

## **The mismeasure of participation: how choosing the ‘wrong’ statistic helped seal the fate of Aimhigher (0031)**

### Abstract

One of the early victims of funding cuts has been Aimhigher and its national mission to widen participation in higher education – although the writing had started appearing on the wall several years previously. Funding for Aimhigher ended in July 2011 after ten years in various incarnations and part of the rationale for its demise was an apparent lack of progress in increasing applications from young people from lower socio-economic groups. This paper will use seven years of individual and area-based data to re-examine progress on widening participation and ask whether the government’s preferred measure provides an accurate picture on which to base major policy decisions. In particular, it will investigate why very significant increases in applications from the most deprived neighbourhoods have not filtered through into the social class statistics and whether the idea of Aimhigher may have been written off too soon as a result.

### Outline

Since the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997), the spotlight has been on social class as the main focus for efforts to widen participation in higher education. The proportion of young people progressing to university from working class homes was (and remains) a fraction of those from middle class homes – a phenomenon that became known as the ‘social class gap’. Narrowing this gap was perhaps the primary policy objective throughout the 2000s (e.g. DFEE 2000; DfES 2003; HEFCE 2007), with the Aimhigher initiative created to achieve this aim by using targeted information and interventions to raise aspirations among under-represented groups.

The categorisation system placed at the heart of these efforts was the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC). This arranges occupations within seven main hierarchical categories, with an additional eighth category for the long-term unemployed and those who have never worked. NS-SEC groups 4 to 7, broadly analogous to the working classes, are those identified as historically under-represented by Dearing and others.

Data on the occupation of young students’ parents is collected from applicants, coded by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and then, having passed through universities’ student record systems, is passed onto the Higher Education Statistics Agency. From there, it has gone on to form the basis of the government’s official statistics for youth participation in higher education (Kelly & Cook 2007). Recent studies have questioned the process of NS-SEC data collection and coding (Harrison & Hatt 2010) and the legitimacy of parental categorisations as a fair representation of a young person’s social class as it relates to educational decision-making (Waller *et al* 2010).

The problem is simple: despite the investment of hundreds of millions of pounds through Aimhigher and other initiatives, the participation levels of NS-SEC groups 4 to 7 have barely moved since 2002 (DBIS 2009). Such narrowing of the social class gap as has occurred has come more from an apparent decline in demand from the middle classes. A report from the National Audit Office (2008) comes to much the same

conclusion using a slightly different method, as does Harrison (2011) using aggregated institutional data. This apparent policy failure was one of the rationales for ending the Aimhigher funding in 2011.

However, in stark contrast, recent data from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) shows that improvements in admissions from neighbourhoods that previously had low participation rates have been startling (HEFCE 2010). Their POLAR dataset shows that admissions from neighbourhoods with the lowest historic participation rates have grown by 32% between 2004 and 2009, compared to 12% overall.

Why, then, has there been a substantial increase in students drawn from low participation neighbourhoods without a corresponding increase in the proportion of working class students, as defined by their parents' occupations? Does NS-SEC accurately represent reality or is there something else happening within demand patterns?

This paper will report the findings of an ongoing study to resolve this paradox using a third data source: the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The IMD provides a finer-grained neighbourhood measure than POLAR data and one which is more closely aligned with factors related to social class. It formed a key plank of HEFCE's guidance on targeting widening participation initiatives (HEFCE 2007) as a means of identifying areas where young people from NS-SEC groups 4 to 7 might be concentrated. The study is based on seven years of cohort data (2004 to 2010) obtained from UCAS and comprising anonymised demographic data for all English applicants to higher education aged under 20. This has been linked neighbourhood data, providing a powerful dataset on both individuals and the communities from which they are drawn.

Initial findings strongly suggest that the growth in higher education applications and admissions has been greatest in the most deprived neighbourhoods, providing supporting evidence to the conclusions of HEFCE (2010). The conference paper will present the latest analysis with a view towards exploring why area-based POLAR and IMD statistics appear to show much stronger progress on widening participation than the individual NS-SEC data which helped spell the end for Aimhigher. It will question the traditional and prevailing conceptualisations of social class as meaningful for guiding contemporary policy in the light of data difficulties. This will lead into a wider discussion about the 'what' and 'how' of measuring higher education applications and what we mean when we talk about 'under-represented groups' – who do we want to attract into the sector in the future and how will we know if we've done it?

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