

Gaining access

Increasing the participation
of disadvantaged students
at elite universities

Luke Heselwood

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Recommendations

- 1.** To inform funding decisions, universities should provide a breakdown of spending, such as outreach activities and spend on contextualised admissions, and collect data assessing the impact it achieves.
- 2.** The Department of Education should create a more robust measure of each university's progress in improving access. It should create a new indicator using synthetic data based on sensitive attributes in the National Pupil Database, such as Free School Meal status, income deprivation and Children in Need status, in combination with other data such as a student's value-added score.

Introduction

Social mobility has been high up the political agenda in the past year.¹ In July 2018, the Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP, Secretary of State for Education, argued that there is “a moral imperative” to tackle social injustice and ensure that everyone in society can succeed.² To Hinds, social mobility is a “core purpose” of the Department for Education (DfE).³ In November 2017, the Social Mobility Commission published its *State of the Nation* report, which highlighted that life chances were closely linked to where a person is from.⁴ It argued that “there is currently no overall strategy to tackle the social, economic and geographical divide that the country faces.”⁵ In light of its findings, the board members of the Social Mobility Commission resigned from their positions, citing a “lack of progress” in the Government’s attempts to improve social mobility.⁶

One area that has seen only marginal progress is access to higher education, which is a key driver of social mobility.⁷ According to UCAS, more 18-year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds are entering higher education than ever before, with an increase of 78 per cent since 2006 for the most disadvantaged.⁸ Since 2014, however, universities have made little progress in narrowing the gap between those most likely and least likely to enter higher education.⁹ This represents a significant stumbling block in the Government’s determination to promote social mobility. This is particularly the case when considering ‘elite’ universities (see Glossary of key terms). Access to elite universities can provide a benchmark to assess the differences in opportunities afforded to people from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁰ As graduates continue to earn more than non-graduates,¹¹ and with a high percentage of recruits in top professions coming from elite universities,¹² addressing the diversity and equality of high-tariff institutions (see Glossary of key terms) is essential.

Attempts to address the under-representation of disadvantaged students in higher education has a long history. In 1963, the *Robbins Report* argued that higher education has, in addition to other stages of the education system, a role to play in promoting equality of opportunity and could “compensate” for socio-economic disadvantage.¹³ Almost thirty-five years later, it was highlighted there was no significant change in the social class composition of universities. Higher-education institutions (HEIs) were urged “to take active steps” to promote access for disadvantaged students.¹⁴ In 2015, David Cameron set a target to double the entry rate of disadvantaged students attending university from 2009-10 to 2019-20.¹⁵

This ongoing policy agenda has, however, not always led to demonstrable progress. Although the number of pupils attending university who received Free School Meals (FSM) aged 15 has risen from 13 per cent in 2005-06 to 24 per cent in 2014-15, this is 18

1 Alan Rusbridger, ‘If Oxford Shrugs’, *Prospect*, 18 September 2018; Nadia Khomami, ‘Education Secretary: Elite Universities Must Improve Access’, *The Guardian*, 31 July 2018; Social Mobility Commission, *State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 2017).

2 Department for Education, ‘Education Secretary Sets Vision for Boosting Social Mobility’, Speech, GOV.UK, 31 July 2018.

3 Ibid.

4 Social Mobility Commission, *State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain*.

5 Ibid., vii.

6 ‘Social Mobility Board Quits over Lack of Progress’, *BBC News*, 3 December 2017.

7 Claire Crawford, *The Role of Education and Skills in Driving Social Mobility: An Overview* (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2015), 4; Boston Consulting Group, *The State of Social Mobility in the UK* (The Sutton Trust, 2017), 2.

8 UCAS Analysis and Research, *End of Cycle Report 2017: Executive Summary*, 2017, 2. This figure uses UCAS’s MEM metric.

9 Ibid.

10 Emilie Sundorph, Danail Vasilev, and Louis Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility (Reform)*, 2017, 7.

11 Gil Wyness, *Rules of the Game: Disadvantaged Students and the University Admissions Process* (The Sutton Trust, 2017), 3; Louisa Darian, ‘Human Capital: A Look at IFS Research on Graduate Earnings’, *Wonkhe*, 12 April 2016.

12 Philip Kirby, *Leading People 2016: The Educational Background of the UK Professional Elite* (The Sutton Trust, 2016), 2. 13 Professor Lord Robbins, *The Report of the Committee on Higher Education* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1963), 7.

14 Ron Dearing, *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1997), 79.

15 Andrew Grice, ‘The Government Has Ordered UCAS to Release Its Data on Poorer Students’, *The Independent*, 9 September 2015.

percentage points lower than non-FSM pupils.¹⁶ FSM students are four times less likely to access high-tariff institutions and, when considering several measures of equality such as UCAS's Multiple Equality Measure (MEM),¹⁷ the most advantaged are nearly 10 times more likely to attend high-tariff providers.¹⁸ Furthermore, the gap between independent and state school pupils attending the most selective universities slightly increased between 2010-11 and 2014-15.¹⁹

Last year, *Reform* published its report, *Joining the Elite*, which examined ways in which top universities can enhance social mobility.²⁰ The report analysed the benefits of contextualised admissions, as well as offering several recommendations calling for more transparent data on university admissions approaches. In addition, the report included a league table that ranked the 29 high-tariff universities based on the average annual increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students over a five-year period.²¹ This paper offers an update to last year's report, and it examines the progress of high-tariff institutions in their attempts to improve access for disadvantaged full-time students.

16 Department for Education, *Widening Participation in Higher Education, England, 2014/15 Age Cohort*, 2017, 1.

17 UCAS Analysis and Research, *End of Cycle Report 2017: Patterns by Applicant Characteristics*, 2017, 4. MEM assesses the disadvantage of 18-year old pupils by combining datasets such as sex, ethnic group, participation of local areas (POLAR3), secondary education type and Free School Meal (FSM) status.

18 Centre for Social Mobility, *Research into Use of Contextual Data in Admissions* (University of Exeter, 2018), 2.

19 Department for Education, *Widening Participation in Higher Education, England, 2014/15 Age Cohort*, 1.

20 Sundorph, Danail Vasilev, and Louis Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility*.

21 Ibid., 21. This is Figure 9 in the *Joining the Elite* report.

1

What's changed

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New data shows little change or improvement in access figures. According to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, across the entire university sector 12 per cent of UK domiciled full-time students came from a low-participation neighbourhood in 2016-17 – the same proportion as 2015-16.²² Whilst the entry rate of students from low-participation neighbourhoods increased in 2016-17, there was also a rise in students from other neighbourhoods. In addition, in 2016-17, 0.38 per cent of students came from the lowest socio-economic classification, representing a small decline from the previous year. In contrast, 19.76 per cent of students came from the highest socio-economic classification, marking a small increase from 2015-16.²³

UCAS's *End of Cycle Report 2017* also demonstrates slow progress. Using UCAS's MEM metric, an equality metric for higher education using several datasets, the report shows that there has been "little progress" in closing the gap between those most and least likely to attend university since 2014.²⁴ Despite this, the report does highlight that 2017 saw 13.8 per cent of 18-year olds from the most disadvantaged MEM group attending university, an increase of 0.2 percentage points from 2016, and the highest proportion on record.²⁵ Those in the most advantaged MEM group, however, were 3.8 times more likely to enter higher education with an entry rate of 53.1 per cent.²⁶ The report also shows that high-tariff providers have narrowed the gap across MEM groups in 2017.²⁷ That said, the gap in equality of representation between the most advantaged and least advantaged MEM groups is still large. Those most likely to attend a high-tariff provider are nearly ten times more likely than their least likely peers.²⁸

The 2016-17 access agreements submitted to the former Office for Fair Access, which is now incorporated into the Office for Students (OfS), show that HEIs have made positive progress against their targets. Access agreements, which have been replaced by access and participation plans for the academic year 2019-20, are mandated for all higher-education providers charging tuition fees above the basic amount, and set out what providers plan to do to improve access for disadvantaged students.²⁹ Seventy-three per cent of access targets, set and assessed by the institutions themselves, were met.³⁰ In addition, providers who submitted access agreements invested £745.6 million on widening participation (WP), up from £725.2 million in 2015-16.³¹ In terms of access, providers spent a total of £128.4 million.³² However, there is no breakdown in the *Monitoring Outcomes* data to show what activities this money, categorised as 'access', was spent on. In February 2018, the Government announced a review of post-18 education and funding which, among other things, will examine the financial support disadvantaged students receive to improve access, success and progression within the sector.³³ More transparent information regarding access spending would help to demonstrate the actions taken by universities to achieve their goals of improving access for disadvantaged students.

