

**Summary Background Paper Prepared for the Policy Forum on Higher Education
Access and Success in the UK and the USA**

Widening Access to UK Higher Education

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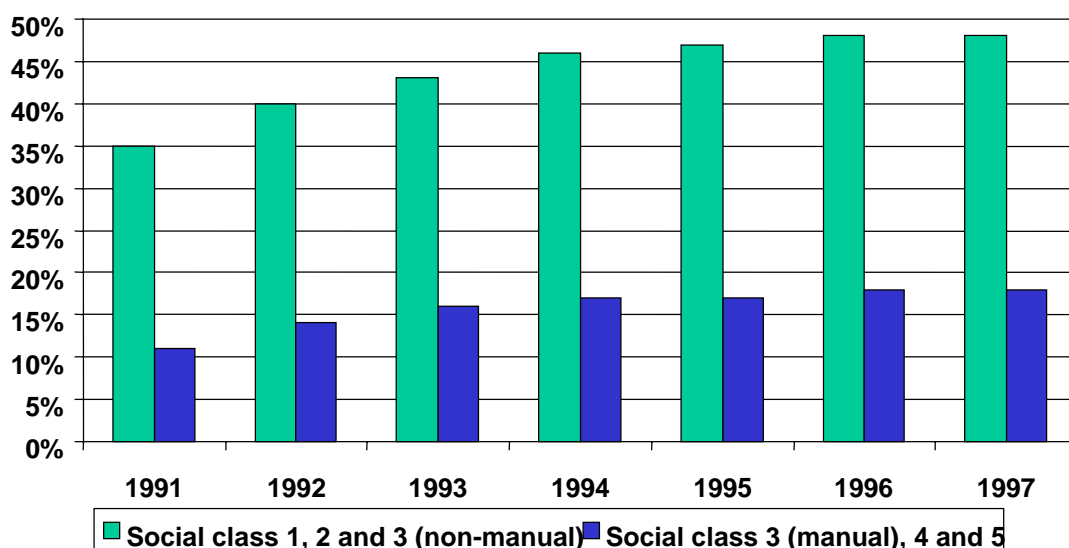
Tony Clark was Director of Higher Education at the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (now the Department for Education and Skills [DfES]). He retired from the DfEE in June 2000, but continued to work with the programme as a consultant.

Background data

Participation by different social classes

1. The differences in participation between social classes have been narrowing in recent years, but still remain large. The following chart sets out the position. A fuller analysis is given at Annex A. There is no evidence that changes in student support have affected recent trends. The main factor influencing patterns of participation in higher education is achievement in qualifications required for entry.

Entry rates by social class of young people (aged under 21) to full-time Higher Education in the UK (Age Participation Index)



Disabled students

2. People with disabilities are under-represented in higher education. This is evident in both part-time and full-time study, and at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. For those participating in higher education, 'unseen' disabilities such as diabetes and epilepsy are most common amongst full-time students, whilst wheelchair users and those with mobility problems are equally in evidence amongst part-time students.

Access by ethnic groups

3. At all stages of education, there is a higher rate of participation by ethnic minority students than by students from the indigenous population. Ethnic minorities are generally well represented in higher education. The exceptions are Bangladeshi and Pakistani women of all ages, young Caribbean and other black men, and older Indians of both sexes. Nevertheless, there has been strong growth in the last few years in participation by Bangladeshi and

Pakistani women. Under-representation may be linked for some to an unwillingness to borrow money to study. Ethnic minority students are concentrated in the new (post-1992) universities and are predominantly located in London and the Midlands where there are large ethnic minority populations.

Access by age, gender, region and sector

4. Most undergraduate study is undertaken by young people on a full-time basis. In Scotland, where the school leaving age has been 17, there is a higher proportion of young students than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The majority of part-time students are mature. Full-time participation in Scotland and Northern Ireland is significantly higher than in England or Wales. In Scotland, this reflects higher participation in one- or two-year sub-degree courses offered mainly by further education colleges.

5. Full-time participation by women achieved parity with men in the early 1990s and now accounts for some 54 percent of all entrants. This higher level of participation reflects higher participation and achievement at school and college. There is a slightly lower propensity for women with good qualifications at 18 to go on to higher education.

6. Participation by mature, full-time students is mainly in the new (post-1992) universities and colleges. Participation by women has now reached parity with men.

