DOI: https://doi.org/ 10.6017/ihe.2025.125.20993

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

# Widening Participation and Accountability in UK Higher Education

*Emma Smith and Georgiana Mihut*

Widening participation remains a key bipartisan aim for higher education policy and practice in the United Kingdom. Universities are held accountable for their widening participation outcomes. Despite these policies, higher education inequalities persist.

Whether or not you went to university used to depend on having the good fortune of being born to a certain favored social group. This started to change in the later half of the twentieth century when a combination of demographic, political, and ideological pressures shifted the discourse around access to university from one of privilege to one that embraced equal rights and expected higher education (HE) to be accessible to students regardless of social origin.

## A Tale of Bi-Partisan Political Support and Persisting Inequalities

Although the university sector expanded rapidly in the post-war period in order to accommodate the growing population, it wasn't until the 1990s that universities became incentivized to increase participation from the most "disadvantaged" sections of the community. This shift is largely attributable to a seminal report, authored by Lord Dearing, which recognized that opportunity was unevenly distributed among the population and placed an expectation on universities to widen their social nets. The Dearing Report kickstarted an era of "widening participation"—an equivalent umbrella term to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the United States and elsewhere. Groups who had routinely been excluded from HE—i.e., those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or from neighborhoods where few went to university, those with disabilities, those who were older, as well as those who came from certain ethnic minority groups—would be encouraged to participate. It reflected the political sentiment of the time with the then Prime Minister Tony Blair pledging to "care about educating the many" and setting a target for 50 percent of young adults to have a university education. The focus of the United Kingdom's widening participation policies is therefore broader than DEI policies in the United States, given the strong focus on addressing a range of socioeconomic and geographic disparities.

Almost three decades have passed since the publication of the Dearing Report, and twice as many students now enter university as they did at the end of the 1990s. Policies to widen access continue to receive widespread bipartisan political support. For example, an important policy paper on HE published by the then Conservative government in 2016 paid close attention to issues of widening access. Of particular focus were two targets for widening participation: a doubling of the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university by 2020, and an increase in the number of Black and minority ethnic students by 20 percent in the same period. These targets, along with a requirement for universities to publish data on the social backgrounds of students, were indicative of the political will to ensure that the university system should act as an "engine of social mobility." More recently, other higher education policies, such as the United Kingdom's Turing Scheme for student mobility, prioritize opportunities for students who meet the criteria of a widening participation group.

These initiatives—at institution and government levels—have sought to break cycles of inequality and ensure that access to higher education is attainable and equitable for all. All told, this emphasis on widening access to university for these underrepresented groups has been very successful—a "social mobility success story"—as students from underrepresented backgrounds are now more likely to go to university than ever before. However, inequalities in access persist and participation in HE continues to be differentiated by socioeconomic status, as well as by other "pre-adult" social, geographic, and historical factors. Students from underrepresented backgrounds also remain less likely to study high status subjects at the most academically selective institutions.

## From Free Higher Education to Substantial Student Debt

Along with the expansion in student numbers, and a proliferation of courses, degree providers, and opportunities for further study, has come the inevitable question of who will shoulder the cost of higher education. Indeed, to understand the politics of widening access and inclusion over the last three decades, particularly in England, it is important to talk about

fees. Until the early 1990s, university in the United Kingdom was largely free of charge, with means-tested grants to cover housing and living costs for those from lower income backgrounds, and no tuition fees for anyone. The gradual introduction of student loans to cover living costs coincided with the growth of the sector during the 1990s, and the decade ended with the Labour government following another of Dearing's recommendations and introducing tuition fees. Initially intended as a contribution toward the cost of tuition, fees were first set at £1,000 but rose rapidly as the burden of payment shifted from the taxpayer to the individual. By 2017, English undergraduate students were paying among the highest fees for public university education in the world, fees which in 2025 are set at £9,535 per year. Students are not required to pay tuition fees in advance but can apply for a loan that they are expected to start paying back once their income reaches a threshold of £25,000.

In less than one generation, therefore, university has gone from being largely free of charge to a situation in which the average English student graduates with £53,000 of debt that, according to government estimates, only just over 50 percent will ever pay back in full. As British universities—even the most elite—lack the philanthropic and institutional aid systems of their American counterparts, students without recourse to family funds can expect to incur considerable debt in pursuit of a higher education.

## Leveraging Fees and Accountability to Widen Participation

Understanding tuition fees is directly relevant to understanding the bipartisan push for inclusion and diversity in the United Kingdom, as, in order to charge such high fees, universities are required by law to diversify their student intake. Each year, universities are expected to report to the higher education regulator a series of plans that set out the steps they will take to "improve equality of opportunity to ensure that disadvantaged groups can access, succeed in, and progress from higher education." These Access and Participation Plans are completed annually and set out, in detail, the outreach programs, research, evidence, and intervention strategies that the university will put in place to demonstrate that they are meeting their obligations to widen access. Universities are held accountable to the regulator in such a way that, if they wish to charge elevated fees, they are obliged to diversify their intake.

## Marketization as the Grounds for HE Attacks

Over the last thirty years or so, the United Kingdom has gradually been moving toward a system of universal higher education. As university intakes have increased and diversified, the burden of payment has shifted from the taxpayer to the individual. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the UK university sector is now under a great deal of scrutiny from interested stakeholders: from politicians who want the sector to be more competitive, flexible, and accountable; from the students themselves who seek value for money and reassurance that their degree is "worth something"; and, more broadly, from those who see higher education as a conduit for social mobility. What is striking is that it is the marketization feature of higher education in the United Kingdom that has made it vulnerable to attacks, not its widening participation aims. Arguably the broad remit of the widening participation agenda has helped to protect it from the kind of backlash currently affecting DEI policies in the United States. and elsewhere.

---

Emma Smith is professor at the University of Warwick, United Kingdom. E-mail: e.smith.22@warwick.ac.uk. Georgiana Mihut is associate professor at the University of Warwick, United Kingdom. E-mail: Georgiana.Mihut@warwick.ac.uk.