22 Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Figure 5 – HE Undergraduate UK Domiciled Full-Time Student Enrolments by Participation Characteristics 2012/13 to 2016/17', *Widening Participation: UK Performance Indicators 2016/17*, 2018. The low-participation neighbourhood marker uses POLAR3 data.

23 Ibid., 5. The highest socio-economic classification is "Higher managerial & professional occupations" and the lowest is "Never worked & long-term unemployed". There are also a considerable amount of students who are categorised as "Not classified" or "Unknown" that may alter the overall figures if successfully classified.

24 UCAS Analysis and Research, *End of Cycle Report 2017: Executive Summary*, 2.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 UCAS Analysis and Research, *End of Cycle Report 2017: Patterns by Applicant Characteristics*, 7.

28 Ibid. This is measured as the ratio of entry rates between MEM groups 1 and 5.

29 Office for Students, 'Access and Participation Plans', Guidance, 13 February 2018.

30 Office for Students, *Monitoring Outcomes: OFFA Access Agreements and HEFCE Funding for Widening Access for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds, Improving Retention and Improving Provision for Disabled Students for 2016-17*, 2018, 3.

31 Ibid.

32 Office for Students, 'Table 3 – Fee Income and Expenditure through Access Agreements in 2016-17, by Institution (HEIs Only)', *Monitoring Outcomes: OFFA Access Agreements and HEFCE Funding for Widening Access for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds, Improving Retention and Improving Provision for Disabled Students for 2016-17*, 2018.

33 Department for Education, 'Prime Minister Launches Major Review of Post-18 Education', News Release, GOV.UK, 19 February 2018.

1.1 The establishment of the Office for Students

The creation of the OfS marks one of the biggest developments of the year. The OfS has replaced the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Fair Access as the main regulator of higher education. Several interviews carried out for this paper highlighted that the establishment of the OfS is a welcome intervention, and that the new regulatory body has taken “a more robust approach” to access. A recent Higher Education Policy Institute report argued that the OfS has “the potential to be an agent of profound change, particularly with regard to widening participation.”³⁴

1.1.1 Access, success and progression

The OfS’s regulatory framework for higher education in England offers a clear picture of the regulator’s objectives. It shows that a primary aim is to help all students, regardless of background, to access, succeed and progress in higher education.³⁵ Interviews carried out for this paper emphasised that the focus on student success within university, and transition to work afterwards, demonstrates a shift from the remit of the Office for Fair Access, which placed more emphasis on access. Commenting on this development, Chris Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation, argued that if providers are to get their access and participation plans approved, they will need to demonstrate how they “will reduce the gaps in access, success and progression between groups that are under-represented at different points of the lifecycle and other students.”³⁶

This shift in focus is also evident through the allocation of funding. In 2016-17, spend on access, success and progression (excluding financial support for students) increased to 44 per cent of access agreement expenditure – a rise of 6 percentage points from 2015-16.³⁷ The OfS has also reported that providers predict that by 2021-22, this will increase to 56 per cent.³⁸ As a result, less funding is being spent across the sector on financial support for students.³⁹ There are also significant differences between higher-education providers in their allocation of WP funding. High-tariff institutions spent a larger proportion of their investment on access activities,⁴⁰ whereas medium and low-tariff institutions focused more spending on student success activities.⁴¹ In part, this may be a result of disadvantaged students at high-tariff institutions being less likely to drop out of university in comparison to other institutions.⁴² It may also be because lower and medium-tariff institutions, who have students with lower attainment and a much higher proportion of WP students, need to focus more attention on success and progression.⁴³ What is more of a concern, then, is that disadvantaged students are less likely to apply to a high-tariff institution than advantaged students, even if they achieve the same grades.⁴⁴

The OfS is also attempting to alter how regularly it assesses access and participation plans. In September 2018, the OfS launched a consultation for its proposed changes to future access and participation plans. Among the proposed changes, the OfS aims to adopt a longer-term approach to access and participation plans where, rather than publishing a new plan each year, providers would be expected to submit plans every three to five years.⁴⁵ On an annual basis, providers would instead submit a smaller report

³⁴ Paul Clarke and Dr Diana Beech, *Reaching the Parts of Society Universities Have Missed: A Manifesto for the New Director of Fair Access and Participation* (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2018), 5.

³⁵ Office for Students, *Securing Student Success: Regulatory Framework for Higher Education in England*, 2018, 14.

³⁶ Chris Millward, ‘Getting in and Getting on: Access and Participation in the Office for Students’, *Wonkhe*, 5 March 2018.

³⁷ Office for Students, *Monitoring Outcomes: OFFA Access Agreements and HEFCE Funding for Widening Access for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds, Improving Retention and Improving Provision for Disabled Students for 2016-17*, 3.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18. Access activities can include strategic partnerships with schools and outreach work.

⁴¹ Ibid., 27. Success activities can include pastoral support.

⁴² Claire Crawford, *Socio-Economic Differences in University Outcomes in the UK: Drop-out, Degree Completion and Degree Class* (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2014), 18.

⁴³ Reform Interview.

⁴⁴ Centre for Social Mobility, *Research into Use of Contextual Data in Admissions*, 1.

⁴⁵ Office for Students, *A New Approach to Regulating Access and Participation in English Higher Education: Consultation*, 2018, 15.

analysing progress, and would only be expected to provide more frequent plans if there were concerns that targets set out in longer-term plans were at risk of not being met.⁴⁶ For several interviewees, this proposed approach was warmly welcomed. One interviewee argued that it would give universities an opportunity to develop longer-term strategies to access and reduce the administrative burden of creating new plans each year.

1.1.2 Outcomes over inputs and outputs

The OfS's framework for measuring performance is another notable change. In its guidance to universities submitting access and participation plans, the OfS stated that there would be an increased focus on outcomes, which would assess how far universities have delivered on their targets to reduce gaps in access, success and progression.⁴⁷ This outcomes-based approach represents a shift from Office for Fair Access, with the OfS being less interested in inputs and outputs as long as universities achieve their outcomes.⁴⁸ The change was well-received by interviewees for this paper. It does, however, risk less clarity over what works in terms of inputs and outputs. Although the regulator plans to continue to collect predicted access spend, it will no longer require institutions to provide information on student success and progression spend – a decision that seems incongruous with their renewed emphasis on success and progression.⁴⁹ An interview carried out for this paper highlighted that this decision is partly because it is hard for these figures to be accurately recorded as there can be significant crossover with learning and teaching activities. Universities should, however, provide a clear breakdown of all spending to inform future funding decisions and to more effectively target interventions. Furthermore, this breakdown should also be matched with data assessing the impact achieved by that spending.

