Foreword

Debates about who participates in higher education now take place on the radio and television, and in the press, as well as in academic journals. The statistics that underpin these debates – what the participation rate is, and how it is changing – are almost always taken as a given, not only by politicians and commentators but also by academics and other experts in the field. Very few people know exactly how measures of participation are derived, and even fewer appreciate the problems with the data that lie behind them. The reality is that, hitherto, none of the published participation rates have been sufficiently accurate to measure year on year changes overall, still less how the differences in participation between young people from different backgrounds are changing.

For the first time we now have measures sufficiently accurate to monitor inequalities in participation over short periods of time. These measures are derived by taking counts of young entrants straight from school or after a 'gap' year, and classifying the most and least advantaged families according to where they live, rather than by their occupation, income or patterns of consumption. As detailed data do not exist for characteristics such as occupation or income, these area-based classifications are the only basis for accurate measures of the participation of advantaged and disadvantaged groups currently available. Some will view them as proxies for other classifications, but they also have value in their own right, particularly for developing policy.

In October 2004 the Council published its strategy for research to inform policies and practices to widen participation. This recognised that measures of participation underpin the whole widening participation agenda, and discussions of barriers to participation would be unsafe without them. The strategy specifically identified that better measures of participation are required, and the publication of this report helps to meet this need.

In this report, patterns of young participation are set out in detail together with measures of the experiences of young people before, during and after their time in higher education. Some of the results are as might have been expected. It does seem, for example, that people living in areas with low participation also experience many other forms of disadvantage. However, a fuller explanation and interpretation of the processes leading to these patterns of participation will entail further discussion and exploration. We have commissioned further work which aims to gain an understanding of the barriers to participation, and the way they interconnect.

Those developing policy do not, of course, have the luxury of waiting for these projects to come to fruition before making decisions. It is interesting to look back to 1997, when HEFCE published its first report on the widely different participation rates of young people from different neighbourhoods. At that time there was no recognition of the extra costs of teaching students who came into higher education less well prepared, nor was there any component for widening participation activities in the allocation of funds to institutions. There was no funded programme for higher education to play its part in raising aspirations and

improving achievement of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. All of these are now established and their full impact should be seen in future years.

The 1997 report helped shape the policies which led to widening participation being placed at the heart of the Council's current operations. We expect that the much more comprehensive analysis presented here – together with the maps of local participation patterns which we are making available – will help to develop these policies further in the continuing programme to increase opportunities for students from all types of backgrounds to benefit from higher education.

Sir Howard Newby
Chief Executive
Higher Education Funding Council for England

Summary and key findings

Why measure participation?

Higher education is generally regarded as bringing benefits to those who take part in it. It also receives substantial amounts of public money. This combination of personal benefit and public investment creates a particular interest in participation rates, that is, the proportion of a group of people who take part in higher education. More specifically, there is interest in differences between the participation rates for different groups, especially groups that can be described as advantaged or disadvantaged.

In this report advantaged and disadvantaged groups are defined by where young people live. Grouping young people in this way allows the calculation of the annual counts of young people and entrants that are required for accurate monitoring of participation. No other groupings, such as income bands or those based on occupation, can offer this. Set against these advantages are concerns that areas are too mixed in the nature of their residents to be a useful grouping. The findings in this report indicate that the relevance of these concerns depends on the choice of area used for the analysis. Using areas of the size of wards appears to work well in reliably capturing participation neighbourhoods, as it is rare for wards to be internally mixed in terms of young participation.

Our earlier work[1] showed that there are very large differences in the participation rates for young people from different types of area. This report uses new data sources and more sophisticated methods to look closely at the participation in higher education of young people from both advantaged and disadvantaged areas. The result is a measure that can detect small changes in participation rates for different groups to give a fuller and more accurate picture of young participation in the period 1994-2000.

National participation rates steady but sex inequality grows

The participation rate in higher education for young people in England is around 30 per cent at the end of the period studied. The overwhelming majority of English young entrants study in higher education institutions (HEIs – universities and higher education colleges). In Scotland this is not the case: around a third of young entrants study HE courses in further education institutions (FEIs), which helps to make Scotland's participation rate some 9 percentage points higher than England's.

These rates are lower than those recorded by other measures such as the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR), which is used to measure progress towards the target of 50 per cent participation in higher education. The principal reason for this is that the HEIPR measure counts HE entrants aged 30 or under whereas the measures in this report focus only on young people – aged 18 or 19. There are a number of reasons for focusing on this age group with the most important being the feasibility of estimating small area populations and interpretation of the resulting area participation rates.

Between the late 1980s and early 1990s young participation approximately doubled. In contrast, young participation increases by just 2 percentage points over the 1994-2000 period. The pattern of participation change across this period can

be explained by changes in the size of the young population, and the rate of improvement in achievement at GCSE.

Around the middle of this period student grants were replaced by loans, and tuition fees were introduced. No evidence is found that this had any material effects on participation. For example, there is no evidence that young people changed their decisions on whether to enter HE, when to enter HE or where to study to avoid the introduction of tuition fees.

