

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

**0400**

**T2** | Beaumaris 1

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10:30 - 11:00

A new social segregation? The impact of tuition fees, student number controls and school leaving age on the composition of student cohorts, and hence academic practice and student experience, in UK universities.

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**Research Domain:** Access and widening participation (AWP)

**Abstract:** Almost a generation has passed since the Dearing Report (1997) triggered the reintroduction and subsequent escalation of tuition fees within UK higher education alongside a mandate for universities to widen participation. It is timely to reassess how this and other policy changes, such as the increase in school leaving age, have changed the student cohort composition; and the consequential impact on both academic practice and student experience.

We will present evidence of the impact of these fee changes, as well as the removal of student number controls and the introduction of private providers, on the composition of student cohorts at a large multi-faculty post-1992 university; and discuss the implications for academic practice, curriculum and co-curricular provision. We will also critically explore the wider implications for the widening participation agenda, in terms of the changing distribution of student cohorts across the sector and its impact on students' (and staff) experience.

**Paper:** Almost a generation since Dearing (1997) opened the path to the reintroduction and subsequent escalation of tuition fees within UK higher education, what has been the impact on the widening participation agenda? No shortage of ink has been spent on this topic [Younger et al 2018], but discussion has often focused on the sector level; in this paper we instead use the lens of student cohort data from the level of an academic department to explore these changes, which we argue raise wider questions about the potential 'segregation' of students and its implications for both student experience and academic practice.

This paper consists of two pieces of statistical analysis. The first uses HESA data to document the changes in the composition of the student cohorts within different UK universities. The statistical analysis considers each education policy impact in terms of the changes that have been most influential in changing the composition of the student cohorts. Differential impacts are identified on different groups of universities, with Russell Group Institutions experiencing more diverse student

bodies and post-92 institutions more similar student bodies that is the students having more in common with each other. The second uses data from our institution to consider further the changes in the composition of the student cohort in terms of more detailed data. This more detailed analysis includes different measures to identify students with widening participation.

Our study analyses evidence from a large multi-faculty post-1992 institution, the University of Greenwich: we have a long history of local engagement which encourages students with widening participation characteristics to enter higher education. Our university data suggest that the cohort has become increasingly local and dominated by students with widening participation characteristics. The most significant impacts are the combination of the removal of the student number controls and the raising of the school leaving age. The combination of these two policies has led 66% of our undergraduate students drawn from the students with widening participation characteristics living locally to the university. With many of the local schools and colleges offering BTEC courses to students with widening participation characteristics, this 58% of our undergraduate students have a BTEC at entry.

Although in one respect these changes in our student cohort represent a strong success for the widening participation agenda, our evidence indicates that policy changes – including the reintroduction and increase in tuition fees, changes to school leaving age, and especially the removal of student number controls ('caps') – have also resulted in a more socially segregated cohort, with more advantaged students finding their way to other providers, thus reducing the benefit from accessing a diverse cohort for students with widening participation characteristics. We debate the parallels with the school choice literature, which suggests that not all students have parity of access to the choices offered; in particular, that students with widening participation characteristics may be more socially, financially and geographically constrained and thus less able to access 'choices' which require mobility [Allen and Vignoles 2006].

These trends in student cohort characteristics at the 'macro' university level are mirrored at the 'meso' level of the Faculty of Business and also the 'micro' level of our Economics Degrees, which forms the core case study for this paper. The combination of these two policies has led 66% of our undergraduate students drawn from the students with widening participation characteristics living locally to the university, 61% within the Faculty of Business and 60% on our Economics Degrees. Corresponding numbers for our BTEC students with widening participation characteristics, 58% university, 56% Faculty of Business and 48% on our Economics Degrees in 2018/19 entry.

In many ways this is a success story: the University of Greenwich has a long and proud history of having a diverse cohort of students, in terms of gender and ethnicity; this includes our economics students, which 'bucks the trend' of the discipline nationally [Royal Economic Society 2019]. This track record has led to our developing practice to reach students which most economics departments do not attract, embracing inclusive curriculum and innovative teaching practices such as team-based learning and the 'trading challenge', as well as a comprehensive portfolio of co-curricular activity, from a rigorous personal tutoring system to our schools outreach programme. In this paper we present as a case study evidence from our Employability Passport initiative, developed to support our students in developing the skills required for the graduate labour market. Data shows both that first-in-family students are more engaged with this initiative, and that engagement is correlated with graduate outcomes:

From this it can be argued we are making a real positive contribution to the widening participation agenda sector-wide. However, this is achieved via a range of enhanced academic practice which has resource implications for the university and its staff; and in the context of an increasingly socially segregated cohort of students, the implications of which, in terms of students' learning and wider university experience, remain largely unexplored.

We argue this study raises wider questions for the sector: Is the 'social segregation' we identify part of a wider trend across UK higher education? If so, should this be embraced as an opportunity to develop specialist expertise in providing effective learning opportunities for students with widening participation characteristics, as per our case study; and/or challenged as a diminution of students' learning experiences due to loss of diversity in their academic environment? We hope that, at a time when the place of higher education in society is contested and arguably in flux – not least, but not only, in response to Augar (2019) – this paper will contribute to wider sector dialogue and development on these key questions.

#### REFERENCES

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