Recommendation 1

To inform funding decisions, universities should provide a breakdown of spending, such as outreach activities and spend on contextualised admissions, and collect data assessing the impact it achieves.

Focusing solely on the outcomes of a specific university could result in the outcomes across the university sector being overlooked. A university's outreach activities, which may not result in a student attending that institution, may still improve the diversity within higher education as a whole. For example, the University of Glasgow's Top-Up programme has worked with around 2,000 students of which 250 progressed to Glasgow, but around 1,000 of the programme's participants have attended other universities.⁵⁰ To combat these concerns, tracking systems such as the Higher Education Access Tracker, which is used by most high-tariff institutions, could be used to provide longitudinal monitoring of a young person's progress, including outreach activities.⁵¹ In addition, the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), which brings together local universities, colleges and schools to deliver outreach activities for 13 to 18-year olds, could improve university collaboration.⁵² With its first annual report published in May 2018, it is too early to properly evaluate NCOP.⁵³ However, interviews carried out for this paper suggested that NCOP might take a university's attention away from implementing their own access and participation plans. Furthermore, one interview highlighted that the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁷ Office for Students, *Regulatory Notice 1: Access and Participation Plan Guidance for 2019-20*, 2018, 11.

⁴⁸ Claire Crawford, Siobhan Dytham, and Robin Naylor, *The Evaluation of the Impact of Outreach: Proposed Standards of Evaluation Practice and Associated Guidance*, 2017; Reform Interview.

⁴⁹ Office for Students, *A New Approach to Regulating Access and Participation in English Higher Education: Consultation*, 15.

⁵⁰ Russell Group, *Submission to the Review on Access and Participation Plans*, 2018, 5.

⁵¹ Higher Education Access Tracker, 'What Is HEAT & Who Are Our Members?', Web Page, 2018.

⁵² Higher Education Funding Council for England, 'National Collaborative Outreach Programme', Policy Guide, 2017.

⁵³ Office for Students, *National Collaborative Outreach Programme: The First Year*, 2018.

OfS is right to note the difference between outreach activities and opening access to disadvantaged students.

1.1.3 Contextualised admissions

The OfS has also advocated for the use of contextualised admissions – a key focus of last year's *Reform* report, *Joining the Elite*.⁵⁴ This is where a university considers an applicant's circumstances during the application process (see Glossary of key terms for a more detailed explanation).⁵⁵ In a speech to the Fair Education Alliance, Chris Millward called on English universities to take "an ambitious approach to contextualised admissions".⁵⁶ Although vague on what this should entail, Millward's speech demonstrates the OfS's determination to promote a greater use of contextual data to improve access for disadvantaged students.⁵⁷ The speech was in reaction to a publication from the Fair Education Alliance, which offered several recommendations related to contextualised admissions, some of which are also reflected in *Joining the Elite*.⁵⁸ The Fair Education Alliance stated that although the use of contextualised admissions has become more accepted in the past five years, and its adoption has become more widespread by HEIs, there are still barriers stopping its effective use.⁵⁹ For example, it argued that there needs to be a shared terminology among HEIs regarding the meaning of disadvantage, better use of data across the sector and more transparency over approaches to contextualised admissions by universities.⁶⁰

The lack of transparency regarding contextual admissions approaches can adversely affect the number of disadvantaged students applying to high-tariff institutions. The lack of clarity for applicants, schools and teachers on the contextual data used by universities can impact a student's university choices.⁶¹ Although there is little research on the application choices of UK students, there is evidence to suggest that disadvantaged students make "sub-optimal decisions on where to apply."⁶² Therefore, by being transparent as to how personal statements are evaluated and what contextual data is considered, it could help to better inform applicants on what information is taken into account. An interview for this paper also suggested that getting students to apply is not just the role of universities. A national campaign is needed, similar to *Better Make Room* in the United States, a college access campaign directed at disadvantaged students.⁶³

Across high-tariff institutions that consider contextual data in their application process, there is considerable variance in the publication of this information on their websites.⁶⁴ Although postcode eligibility checkers that use POLAR3 data – an area-based assessment of higher education progression⁶⁵ (see Glossary of key terms) – are relatively widespread, other information can be lacking.⁶⁶ There are, however, some notable exceptions. For example, Southampton University sets out clearly its contextual admissions policy on its website. It shows that a student will be flagged for additional consideration if they have been in care for more than three months, if their postcode is in a low-participation neighbourhood, if they have attended a lower-performing school, or if they have participated in an outreach or WP programme.⁶⁷

⁵⁴ Sundorph, Danail Vasilev, and Louis Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility*, 6.

⁵⁵ Supporting Professionalism in Admissions and HEDIP, SPA's Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIP), 2015.

⁵⁶ Chris Millward, 'Be More Ambitious on Contextual Admissions, Says the Office for Students', Speech, Office for Students, 10 July 2018.

⁵⁷ Chris Haughey, 'Make Greater Use of Contextual Admissions, English Sector Told', *Times Higher Education*, 10 July 2018.

⁵⁸ Fair Education Alliance, *Putting Fairness in Context: Using Data to Widen Access to Higher Education*, 2018; Sundorph, Danail Vasilev, and Louis Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility*, 6.

⁵⁹ Fair Education Alliance, *Putting Fairness in Context: Using Data to Widen Access to Higher Education*, 4.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Wyness, *Rules of the Game: Disadvantaged Students and the University Admissions Process*, 3.

⁶² Ibid., 10.

⁶³ Better Make Room, 'Our Story', Web Page, 2018.

⁶⁴ Newcastle University, 'Newcastle University Access Scholarships – Postcode Checker', Web Page, 2018; University of Southampton, 'Contextual Admissions', Web Page, 2018; London School of Economics and Political Science, 'Admissions Information', Web Page, 2018.

⁶⁵ 'POLAR', Briefing, Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2018.

⁶⁶ Reform Interview.

⁶⁷ University of Southampton, 'Contextual Admissions'.

2

Updated access rankings

2.1 The data

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2.1 The rankings

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Last year's report, *Joining the Elite*, ranked elite universities according to their track record in increasing access for POLAR3 quintile 1 students, which are from neighbourhoods least likely to attend university, from 2011-12 to 2015-16.⁶⁸ This paper has updated last year's table (see Figure 1), based on a new rolling average from 2012-13 to 2016-17 (see Figure 8 in the Appendix for the rankings from 2011-12 to 2016-17). To provide a more detailed analysis of the progress of elite universities, and to compensate for a change in the base year from 2011-12 to 2012-13, Figures 2, 3 and 4 chart the percentage of students from low-participation neighbourhoods at high-tariff institutions, in addition to their progress against their individual benchmarks, since 2009-10.⁶⁹

2.1 The data

Figure 1 uses POLAR3 data to measure the progress of elite universities in their attempts to improve access for disadvantaged students. POLAR3 classifies local areas into five quintiles, with quintile 1 areas having the lowest rates of young people progressing to university, and quintile 5 areas having the highest rates of university participation. Several interviewees questioned the ability of POLAR3 to successfully measure disadvantage or diversity, noting that it does not consider socio-economic background, ethnicity and caring responsibilities among other metrics. Instead, POLAR3, which is still used by HESA to measure the participation of under-represented groups in higher education, measures the progression to higher education of a local neighbourhood.⁷⁰