National policies

7. In its submission to the National Committee of Inquiry (the Dearing Committee) before the last general election, the Labour Party set out four key principles for lifelong learning:

- high-quality teaching and learning
- improving access to learning opportunities
- ensuring that no-one is denied a place because of their background or financial circumstances
- ensuring that universities and colleges are accountable, as well as responsive, to their students and the needs of the wider community.

8. The Committee issued its report, *Higher Education in a Learning Society*, in July 1997, soon after the new Labour Government had been elected. The Government issued a statement on the day of publication, welcoming the Committee's emphasis on extending opportunities. The Secretary of State, David Blunkett, said that access must be widened to include those who have been traditionally under-represented in our colleges and universities.

9. At the same time, the Government accepted the Committee's argument that the costs of higher education should be shared amongst those who benefit. The Government introduced fees to be paid by individual full-time students, but subject to a means test, so that about one-third of all students would continue to receive free higher education. It also introduced 100 percent loans (rather than grants and loans) for students' living costs. However, repayments for these subsidised loans are to be made on an income-contingent basis and collected through the tax system. Hence the level of repayment will depend on the salary achieved by students following graduation. In addition, the Government introduced

supplementary loans for those in hardship. These support arrangements were designed to meet the principle that no-one should be denied access because of their financial circumstances.

10. Subsequently, the Government has substantially increased the level of special funds (Hardship and Access Funds) made available to universities and colleges for allocation on a discretionary basis, mainly as grants to needy students. Within the Access Funds, there are special bursaries for mature students, especially lone parents; students with dependent children are eligible, subject to a means-test, for free school meals for the children. Grants for disabled students have been retained and are no longer means-tested. Some other personal grants have also been retained. Loans for part-time students are being introduced this Autumn for the first time, and there is a special scheme to remit fees to needy part-time students.

Landmark speech by David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, February 2000

11. The following extract covers the section of this speech on universities and social inclusion:

I want also to address the issue of higher education social justice directly. In a knowledge-economy, higher education becomes a potentially powerful instrument of social justice, since it serves not only as a driver of wealth creation, but as a critical determinant of life chances. As we expand access, and participation becomes the norm rather than the exception, so the higher education system will increasingly underpin social justice within the community. Rather than reinforcing social stratification, as it did for much of the 20th century, a modern, open higher education sector can take its place within a diverse framework of lifelong learning provision as a force of social justice.

Crosland chose to meet this imperative through vocationally orientated, locally accessible provision in the polytechnics. These created a distinct sector of higher education which, subsumed within local authorities, promoted wider access and helped secure local economic development. But his policy, successful as it was, deliberately, therefore, did not address the role of higher education in its totality. The wider contribution of higher education to the fulfilment of social justice remained uncharted terrain, and, with it, the role of Government policy towards the universities in this critical area. Only the creation of the Open University addressed social justice as a direct imperative of higher education policy, but, once again, a distinct entity was established, rather than a sector-wide initiative.

The political landscape is different in the post-binary era. We cannot address the issue of higher education and its contribution to social justice other than on sustained sector-wide basis. What, then, are the components of a modern policy for higher education and its contribution to social cohesion and prosperity?

The first is a system of student support that both adheres to progressive principles and facilitates access. The system of full public support for tuition fees and

maintenance, to which the Left subscribed for many years, did not meet these criteria. It failed over the decades fundamentally to transform the socio-economic mix of the student intake, whilst at the same time redistributing resources from ordinary taxpayers to the better off. Higher education has never been 'free' in this sense; it has been paid for, either directly, as in the case of individuals choosing part-time study, or through general taxation, which, until recently, subsidised those benefiting from higher education at the expense of those denied access.

The new system of student support balances the contributions made by individuals and the community as a whole. It is more progressive than in the past, and it directs resources to those who need them most. Critically, it secures an income stream for higher education of fee contributions and loan repayments which underpins expansion and the widening of opportunities. We have already announced investment of an extra 11 percent in real terms for higher education for this Parliament; loan repayments and fee contributions alone will total £710 million in England and Wales in 2001-02.

In simple terms, the system gives us the resources we need for investment in access to a high-quality higher education sector, when, as a nation, we would not otherwise be able to afford this against competing claims for funding for early years, schools standards and tackling the backlog of decay in education.

The system seeks to promote wider access by ensuring that students have enough funds to live on without being forced to rely unnecessarily on family resources; that modes of study, such as part-time learning, which are often favoured by individuals from less advantaged backgrounds, are better supported than previously; and by targeting particular groups of students, such as lone parents, who require specific help. Our new student support measures for widening access will give particular help to mature students with children.

