Labour Force Survey data allow us to do. When measured in this way it is an incontrovertible fact that modern universities are the main contributors to social mobility.

Widening participation and social mobility also depend on expanding student numbers. In the debate about fee structures, AAB+ and core and margin, it is too often forgotten that in 2012 there will be 15,000 fewer funded student places than in 2010 – and 25,000 fewer places than Labour had promised prior to the 2010 general election. Of the number that are funded in 2012, 20,000 have been top-sliced from universities, with far greater numbers lost from universities which have first-class track-records in promoting the kind of participation that contributes to social mobility.

Of this 20,000, 10,354 places are being transferred to Further Education Colleges. If these numbers are to be filled, students in England will have to choose to study higher education courses in FE in far greater numbers than they have ever done before – begging a real question about the extent to which some students who want to study at a university will have a choice. But universities cannot wash their hands of societal obligations to promote social mobility by complaining about fees or inputs. The complaints about applicants which surfaced yet again in the recent debate about the next Director of Ofqa are revealing. According to these critics the problems include poor attainment of state school pupils, pupils choosing the ‘wrong’ subjects at 13, state schools not encouraging aspiration and pupils with the right qualifications just not applying to some universities.

Frankly I think these complainants over-egg the pudding: are we really expected to believe that universities which sell themselves as world-class, with brilliant academic staff, are unable to teach students who lack a perfect set of pre-entry A-level grades? And that these same world-class institutions cannot admit students from the rich talent pool that exists in state schools or even students who are older – and support them to attain honours degrees?

Interestingly, one thing that those who favour a US model of higher education and more private providers never mention, is the affirmative action programmes which are commonplace in the US, including at Ivy League universities. In 2009, 10.8 per cent of students at Harvard – where President Barack Obama studied law – were African-American – and this in a country where racial segregation in education existed into the 1960s. Compare this with the statistics for some UK institutions which benefit from huge endowment funding and hundreds of years of public funding and now ‘Dux’ support. Of course, ethnicity is not the only factor that we should be considering.

Inevitably affirmative action has been tested in the US Supreme Court. In a landmark judgment in 2003 the Court ruled that race could be one of many factors considered by colleges when selecting their students because it furthers “a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body.” Notwithstanding the outcome of the 2012 fees and funding structure, it’s about time that we also challenged the views of those who wrongly claim that only a handful of universities deliver social mobility.

If we want to have our own compelling vision about achieving and delivering more diverse student bodies across the higher education sector then we need to stop blaming others and challenge the elitism that continues to pervade the social mobility debate in the UK.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

## **About the author**

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