This measurement is imperfect, as it can group together applicants with very different backgrounds that may live in the same area.⁷¹ This can result in urban universities, such as those in London, performing poorly against the POLAR3 measurement. This is because most areas in London, which are densely populated with people from a wide-range of backgrounds, have high rates of university participation – even if there is socio-economic disadvantage within an area. POLAR3, however, remains the only publicly available metric used to measure disadvantage in HEI admissions.⁷² It is, therefore, still used and prioritised by universities. Despite its imperfections, POLAR3 quintile 1 students make up over 64 per cent of MEM group 1 (the most disadvantaged according to UCAS's metric, which takes individual-level factors into account), and over 31 per cent of MEM group 2 – demonstrating that although imperfect, POLAR3 does capture the majority of disadvantaged students.⁷³

Disadvantage is complex and multifaceted.⁷⁴ If universities and regulators adopted several metrics including POLAR3, FSM status or a student's value-added score, they could provide a better measure of disadvantage. Several interviews carried out for this paper highlighted that a more comprehensive use of data would be a fairer measurement for universities in high-participation areas.⁷⁵ It was noted, however, that one reason POLAR3 is still used is because it assesses less-sensitive data that cannot identify an individual person. Using synthetic data could circumvent this concern. Synthetic data provides an artificial version of a sample of data with similar attributes to the original sample.⁷⁶ Individuals cannot be reidentified through the artificial version of data making it intrinsically privacy preserving. The DfE could provide synthetic data based on individual-level data in the National Pupil Database, such as a student's FSM status and income deprivation, which would be able to effectively measure a university's progress in improving access. As suggested in an interview carried out for this paper, developing a better measure of

⁶⁸ Sundorph, Danail Vasilev, and Louis Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility*, 21. See Figure 9.

⁶⁹ The POLAR3 method was used to assess students from low-participation neighbourhoods from 2009-10.

⁷⁰ Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Widening Participation: UK Performance Indicators 2016/17*, 2018.

⁷¹ Fair Education Alliance, *Putting Fairness in Context: Using Data to Widen Access to Higher Education*, 10.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ UCAS, 'Equality and Entry Rates Data Explorer', 2016.

⁷⁴ UCAS Analysis and Insights, *MEM – Technical Report*, 2018.

⁷⁵ Reform Interview.

⁷⁶ Stefanie Koperniak, 'Artificial Data Give the Same Results as Real Data – without Compromising Privacy', *MIT News*, 3 March 2017.

access to universities would require leadership from the DfE to ensure that it was adopted nationwide. As POLAR3 is still the measure on which universities are judged, universities are unlikely to unilaterally stop using it in favour of other metrics.

Recommendation 2

The Department of Education should create a more robust measure of each university's progress in improving access. It should create a new indicator using synthetic data based on sensitive attributes in the National Pupil Database, such as Free School Meal status, income deprivation and Children in Need status, in combination with other data such as a student's value-added score.

2.2 The rankings

The rankings (see Figure 1), measures the 29 high-tariff institutions from 2012-13 to 2016-17 according to several metrics. The first column of the table shows the average annual increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students from 2012-13 to 2016-17. The second is the average distance from the HESA benchmark in the same five-year period. The last measure of performance is the progress against the institution's benchmark. Finally, average outreach expenditure per student, as reported in a university's access agreements and access and participation plans, is included.

Figure 1 shows that London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) has retained its place at the top of the rankings, although the increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students has dropped from 1.13 per cent between 2011-12 to 2015-16, to 0.675 per cent from 2012-13 to 2016-17. There are also some notable shifts between the two ranking tables as a result of the rolling five-year average. Newcastle University has gone up from 24th in last year's access rankings to 2nd this year, whereas Southampton has slipped from 8th to 28th.

The table shows that 20 universities have seen an average increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students from 2012-13 to 2016-17. However, in 2016-17, only 17 universities saw a proportion increase from 2015-16. Figure 2, which traces the progress of 8 elite universities from 2009-10 to 2016-17 using data measured by the POLAR3 method, adds further clarity. These 8 universities have been chosen because, according to the Complete University Guide for 2019, they have the highest entry standards among English universities.⁷⁷ Figure 2 shows that the proportion of LSE's intake from low-participation neighbourhoods dropped by 1 percentage point from 2015-16 to 2016-17. However, it has risen by nearly 3 percentage points since 2009-10. In comparison, six of the other seven universities have made small improvements of less than 1 percentage point since 2009-10. The percentage of students from low-participation neighbourhoods at the University of Cambridge has slightly dropped from 3.1 per cent in 2009-10 to 3.0 per cent in 2016-17.

⁷⁷ The Complete University Guide, 'Top UK University League Tables and Rankings 2019', 2018.

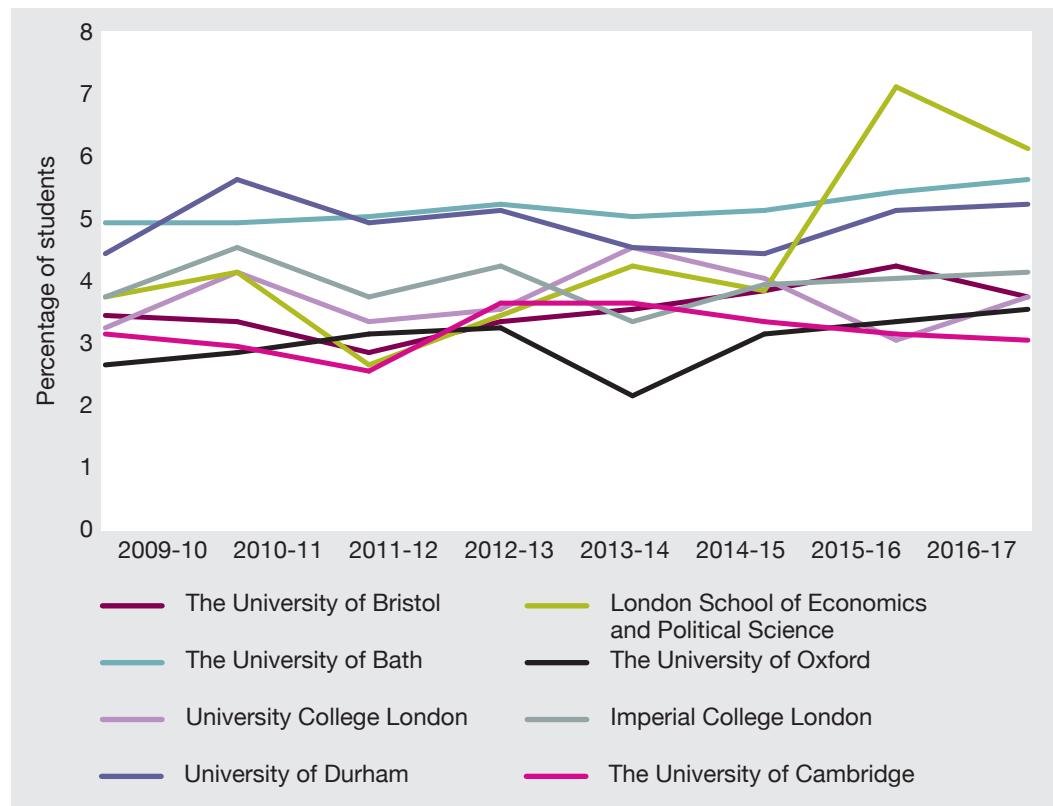
Figure 1: High-tariff university access rankings