Inequality of the sexes in young participation has risen steadily: by the end of the report period, young women in England are 18 per cent more likely to enter higher education than young men. This inequality is more marked for young men living in the most disadvantaged areas, and is further compounded by the fact that young men are less likely than young women to successfully complete their HE courses and gain a qualification.

There are differences in the chance of entering higher education by month of birth, with patterns that reflect relative age within a school year. In England, those born in the autumn (and therefore the oldest in their school year group) are up to 20 per cent more likely to enter higher education at age 18 than those born in the late summer. These differences appear to be a reflection of earlier patterns in progression from GCSE to A-levels, so that there are no differences in, for example, progression rates for young people once they have entered higher education.

Deep divisions in the participation chances of young people by where they live

There are substantial regional differences in young participation, with young people in some regions being 50 per cent more likely to enter higher education than their peers in other regions. There are also regional differences in participation trends. The growth of young participation in London has been particularly high, so that it has overtaken the South East to become the highest participating English region. In contrast, low participation regions such as the North East have seen little growth in young participation over the period, with the result that they have fallen further behind and inequalities between regions have increased.

The pattern of participation in smaller areas, such as parliamentary constituencies, reveals a more complex geography and further inequalities. Areas of high participation can be found in low participation regions, and some of the constituencies with the lowest participation rates are in the south of England. In some constituencies less than 1 in 10 young people enter higher education, whereas in others more than half do so. Some disadvantaged constituencies in Scotland have young participation rates that are nearly twice as high as the very low rates found in similarly disadvantaged constituencies in England. This appears to be due in part to the greater importance in Scotland of the participation route of studying HND or HNC qualifications in FEIs.

The full extent of participation inequalities is revealed by using neighbourhood level geographies such as census wards. These show that there are broad and deep divisions in the chances of going into HE according to where you live. Young

people living in the most advantaged 20 per cent of areas are five to six times more likely to enter higher education than those living in the least advantaged 20 per cent of areas. Maps of local participation patterns – such as those presented through POLAR (www.hefce.ac.uk/polar) – reveal that many cities and towns are educationally divided, containing both neighbourhoods where almost no one goes to university and neighbourhoods where two out of three or more will enter HE.

Participation inequality between neighbourhoods persistent

We investigated the extent and change from 1994 to 2000 in local participation inequalities using a range of different geographies and ways to classify disadvantage. These analyses consistently showed that there is a deep division in the chances of young people going to university according to where they live, and that this inequality in young participation has not changed substantially over the period covered by this work.

The methods used are powerful enough to detect small changes and these give a mixed picture. The more disadvantaged areas show the higher *proportional* growth in participation over this period, particularly for young women and those living in London, with a corresponding small fall in *relative* participation inequality. The participation of the more advantaged areas was checked in the middle of the period. Despite this, these advantaged areas generally showed the largest *absolute* percentage point increases in participation over the period, so that the gap in participation between advantaged and disadvantaged areas widened slightly.

This means that although the extra entrants resulting from the higher participation over the period are slightly more evenly distributed than before, most of the new places in HE have gone to those from already advantaged areas. A number of possible associations with these participation patterns trends are investigated, including the relative improvement of GCSE results at the lowest performing schools and the effect of the growth in the number of young people on demand at particular institutions.

Young people in low participation areas face many disadvantages

Having established a classification of high and low participation areas, the report looks at the different nature of these areas. High and low participation areas are found all over the country, often in close proximity. However, they are very different places both in environment and the characteristics of their residents. In particular, areas with low young participation rates are also disadvantaged on many other social and economic measures. There are particularly strong associations with measures of educational disadvantage: for example, neighbourhoods with the lowest participation rates also have the lowest proportion of graduate adults.

Looking at entrants by area background is more problematic but the pattern of differences continues. Entrants from high participation areas are much more likely

to have studied at an independent school or to be paying all of the tuition fee themselves. Entrants from low participation areas are markedly more likely to have, for example, weaker entry qualifications or to be studying for an HND. However, entrants from the most advantaged half of areas so dominate the student population that the majority of entrants with almost any characteristic – even those usually associated with disadvantaged areas such as weaker entry qualifications – are those from advantaged areas.

Non-completion increases participation inequalities but postgraduate study does not

Tracking young entrants to first degree courses through their time in higher education shows that 87 per cent qualify within six years, with the remainder mostly leaving without a qualification. This leads to an estimate of an *effective* young participation rate (that is, participation in HE which leads to a qualification) of around 25 per cent. The qualification rates are lower for entrants from low participation areas especially for men; this serves to increase the effective participation inequality for these groupings.

Following the progress of young entrants to first degree courses beyond graduation allows an estimate of the level of young postgraduate participation. Around one in five of degree qualifiers either have experienced, or immediately progress to, postgraduate level study, suggesting a young postgraduate participation rate for England of around 4 per cent.

The pattern of postgraduate study for qualifiers does not vary much by area background. Qualifiers from disadvantaged areas are notably more likely to take part in teaching-related postgraduate study, leading to a slightly higher overall proportion of qualifiers from these areas progressing to postgraduate study. However, the absence of large differences means that the level of young postgraduate participation inequality across areas is similar to that measured for undergraduate participation. This suggests that where you lived as a child, so important in determining earlier educational outcomes, has little additional effects on the transition to postgraduate study.