

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

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Lessons to Learn from 15 Years of Access Agreements

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** Access agreements have been a feature of higher education institutional practice in England for fifteen years. This paper considers what lessons can be learnt by examining how they have responded to as higher education has changed under austerity and marketisation has intensified (McCaig, 2018). It will examine the access agreements published for the 2006-7, 2016-7 academic years and the 2020-2025 access and participation plans that have replaced them. Although these documents may appear homogenous and unchanging overtime, the corpus textual analysis conducted reveals structural differences. . This examination of the lexical choices that have been made reveals differences between institutional groups and over time. This recent analysis builds on a history of discourse analysis of access agreements (McCaig, 2015; Rainford, 2021) and builds on insights gained from access agreements about institutional stratification (Bowl and Hughes, 2016) and exploring institutional missions interact with statements about outreach and access.

**Paper:** The continued expansion of higher education in England following both the massification of 1992 and the subsequent sectoral expansion as a result of the 2017 Higher Education Act has lead to great diversity in the sector. Within this diversity, it has been a policy imperative that institutions make provision to support access to and success within these institutions. This is set out and agreed via policy documents, previously called access agreements (covering a single year), now access and participation plans (covering 5 years). Documents setting out access plans for institutions have been a feature of higher education institutional practice in England for fifteen years. This paper considers what lessons can be learnt by examining how they have responded to as higher education has changed under austerity and marketisation has intensified (McCaig, 2018). This paper examines the access agreements published for the 2006-7, 2016-7 academic years and the recent access and participation plans that have replaced them. The paper builds on insights gained from access agreements about institutional stratification (Bowl and Hughes, 2013) and explores how institutional missions interact with statements about outreach and access.

There is a substantial body of literature, much of it practitioner-authored, which deals with issues of access to higher education and espouse change in admissions practices and campus procedures for ends based on the concept of social emancipation (e.g. Burke, 2012; Burke, 2017; Rainford, 2020). Instead of the veracity of stated plans or claimed actions in relation to widening participation access as exemplified in the these policy documents, this research focuses upon, the language they choose to use. This language, if carefully analysed can in itself elucidate Higher Education providers' stances towards widening participation and fair access. There are both 'keywords' (Williams, 1976) that can

be tracked over time and also comparisons that can be made as to the way language is deployed. These can both offer insights into the way institutions interpret and operationalise national policy. However, they also serve as a strategic document that shapes and performs practice in institutions and were intended to inform students of what institutions are doing to address issues of access, success and progression for underrepresented groups.

Although at first glance the sectors' access agreements look broadly homogenous and unchanging overtime, textual analysis reveals structural differences (McCaig, 2015; Rainford, 2021). Researchers used corpus textual analysis techniques on all the published access agreements in the selected years and the relative frequency of words used in different stratified groups against the whole noted. This examination of the lexical choices that have been made reveals differences between institutional groups and over time. The paper theorises how the performance of student access has altered over the last fifteen years and how that might shift in the future by looking at the access documents of the same eight institutions with a range of metro/regional and status in three different collection points.

Being able to look in this way at the three time periods offers unique and specific insights to understand policy development and institutional responses. For example, while the Access Agreements were extremely diverse in 2006, over time the guidance from the regulator and the process of annual monitoring has often caused them to become more homogeneous. Looking at the close textual analysis of the Access Agreements it is notable that even the word frequency distribution varies significantly between the three sets. The 2020-25 Access and participation plans have a more limited range of words and the use of the word student/s overwhelms by a factor of 3 the next most frequent word (which is university). There are also significant new additions to the most frequent word count, including 'attainment' as the 8<sup>th</sup> most frequent word and evaluation is also a new entrant to the most frequent – as the 15<sup>th</sup> most frequent word. The short word 'gap' is the third most frequent word which seems to be a rising usage.

In 2016 the access agreements also showed increased professionalism in their presentational features; institutionally created documents that had had time to mature and evolve and respond to policy change. The access agreements of 2016 were homogenous to a great extent, with little change between them. With the move to the Access and participation plans, there has been another discursive shift; this time it is away from intent and has been immersed by the language of program evaluation and the documents are overwhelmed by metrics. By looking into the history we can see and will discuss how these move and change over time for ourselves.

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