University	Average annual increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students 2012-13 to 2016-17	Average distance from HESA benchmark 2012-13 to 2016-17 (percentage points)	Change in distance from HESA benchmark 2012-13 to 2016-17 (percentage points)	Per-student expenditure across all entrants (5-year average)
1 (1) London School of Economics and Political Science	0.675	0.16	3.4	£699
2 (24) University of Newcastle	0.475	0.64	0.9	£711
3 (7) The University of Sheffield	0.45	0.96	0.9	£599
4 (3) The University of East Anglia	0.4	-0.46	0.1	£592
5 (2) The University of York	0.375	-0.08	0.5	£541
6 (16) SOAS, UoL	0.35	-4.82	0.3	£507
7 (21) Royal Holloway, UoL	0.32	-3.4	-0.3	£393
8 (9) Loughborough University	0.275	-2.04	0.7	£315
9 (26) The University of Warwick	0.25	-0.76	0.7	£569
10 (17) University of Nottingham	0.225	-1.16	0.2	£368
11 (10) The University of Leicester	0.225	-1	-1	£582
12 (13) King's College London	0.2	-2.5	-0.5	£480
13 (19) The University of Surrey	0.175	-2.04	0.1	£218
14 (28) The University of Exeter	0.15	-2.12	0	£383
15 (12) The University of Birmingham	0.125	-0.86	0.2	£388
16 (6) The University of Bristol	0.1	-2.14	0.1	£524
17 (18) The University of Bath	0.1	-1.28	0.7	£592
18 (22) The University of Oxford	0.075	-1.72	0.6	£1,542
19 (25) Queen Mary, UoL	0.05	-4.06	-1	£108
20 (23) University of Durham	0.025	-0.98	0.3	£915
21 (15) The University of Liverpool	0	0.92	-1.3	£219
22 (11) The University of Lancaster	-0.025	1.28	-1	£371
23 (20) Imperial College London	-0.025	-1.1	-0.2	£450
24 (4) The University of Leeds	-0.05	0.46	-0.6	£317
25 (5) The University of Manchester	-0.075	0.66	-0.7	£387
26 (29) St George's, UoL	-0.125	-3.16	-1.8	£1,099
27 (14) The University of Cambridge	-0.15	-1.32	-0.3	£792
28 (8) The University of Southampton	-0.25	-0.78	-1.9	£312
29 (27) University College London	-0.325	-1.98	-0.1	£801

Key:  Stayed in the same place  Moved up the rankings  Moved down the rankings

The first number represents current position and the number in brackets represents last year's position.

Sources: Reform calculations based on HESA performance indicators, in addition to OFFA and OfS monitoring outcomes. Expenditure refers to spending on the 'access' category in access agreements, which was previously reported under 'outreach'.

Figure 2: Percentage of students from low-participation neighbourhoods

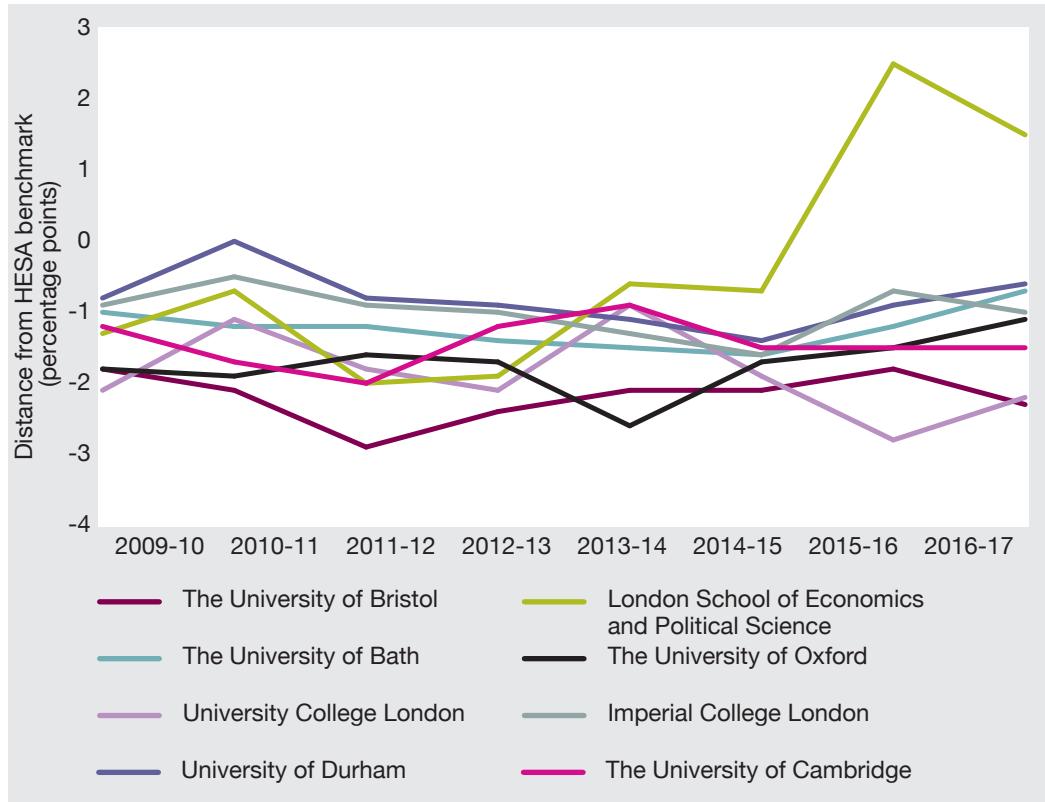
Sources: Reform calculations based on HESA performance indicators from 2009-10 to 2016-17.

Figure 1 also ranks Lancaster 22nd out of 29. However, Lancaster has a high percentage of students from low-participation neighbourhoods, in comparison to other elite universities, year-on-year.⁷⁸ Indeed, Figure 1 also highlights that Lancaster is highest ranked in terms of the University's average distance from its benchmark from 2012-13 to 2016-17. Over the five-year period, only seven universities of the 29 had an average that was above their benchmark.

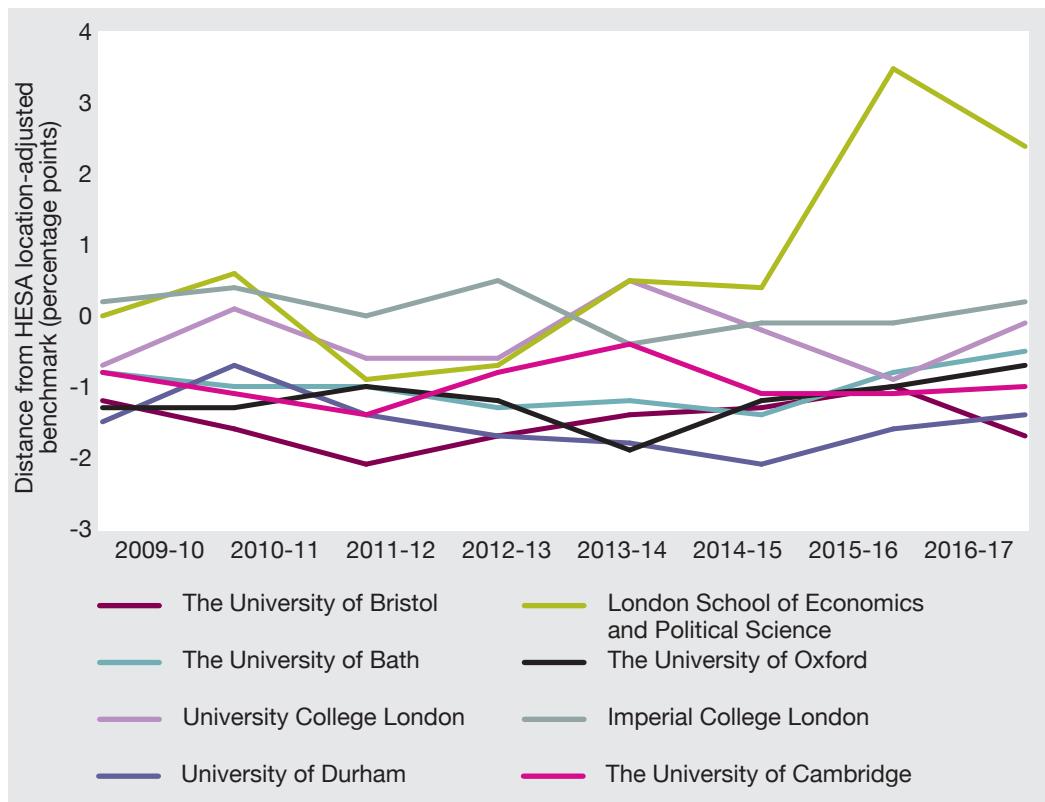
In terms of progress against the benchmark, Figure 1 shows that LSE stands out – similar to last year's results.⁷⁹ From 2012-13 to 2016-17, LSE improved against its benchmark by 3.4 percentage points. Although this is lower than its improvement from 2011-12 to 2015-16, which was 4.5 percentage points, it does show LSE's consistency in beating its benchmark in recent years, reflecting the successful use of contextualised admissions. Figure 3 supports this conclusion, showing that since 2015-16, LSE has made a marked improvement. Figure 3 also shows that the other 7 elite universities have failed to outperform their individual benchmarks from 2009-10 to 2016-17. In addition, as Figure 4 demonstrates, when the benchmark is adjusted to consider location, apart from LSE, only Imperial College London surpasses its benchmark by 0.2 percentage points in 2016-17.