In addition, we are now introducing into student support arrangements measures to promote institutional links between universities and young people from backgrounds with no history of participation in higher education. I have recently announced that we will spend £10 million a year on pilots to promote these links between schools, further education colleges and universities, building on examples such as the scholarships financed by Richard Ogden in Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham which encourage access for disadvantaged students to the University of Leeds. The University of Sheffield has a COMPACT scheme that involves schools and colleges in South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire. University academic staff identify prospective students in these schools and colleges and act as advocates on their behalf as they go through the higher education admissions process.

We want to build on these links to nurture institutional capacity and commitment to wider access in both schools/colleges, and universities. They create a visible bridge for young people between school and college and a future in higher education.

The second is the promotion of institutional responsiveness. A modern higher education sector must be open and inclusive. It must pursue wider social inclusion as

an institutional objective. Success must be understood and measured by how far institutions serve the population as a whole – and that means people from all social backgrounds and ethnic groups, and those with disabilities, at whatever stage of their lives. This will mean better access courses and similar initiatives which root higher education in the local community and open up provision to previously excluded groups. It means extra resources that unlock engagement in higher education from communities in which there is no expectation at present. This is work that the HEFCE has taken forward as a priority, and I am grateful for this commitment. We must overcome the entrenched exclusion of large sections of our society from higher education.

It will also mean facilitating choice and progression for students, enabling them to build steadily towards awards, giving them more flexibility over when and where to study. Social justice requires the democratisation of participation in higher education, which, in turn, requires reform and modernisation of the sector itself.

As our policies for raising school standards feed through into increased post-16 participation, and support for 16-19 learning is improved, I expect the numbers entering higher education from lower social income groups to rise. The introduction of foundation degrees and work-based entry into higher education will also widen access, enabling students to begin climbing the ladder of lifelong learning. More people will engage with higher education throughout their lives and, as the age profile of the population increases, higher education provision will need increasingly to respond to the needs of older students.

In sum, higher education in this century will need to look very different to the system that evolved in the second half of the 20th century. It will typically be mixed mode – delivering through ICT and other learning at a distance, as well as face-to-face. It will offer flexible provision tailored to need, overcoming traditional distinctions between full- and part-time study, and responding rapidly to changing social and economic conditions. Its students, drawn from all backgrounds, will reflect the society of which it is a part, and they will undertake learning at home or in the workplace, as well as on the campus. Learning programmes will be more diverse and will be offered within a flexible credit and qualifications framework that embraces intensive short courses and recurrent lifetime participation.

Guidance to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

12. The Government has powers to attach conditions to the grant allocated to the HEFCE each year. These conditions may not cover grant to individual institutions or specified academic matters. In practice, these conditions are exercised through annual guidance to the HEFCE. The 1999 guidance letter included the following:

Widening access to higher education is a key priority and critical to tackling social exclusion. I look to the Council to review and if necessary develop the funding formula to recognise success in the recruitment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds or facing particular challenges. I also want the Council to provide further development funds to link higher education institutions with schools and

colleges to encourage retention and progression through higher education, to target particular disadvantaged groups and mature students, and to support the promotion and dissemination of good practice. At the forefront of these funds should be childcare support and assistance to students with caring responsibilities.

Delivery of national policies (by the HEFCE)

13. The key principles underlying the HEFCE's approach to funding widening participation in higher education are:

- a. Access to achievement – we should encourage institutions not only to increase the participation of students from under-represented groups, but also to help such students succeed.
- b. Increased collaboration – priority should be given to collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs) and partners from other education sectors to improve progression routes to higher education for under-represented groups.
- c. Recognising diversity – we should avoid prescription in our funding and allow for differences in institutional approach, adopting different funding approaches to recognise the diversity of missions and strategies in the sector.
- d. Targeting certain groups – emphasis should be placed on improving the representation of particular disadvantaged groups.

14. The funding objectives are to:

- a. Reward proven success and encourage all institutions to improve their record in widening participation.
- b. Recognise the additional costs of providing access for under-represented groups.
- c. Increase representation in higher education of particular disadvantaged groups – for example, disabled students, young people from poor backgrounds, and those who missed out on higher education opportunities first time round.
- d. Build partnerships between HEIs, schools and especially the further education sector to improve the progression rates to higher education of previously disadvantaged students.
- e. Promote and disseminate good practice in strategies to widen participation.
- f. Support activity designed to retain students.
- g. Encourage collaboration between HEIs to promote the above objectives.

