

# What works and who knows: problematising 'success' in widening participation

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## Abstract

This paper will report the first two strands of the SRHE-funded study: *'Assessing Impact and Measuring Success in widening participation initiatives'*. This study aims to develop a new theory of knowledge around the demand for higher education by drawing on the professional experience of a range of expert-practitioners within the field. The first two strands comprise interviews with the nine former Aimhigher regional directors and an online survey of current directors of widening participation. This data will be contextualised within a discussion around the limited progress to date in widening access to higher education, especially to elite universities, and some of the hypotheses presented for why the existing policy interventions may not be showing the expected levels of success.

## Paper

Inequalities in higher education admissions in the UK have remained stubbornly entrenched despite a sustained policy focus and the investment of significant resources by government, universities and others in the last few decades. Still the chances of going to university are strongly related to social class, with between three and four times the proportion of young people from the most advantaged families progressing compared to the least advantaged families (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2013). The last five years have seen some improvements, but these have been relatively modest and concentrated in lower-status universities and in London.

Universities in the UK have been offering a portfolio of outreach activities since at least the mid-1990s aimed at young people (and, less often, prospective mature students) from lower socio-economic groups. These activities have typically included taster days, summer schools, curriculum enhancement activities, work experience programmes and tutoring/mentoring schemes. Between 2004 and 2011, these efforts were supported by Aimhigher – a government-funded organisation with national, regional and sub-regional branches and a blended co-ordination, networking and delivery role. Aimhigher received a total of around £1 billion in its lifetime. Since its demise, universities have had a statutory obligation to provide outreach activities, monitored by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), with £112 million set to be spent in 2014/15 (OFFA 2014).

Despite these efforts, the proportion of young people from the poorest families in England (as measured through eligibility for free school meals) entering university has been quite slow to respond, rising from 13 percent in 2005/06 to 20 percent in 2010/11 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013). However, nearly all of this growth has been located in lower status universities, with the social mix of elite universities with respect to social class barely changing over the period in question (Harrison 2011; Raffe and Croxford in press).

This paper will be based around the SRHE-funded study: *'Assessing Impact and Measuring Success (AIMS) in widening participation initiatives'*. This ongoing project aims to explore the meaning of success means in the context of widening participation from the perspective of expert-practitioners in the field and to explore the underpinning theory of knowledge around how outreach interventions may prove successful or not. The paper will begin by examining four common hypotheses for the apparent slow progress on the widening participation agenda:

1. **Over-focus on aspirations over attainment.** Using large-scale quantitative studies, it is argued that the vast majority of the inequality seen in university admissions is actually formed in the earlier stages of the educational system (e.g. Chowdry et al 2008). As such, young people from lower socio-economic groups attend university in the 'correct' proportion relative to their GCSE pass rate; indeed, the late 2000s growth in participation has followed a period of improved GCSE results. However, outreach activities have tended to focus on raising aspirations for higher education rather than on improving school attainment. Arguably this has been a mis-focusing of resources into activities that have not directly engaged with educational decision-making and whose impact has not been rigorously evaluated (Gorard et al 2006).
2. **The 'barriers' of institutional habitus and rising costs.** Structuralist approaches have tended to focus on the existence of barriers which actively dissuade some prospective students from applying for a university place (Gorard et al 2007). The two most commonly cited relate to Bourdieu's concept of an institutional *habitus* and financial concerns relating to rising costs and an aversion to debt. The former is well-attested, especially in the context of elite universities and prospective students that do not conform to their traditional intake (e.g. Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009). However, the latter has not been well-investigated to date with assertions about falling demand (e.g. Callender and Jackson 2005) not generally being supported by admissions' data, which has shown young people from richer families to be more cost-sensitive (Harrison 2012; Independent Commission on Fees 2013).
3. **Poor targeting – deadweight and leakage.** The concept of 'deadweight' within social policy analysis relates to resources invested in changing the behaviour of individuals who would have made that choice without the additional resources. This has been something of a neglected concept within widening participation, with an unknown proportion of outreach activities actually engaging with young people already safely on the conveyor belt to higher education (although they may not know it at the time). Similarly, 'leakage' refers to resources inadvertently finding their way to relatively advantaged individuals, with the effect of reinforcing inequalities rather than disrupting them (Thomas 2001). This is a particular risk through the policy transmission from government to university to school and in the context of 'policy enactment' (e.g. Braun, Maguire and Ball 2010) within the school (or, indeed, university) itself.

4. **Direct or passive discrimination.** Jones (2012) argues that elite universities use the personal statements required on university application forms as a means of giving preference to relatively advantaged applicants who have access to scarce opportunities such as internships, work experience and volunteering (Ball 2010). Elite universities are also less likely to recognise the vocational qualifications that may be prioritised in schools and colleges serving disadvantaged communities, although this inbuilt social reproduction is being challenged to a degree by the 'contextualised admissions' agenda (Moore, Mountfield-Zimdars and Wiggans 2013).

The main part of the paper will report the first two strands of the AIMS project; at the time of writing, data collection is ongoing. The data will comprise interviews with the nine former Aimhigher regional directors and an online survey of current directors of widening participation (or equivalent) in English universities. Both strands will explore the expert-practitioners' conceptualisation of what constitutes 'success', how it is achieved and how it is evaluated. They will also respond to the hypotheses listed above as step towards providing a new insight into how knowledge around the demand for higher education is constructed.

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