⁷⁸ Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Table T1a – Participation of Under-Represented Groups in Higher Education: UK Domiciled Young Full-Time Undergraduate Entrants 2016/17', *Widening Participation: UK Performance Indicators 2016/17*, 2018.

⁷⁹ Sundorph, Danail Vasilev, and Louis Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility*, 21–22.

Figure 3: Distance from HESA benchmark

Sources: Reform calculations based on HESA performance indicators from 2009-10 to 2016-17.

Figure 4: Distance from HESA location-adjusted benchmark

Sources: Reform calculations based on HESA performance indicators from 2009-10 to 2016-17.

Access and outreach spending vary between universities, which reflects similar results from last year's report.⁸⁰ Oxford University spends the most on access and Queen Mary, University of London spends the least. However, Queen Mary is only one place below Oxford in the rankings. In addition, other metrics show that Queen Mary attracts a diverse student population, which may account for the university's low spend on access.⁸¹ For example, according to its access and participation plan for 2019-20, 59 per cent of its students are BME and 42 per cent are the first from their family to attend university.⁸² The two universities that have spent the most on access – Oxford and St George's Hospital Medical School – have, on average, seen little improvement in the proportion of disadvantaged students from 2012-13 to 2016-17.

There is, however, little transparency as to what spending on 'access' is used for, which makes it hard to assess what activities are most effective.⁸³ Furthermore, for Oxford, regardless of the university's spending on access, its entry standards, which are one of the highest among the elite universities, make it difficult to admit disadvantaged students. This is because a lower proportion of disadvantaged students achieve the necessary grades in comparison to more advantaged students.⁸⁴ Without actively reducing these grades to admit more disadvantaged students, it will be hard for high-tariff institutions to close this gap and will require more effort pre-GCSE to raise attainment of disadvantaged students from an earlier age.⁸⁵

80 Ibid., 21.

81 Reform Interview.

82 Queen Mary University of London, *2019-20 Access and Participation Plan*, 2018, 1.

83 Sundorph, Danail Vasilev, and Louis Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility*, 22-23.

84 Department for Education, *Revised A Level and Other 16-18 Results in England, 2016/17*, 2018, 11; University of Oxford, *Access and Participation Plan 2019-20*, 2018, 1-4.

85 Reform Interview.

3

Case studies

As Figure 1 shows, several universities have changed position from last year's access rankings as a result of the five-year rolling average. LSE has also retained the top spot. Newcastle University's rise up the table, and Southampton University's drop, are two notable changes. This section evaluates the approaches to access from LSE, Newcastle and Southampton in greater detail, to assess whether their positions in this year's access rankings reflect their access activities.

Figure 5: Newcastle University

Newcastle University has seen positive improvements to its WP performance according to its most recent access and participation plan.⁸⁶ They have maintained their relatively high figures in the entry of students from low-participation neighbourhoods, which was 9.3 per cent in 2016 and 9.1 per cent in 2017 – a rise from 7.6 per cent in 2015.⁸⁷ However, its offer rate to more disadvantaged students (POLAR3 quintile 1) was lower than more advantaged students. Although the University is a national recruiter, it has a strong local presence, with 23 per cent of entrants in 2016-17 coming from the North East.⁸⁸ Newcastle was also 1.3 per cent above its benchmark in 2016-17, whereas in 2015-16, it was 0.2 per cent below the benchmark.⁸⁹ In 2016-17, Newcastle spent £3,443,442 on access, an increase of £121,242 from 2015-16.⁹⁰ It is, however, unclear how this money was allocated and therefore how it affected Newcastle's performance.

Newcastle have developed various outreach activities and contextual admissions programmes that support access for disadvantaged students. For example, its PARTNERS programme is a supported entry route to the University, where students can receive a lower conditional offer on completion of the summer school.⁹¹ The PARTNERS programme is explicitly aimed at disadvantaged students and sets out the eligibility criteria on the website.⁹²

Newcastle University introduced contextualised admissions in 2010.⁹³ According to its admissions policy for 2018 entry, contextual information such as personal circumstances, disabilities, parental experience of higher education and involvement in schemes such as the PARTNERS programme, gathered during the admission process, is given to admissions tutors.⁹⁴ This approach, however, could lead to subjectivity in the use of contextual data among tutors. Thus, as set out in the University's most recent access and participation plan, it aims to "refine our approach to the use of contextual data in admissions so that it is coherent and consistent across all subjects and makes use of multiple data sets."⁹⁵ From its website, its contextual admissions policy is unclear. It does, however, provide a link to its admissions policy document, which briefly refers to the contextual information that will be considered.⁹⁶

86 Newcastle University, *2019-20 Access and Participation Plan*, 2018, 1.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Table T1a – Participation of Under-Represented Groups in Higher Education: UK Domiciled Young Full-Time Undergraduate Entrants 2016/17'; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Table T1a – Participation of Under-Represented Groups in Higher Education: UK Domiciled Young Full-Time Undergraduate Entrants 2015/16', *Widening Participation Summary: UK Performance Indicators 2015/16*, 2017.

90 Office for Students, 'Table 3 – Fee Income and Expenditure through Access Agreements in 2016-17, by Institution (HEIs Only)'; Office for Fair Access, 'Table 3 – Fee Income and Expenditure through Access Agreements in 2015-16, by Institution (HEIs Only)', *Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring for 2015-16*, 2017.

91 Newcastle University, 'PARTNERS Programme – Information for Schools and Colleges', Web Page, 2018.

92 Newcastle University, 'PARTNERS Programme – Eligibility Checker', Web Page, 2018. The website lists the nine eligibility criteria, of which pupils must meet one (or more): postcode, entitlement to FSM, school performance, local authority care, parent/carers' experience of higher education and current occupation, long-term health condition, recognised carer and living independently of family.

93 Sundorph, Danail Vasilev, and Louis Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility*, 36.

94 Newcastle University, *Admissions Policy: 2018 Entry*, 2018, 4.

95 Newcastle University, *2019-20 Access and Participation Plan*, 7.

96 Newcastle University, 'Admissions Policies and Procedures', Web Page, 2018; Newcastle University, *Admissions Policy: 2018 Entry*, 4.