HEFCE funding measures

15. The HEFCE has introduced the following funding measures to promote widening participation:

a. Funding per student for teaching is set at broadly the same level for all institutions, within four groups of subjects. There is a 5 percent premium payment per student for young students from poor neighbourhoods, as identified by postcodes. This is designed to cover the extra cost of recruiting and retaining students from poorer neighbourhoods (see list of anticipated areas of spending below). There are also premia for part-time and mature students which may also encourage wider participation. The HEFCE plans to introduce a premium payment for disabled students based on the number of students receiving disabled students' allowances.

b. The HEFCE currently sets target full-time student numbers for each institution. In determining additional student numbers each year, it gives priority to proposals for widening participation.

c. Some special funding measures costing some £7.5 million in 1999-2000 have been introduced. These cover the building of partnerships between higher education institutions and schools/colleges, schemes to promote good practice and to assist institutions in applying such practice, and special measures to improve the quality of provision for disabled students.

16. It is anticipated that the premium payments will cover some of the following areas:

a. Additional academic support and counselling.

b. Additional contact hours.

c. Special recruitment schemes (for example, summer schools and outreach work).

d. Special retention schemes (for example, mentoring).

e. Staff development – in respect of recruitment strategies, retention programmes and learning and teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of students.

f. Additional support structures, especially child-care arrangements for mature students.

g. Maintenance and development of in-house expertise in reaching out to non-participating groups and the wider community, and in developing flexible delivery of higher education.

17. Alongside these funding measures, the HEFCE has asked institutions to develop participation strategies which would include an account of how any premium payments would be spent. To provide benchmarks for institutions and to assist evaluation, it has included two

performance indicators concerned with widening participation in its range of published indicators. The first indicator covers the number and percentage of young undergraduate entrants from state schools or colleges, from specified social classes and from low participation neighbourhoods. The second covers full-time mature undergraduate entrants and the number and percentage with no previous higher education and from low participation neighbourhoods.

18. Finally, the HEFCE is considering how best to fund and promote liberal adult education. One of the aims is to encourage into universities and colleges those who have previously had no experience of higher education.

Access to higher education by social class

1. This pulls together the available evidence in this area and attempts to draw some conclusions from it, although the data becomes increasingly patchy as we attempt to look further back in time.

Summary of key findings

- ❶ There are significant differences in participation between higher and lower social classes.
- ❷ The differences between social classes have been narrowing for the last 27 years, but still remain large.
- ❸ The move from maintenance grants to grants plus loans in 1990-91 has not halted the trend of faster growth in participation by lower social classes.
- ❹ The main factor influencing patterns of higher education participation is the corresponding difference in achievement of level 3 entry qualifications (in particular A-levels).

Trends in participation by social class

2. Table 1 combines all the information available on participation by social class as far back as 1940. There is a considerable number of gaps along the way, and it is only possible to show a fairly coarse two-way split of social class consistently over this period. The Age Participation Index (API) measures in broad terms the proportion of young people going on to higher education by the age of 21. Trends in the API clearly reflect the two major periods of rapid expansion; the first post-Robbins throughout the 1960s and the second in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The overall participation over this period rose from just 1.8 percent in 1940 to almost 1 in 3 in 1995.

Table 1: Participation trends by social class

Academic year beginning	1940	1955	1960	1970	1980	1985	1990	1995
I, II & III _n - Higher SEGs	8.4%	18.5%	26.7%	32.4%	33.1%	35.2%	36.7%	46.6%
% change		+120%	+44%	+2%	+2%	+6%	+4%	+27%
III _m , IV & V - Lower SEGs	1.5%	2.7%	3.6%	5.1%	6.5%	8.3%	10.3%	17.4%
% change		+80%	+33%	+42%	+27%	+28%	+24%	+69%
The API for the UK	1.8%	3.4%	5.4%	13.7%	12.6%	13.8%	19.3%	32.4%
% change		+89%	+59%	+154%	-8%	+9%	+40%	+68%

Notes:

1 SEG = Socio-economic group

2 Student loans introduced in 1990-91. Although the overall API and the individual participation rate by social class are measured on different definitional bases, shifts in trend are comparable.

3. It can be seen that, up until 1960, participation increased more rapidly amongst the higher social classes; in consequence, the already large disparities in participation by different social classes actually widened over this period. Following the Robbins expansion and subsequently, this trend was reversed: participation amongst the lower social classes has increased more rapidly than for the higher social classes. The result is that the disparity in participation rates has slowly narrowed, but it is clear from the figures in Table 1 that the gap, nevertheless, remains wide.