Figure 6: London School of Economics and Political Science

LSE's access and participation plan for 2019-20 shows that 6.1 per cent of its entrants were from low-participation neighbourhoods in 2016-17 – above its benchmark of 4.6 per cent.⁹⁷ However, in 2016-17, 68.4 per cent of LSE's UK domiciled young full-time undergraduate entrants were from state schools or colleges – below their benchmark of 70.9 per cent.⁹⁸ The percentage of applications from black African-Caribbean students has fallen to under seven per cent, but there has been an increase in the proportion of offers and in the enrolment rate.⁹⁹ In 2016-17 LSE spent £800,000 on access, an increase of £200,000 from 2015-2016.¹⁰⁰

As demonstrated in last year's report, LSE have been proactive in their approach to contextualised admissions, which has had a positive impact on its WP performance.¹⁰¹ This is demonstrable through its spike in figures of POLAR3 quintile 1 students from 2015-16 as shown in Figure 2. LSE introduced contextualised admissions in 2014, and there are six contextual data 'flags' that are used to place a person's educational achievement and potential into context. LSE flags a student for additional consideration if they are from a low-participation neighbourhood, a low-performing school or college, if they have spent time in care, if they have been part of an LSE WP scheme, or other relevant factors such as medical issues.¹⁰²

On the 'Admissions Information' section of its website, LSE sets out what contextual information is used.¹⁰³ Although clear, it does not provide an eligibility checker for students who are unsure whether their postcode, school or college meets the requirements. The website also demonstrates how the information is used when it is flagged to the admissions selector. For example, a disadvantaged student may receive a standard offer if their academic record is slightly less competitive, or if they are predicted slightly lower grades, and the information is also considered when making confirmation decisions.¹⁰⁴ A spokesperson from LSE argued that the university "is currently making a concerted effort to increase the transparency of its use of contextual data" and "is working with schools and colleges to make its use of contextual data more visible."

Figure 7: University of Southampton

In 2016-17, 7.1 per cent of full-time young students entering Southampton came from low-participation neighbourhoods. This is a slight drop from 7.4 per cent in 2015-16.¹⁰⁵ However, this is 0.3 percentage points above its benchmark. In 2015-16, 325 students came from low-participation neighbourhoods, in 2016-17 this fell to 265.¹⁰⁶ As of 2016-17, Southampton has also piloted the use of UCAS's MEM data, which the University argues "provided an opportunity to develop how we consider multiple equality characteristics/intersections of disadvantage."¹⁰⁷ This pilot has shown that most of the applications that meet their current contextual criteria are in the MEM group least likely to attend university. In addition, it has shown that those in the most disadvantaged MEM

⁹⁷ London School of Economics and Political Science, *LSE Access and Participation Plan: 2019 Entry*, 2018, 1.

⁹⁸ Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Table T1a – Participation of Under-Represented Groups in Higher Education: UK Domiciled Young Full-Time Undergraduate Entrants 2016/17'.

⁹⁹ London School of Economics and Political Science, *LSE Access and Participation Plan: 2019 Entry*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Office for Students, 'Table 3 – Fee Income and Expenditure through Access Agreements in 2016-17, by Institution (HEIs Only)'; Office for Fair Access, 'Table 3 – Fee Income and Expenditure through Access Agreements in 2015-16, by Institution (HEIs Only)'.

¹⁰¹ Sundorph, Danail Vasilev, and Louis Coiffait, *Joining the Elite: How Top Universities Can Enhance Social Mobility*, 24–25.

¹⁰² London School of Economics and Political Science, *Undergraduate Admissions Policy*, 2018, 8.

¹⁰³ London School of Economics and Political Science, 'Admissions Information'.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Table T1a – Participation of Under-Represented Groups in Higher Education: UK Domiciled Young Full-Time Undergraduate Entrants 2016/17'; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Table T1a – Participation of Under-Represented Groups in Higher Education: UK Domiciled Young Full-Time Undergraduate Entrants 2015/16', 1.

¹⁰⁶ The University of Southampton, *Access and Participation Plan 2019-20*, 2018, 23.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1.

group were less likely to receive an offer than the most advantaged MEM group.¹⁰⁸ In 2016-17, Southampton spent £1,394,387 on access, an increase of £263,387 from 2015-16.

Southampton have developed outreach programmes to improve access for disadvantaged students. Its 'Learn with US' outreach programme, for example, uses a series of regular interventions for groups of disadvantaged students from Years 6-13 to encourage them to progress to university. This includes university visits, school-based workshops and support and advice to students, parents and teachers.¹⁰⁹ In 2015-16, 35 secondary schools and 25 colleges across Dorset, Hampshire, London, the Isle of Wight, London and Wiltshire engaged with this programme.²⁵

Southampton has also embraced collaboration to improve its WP performance. It works with Southampton Solent, Arts University Bournemouth, Bournemouth, Portsmouth and Winchester universities to exchange good practice, ensure appropriate targeting and monitoring of outcomes to increase access to higher education.¹¹⁰ In 2016, Southampton became the lead institution for the Southern Universities Network, a collaborative partnership comprising higher education providers in Hampshire, Dorset and the Isle of Wight, and from 2017 this partnership has delivered the NCOP for the region. The network works to increase higher education participation working with 101 schools and further education colleges in the region.¹¹¹

Southampton introduced a contextual admissions policy in 2015-16. In 2017, 25 per cent of applications from home students met at least one of the contextual criteria. 64 per cent of these potential students received an offer, of which 31 per cent received a reduced offer.¹¹² On the University's website it sets out clearly what contextual data is acknowledged in the admissions process, and provides links to various tools, such as a postcode look-up, which can help an applicant check their eligibility.¹¹³

The case studies demonstrate that each university has been proactive in their approach to access for disadvantaged students. Most notably, each university has developed some form of contextualised admissions. Yet, only LSE's data demonstrates a significant change in the percentage of students from a low-participation neighbourhood it admits, or in the progression against its benchmark. In regard to the transparency of each university's contextual admissions process, there is significant variance that may make it difficult for students to assess their eligibility. Southampton's approach is the most thorough, with the criteria clearly set out and tools readily available for students to check if they are eligible.

When comparing universities, it is important to consider local circumstances. This is because, to a certain degree, universities continue to attract local students and are therefore subject to local demographics. Indeed, although the scale of local recruitment will differ depending on the university, local areas are often disproportionately represented.¹¹⁴ Recent research, which examines median household wealth, GDP per capita, unemployment rate and average house price among other metrics, demonstrates that London is the most prosperous area of UK, followed by the South East, whereas the North East is the least prosperous area of the UK.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, according to the 2011 UK Census, 81.9 per cent of Newcastle's population are White British, 77.7 per cent of Southampton's population are White British, and 38.4 per cent of Inner London's

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 11-12.

¹¹⁰ The University of Southampton, *Access Agreement 2015-16*, 2014.

¹¹¹ Southern Universities Network, *About: The Southern Universities Network*, 2018.

¹¹² The University of Southampton, *Access and Participation Plan 2019-20*, 18.

¹¹³ University of Southampton, 'Contextual Admissions'.

¹¹⁴ London School of Economics and Political Science, *LSE Access and Participation Plan: 2019 Entry*, 9; Newcastle University, *2019-20 Access and Participation Plan*, 1.

¹¹⁵ Barclays, 'UK Prosperity Map 2017', Web Page, 2017.

population are White British.⁷ This demographic difference is reflected in each university's recruitment figures. For example, only 0.2 per cent of Newcastle's newest entrants were from a black, or black British-Caribbean background, whereas nearly 6 per cent of LSE's newest entrants were black African-Caribbean students.¹¹⁶ It is essential to hold all universities to account regarding the composition of their student bodies. However, with so many local factors in play, it is also important to assess each university in relation to its local and regional circumstances. Better publicly available data would enable a more robust approach that takes these nuances into account. What the case studies show, however, is that there is still a lot to be done to close the access gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

¹¹⁶ Newcastle University, *2019-20 Access and Participation Plan*, 2; London School of Economics and Political Science, *LSE Access and Participation Plan: 2019 Entry*, 3.

4 Conclusion

The commitment to enhancing social mobility in England is regularly displayed. In Government statements,¹¹⁷ access and participation plans,¹¹⁸ and the OfS's guidance to universities,¹¹⁹ social mobility is a clear goal. Improving access to elite universities for disadvantaged students is one way of achieving this. As the data shows, however, this year demonstrates little improvement from the previous year. Although the number of disadvantaged students accessing elite universities is slowly rising, the gap between them and their more advantaged peers remains stubbornly large.¹²⁰ With no control on the number of students admitted to universities, and with £745.6 million spent on WP, there is potential to improve the equality of access.¹²¹ The figures demonstrate, however, that more needs to be done.

The introduction of the OfS is a step in the right direction. While the regulatory framework for this year's access and participation plans remains similar to previous access agreements submitted to OFFA, the recent consultation demonstrates the OfS's determination to embrace change and to tackle barriers to WP.¹²² In particular, its support for contextualised admissions, as demonstrated by Chris Millward's speech to the Fair Education Alliance, should be lauded.¹²³ As previously mentioned, the use of contextualised admissions is already becoming widespread and, for LSE in particular, has begun to bear fruit.

The use of contextualised admissions also has the potential to offset the attainment issue facing elite universities. A large barrier to improving access is that on average, disadvantaged students achieve lower A level grades than their more advantaged peers and are therefore unable to apply to high-tariff institutions.¹²⁴ Indeed, attainment remains a key barrier to access.¹²⁵ In addition, the students that do achieve the same grades have historically applied for lower-tariff institutions.¹²⁶

Interviews carried out for this paper focused on the data used to measure disadvantage. Several questioned the ability of POLAR3 data to measure disadvantage. Although it was noted that certain institutions are using ACORN or MEM datasets to get a better representation of disadvantage, institutional-level data on these metrics are not released, and therefore POLAR3 is still the measure by which universities are regulated. It will require a national effort led by government, therefore, to provide synthetic data to more effectively measure the progress made by elite universities in their efforts to improve access. By doing so, it will enable the OfS to regulate universities by a set of metrics that reach as many disadvantaged pupils as possible.

Enhancing access to elite universities for disadvantaged students will require further collaboration between universities, schools and government. Although each university has separate benchmarks, and different local circumstances, improving social mobility is a national goal. Initiatives such as NCOP demonstrate efforts to move in this direction. However, as several interviewees argued, NCOP is a localised programme and therefore there is too much variation in quality between different areas. By pooling resources, sharing examples of best practice and focusing on raising the attainment of disadvantaged students at an earlier age, elite universities stand a better chance of tackling inequality.

117 Department for Education, 'Education Secretary Sets Vision for Boosting Social Mobility'.

118 The University of Southampton, *Access and Participation Plan 2019-20*; London School of Economics and Political Science, *LSE Access and Participation Plan: 2019 Entry*; University of Oxford, *Access and Participation Plan 2019-20*; Newcastle University, *2019-20 Access and Participation Plan*.

119 Office for Students, *Regulatory Notice 1: Access and Participation Plan Guidance for 2019-20*.

120 Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Figure 5 – HE Undergraduate UK Domiciled Full-Time Student Enrolments by Participation Characteristics 2012/13 to 2016/17', 5; UCAS Analysis and Research, *End of Cycle Report 2017: Executive Summary*, 2.

121 Mark Corver, 'The Equality Indicators Are Quietly Flashing Red', *Wonkhe*, 23 September 2018.

122 Office for Students, *A New Approach to Regulating Access and Participation in English Higher Education: Consultation*.

123 Millward, 'Be More Ambitious on Contextual Admissions, Says the Office for Students'.

124 Department for Education, *Revised A Level and Other 16-18 Results in England, 2016/17*, 11.

125 Reform Interview.

126 Centre for Social Mobility, *Research into Use of Contextual Data in Admissions*, 1.

Glossary of key terms

High-tariff university

A university which is either a Russell Group institution or has entry tariffs higher than the lowest Russell Group institution. As the report is only addressing English universities, this list comprises 29 institutions.

Will be used interchangeably with ‘elite universities’.

When referring to research using different definitions, these will be provided.

Disadvantaged students

Different measures of disadvantage are referred to in the paper and defined throughout. If not stated otherwise, it refers to students living in areas of low higher education participation rates. These are defined by the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s POLAR3 measure.¹²⁷

Widening Participation

A strategic priority for the UK government and the higher-education sector to address the discrepancies in HE participation between different social and demographic groups.

Contextualised admissions

A system used by universities to increase the participation of disadvantaged students, by considering an applicant’s circumstances during the application process.¹²⁸ Contextual data can include but is not limited to: an applicant’s FSM status, attending a lower-performing school, being a care leaver, neighbourhood’s participation in higher education and attending an outreach programme. A university may decide to give an applicant additional consideration, an offer, or a lower offer if they meet one or several of these criteria.

Approaches to contextualised admissions can differ between universities.

POLAR3

POLAR3 assesses the progression to higher education of a local neighbourhood. It classifies local areas into five quintiles, based on the proportion of 18-year olds who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Higher Education Funding Council for England, ‘POLAR – Participation of Local Areas’, Briefing, 2017.

¹²⁸ Supporting Professionalism in Admissions and HEDIIP, SPA’s *Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*.

¹²⁹ Higher Education Funding Council for England, ‘POLAR – Participation of Local Areas’.

Appendix

Figure 8: Access rankings from 2011-12 to 2016-17

	University	Average annual increase in the proportion of disadvantaged students 2011-12 to 2016-17 (percentage points)
1 (23)	University of Durham	0.867
2 (2)	The University of York	0.733
3 (3)	The University of East Anglia	0.683
4(17)	University of Nottingham	0.5
5 (12)	The University of Birmingham	0.5
6 (24)	University of Newcastle	0.467
7 (9)	Loughborough University	0.417
8 (19)	The University of Surrey	0.333
9 (7)	The University of Sheffield	0.3
10 (21)	Royal Holloway, UoL	0.3
11 (15)	The University of Liverpool	0.283
12 (11)	The University of Lancaster	0.283
13 (6)	The University of Bristol	0.117
14 (29)	St George's, UoL	-0.067
15 (4)	The University of Leeds	-0.083
16 (1)	London School of Economics and Political Science	-0.116
17 (20)	Imperial College London	-0.117
18 (8)	The University of Southampton	-0.15
19 (16)	SOAS, UoL	-0.167
20 (10)	The University of Leicester	-0.167
21 (18)	The University of Bath	-0.183
22 (13)	King's College London	-0.217
23 (5)	The University of Manchester	-0.233
24 (27)	University College London	-0.25
25 (25)	Queen Mary, UoL*	-0.34
26 (26)	The University of Warwick	-0.35
27 (28)	The University of Exeter	-0.75
28 (22)	The University of Oxford	-0.9
29 (14)	The University of Cambridge	-1.067

Key: Stayed in the same place Moved up the rankings Moved down the rankings

The first number represents current position and the number in brackets represents last year's position.

*Figures for Queen Mary are only available from 2012 onwards.

Sources: Reform calculations based on HESA performance indicators from 2011-12 to 2016-2017.

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