

Opportunity to succeed?

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Introduction

The General Election of 2001 brought Higher Education to the forefront of the political debate. Although the 50 per cent participation target was not new, the manifesto reinforced its status and indicated the strength of New Labour's commitment. The recruitment of an additional 350,000 full-time equivalent students represented a significant challenge but, as far as the government was concerned, numbers alone were not sufficient. Entry to HE had to be widened as well as increased to extend participation to all sections of society. In addition, the high standards for which British HE was renowned must be maintained. This article reports on the performance of the first cohort of students to enter a new university with an Opportunity Bursary (OB). OBs offer financial support to students from 'disadvantaged backgrounds', the focus of the new generation of widening participation initiatives. Contrary to fears about widening participation reducing standards, this study suggests that high proportions of students from low-income backgrounds completed the first year successfully and that their progression rate exceeded that of other groups including the 'traditional' clients of the HE sector.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a young person born into a professional family was seven times more likely to go to university than one born to an unskilled manual worker (HEFCE 2001). By the late 1990s, HE had become the normal expectation for young people from professional backgrounds while it was still a high risk option for those from the working class (Archer and Hutchins 2000). To encourage HE participation from under-represented groups, New Labour had launched a raft of initiatives. These included the Special Initiatives Fund, the 'postcode' premium, the Summer Schools programme, the creation of Excellence in Cities (EiC)

areas and Education Action Zones (EAZ) and the introduction of Opportunity Bursaries. Each measure was to encourage different players to respond to the needs of under-represented groups. The Special Initiative Fund was for outreach work by HEIs to raise young people's awareness and aspirations. Some universities were also invited to offer Summer Schools for year 11 pupils from EiCs or EAZs to encourage them to apply to university or to consider a wider range of institutions. The 'postcode' premium - a 5 per cent core funding premium for enrolled students from undisclosed 'low participation postcodes' - was for institutions to cover the costs of reaching out to and adapting their practices to facilitate the learning of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, the young people themselves were targeted. Opportunity bursaries were offered to those from low-income families and EiC/EAZ schools to contribute towards the costs of their education. Cumulatively, these measures represented a package of initiatives strengthening the links in the educational supply chain and encouraging the recruitment, retention and success of HE students from under-represented groups. If these measures are successful, their impact on learners, institutions and communities will be far reaching.

The study

This paper will report on the early findings from an ongoing study of a group of widening participation students. It will examine the first year experience of a cohort of young entrants to a large new university that includes programmes with selective entry requirements as well as some that rely on clearing. The study includes the young entry cohort for 2001, a total of 3485 students, and focuses, in particular, upon the 362 students were awarded a bursary to provide financial support for their studies. One quarter of the bursary students received a government-sponsored OB while the remainder received a university-specific Start Up Bursary (SUB). The first year performance of the bursary students and the other young entrants will be analysed to consider whether there are differences between the completion rates of these sub-groups. At this early stage in the study, the data enables some tentative conclusions to be drawn about the first year

success rate of bursary students and the extent to which they might affect their institutions' retention indicators.

The refocusing of widening participation initiatives

Historically, the majority of university entrants have been young, white, middle class, A level qualified school leavers. There was some evidence that those with alternative entry qualifications were less likely to continue their studies beyond the first year (House of Commons 2001) and, although institutions recognised the moral imperative of widening participation, in practice, they were wary of admitting significant proportions of 'new' types of students.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, widening participation or access policies had targeted mature learners, those who had the ability but had not progressed to HE as school leavers. The 'old' widening participation students were a 'mixed bag'. They were variously identified as being mature, having qualifications other than A level or entering through an Access programme. By the late 1990s, the widening participation agenda had moved on beyond access. The new target groups were school leavers and the focus has also shifted into institutions to ensure that teaching and learning strategies enabled all groups within the student body to succeed in realising their potential.

Participation in HE is skewed and declines with social class. By the late 1990s, the under-represented groups were those from socio-economic groups IIIM, IV and V, Afro-Caribbean men, Muslim women and disabled people. To address these 'new' widening participation groups, initiatives had to be refocused and redirected to target young people. Able young people from working class backgrounds were less likely than similarly qualified, middle class pupils to stay in education after 16, to take A levels or to apply for higher education (HEFCE 2002) and, consequently, their chances of progressing to HE were limited. The widening participation initiatives aimed to address these barriers and change the profile of HE entrants and graduates.

Opportunity Bursaries and financial incentives to participation

OBs were part of a package of widening participation initiatives to reach out to disadvantaged young people. An OB consists of £2,000 in total, paid in three installments of £1,000 in the first year of study and £500 in each of the second and third years. Young people from low income families are more debt averse than those from middle class backgrounds (Callender 2003) and the abolition of the maintenance grant, the introduction of fees and the proposals for top-up fees have strengthened the perception that going to university is a luxury only the rich can afford. Against this background, OBs were introduced to reduce the amount of debt the recipients incur and they thus provide

'an additional financial incentive... for students from the lowest income backgrounds to encourage more of them to apply for HE' (DfES 2000: p23).

To qualify for an OB, students had to meet multiple selection criteria. They had to be under 20, come from a family in which neither parent had attended HE, have attended a school in an Excellence in Cities (EiC) or Educational Action Zone (EAZ) area and have an annual family income of £20,000 or less. The OB students are different from the 'old' widening participation students in that they are young, they have not been in employment and they are progressing to university as school leavers rather than as mature returners. In all these respects, the OB students are similar to the traditional entrants to university; the difference lies only in their family income, their parents' education and the school they attended.

In this study, OBs were only reaching a small proportion of students from low income families, as table 1 shows. Students whose annual family income fell below £20,000 were entitled to full support with their fees and 892 students, or 26 per cent of all young entrants, were in this category. Only 89 of these, however, were awarded an Opportunity Bursary. While some low income students did not apply for an OB, others did apply but failed to qualify. OB students are selected by multiple criteria and do not qualify if they fail to meet any one of them. Low income students who did not attend a school in an EiC/EAZ area or whose parents had attended HE or who entered HE after a period in employment would not qualify for an OB. The use multiple

criteria can thus lead to cumulative exclusion and, in this study, nine out of ten low-income students did not receive a bursary. The policy initiative designed to help those from poorer backgrounds in practice only directed financial assistance to a small proportion of students in that category.

TABLE 1: BURSARY STUDENTS AND ALL YOUNG ENTRANTS, 2001

	Number	Percentage of entrants
Full Fee Support (annual income of £20k or less)	892	26
Total Bursary	362	10.4
Start Up Bursary	273	7.8
Opportunity Bursary	89	2.5
All young entrants	3485	100

There are two reasons why restricting OBs to those from EiC or EAZ schools omits large numbers of students from low-income backgrounds than it includes. Firstly, there are many low income families 'hidden' in affluent areas, especially in rural locations. These areas do not qualify for EiC or EAZ status and their residents are thus excluded from financial assistance. Secondly, the designation of an area as an EiC or EAZ was the outcome of a political bidding process. They were not intended to allocate resources on the basis of any objective criteria of disadvantage and bids were judged against a wide range of criteria. In the first round of EAZ bids only 25 bids were accepted (Gewirtz 2000) and, as a result, limiting OBs to students from EiC/EAZ areas selects only those 'disadvantaged' students from areas which made acceptable bids.

To offer assistance to some groups excluded from OBs, the University in the study provides Start Up Bursaries (SUB) of £300 in the first year of study. The SUB extends financial support to 273 students who, despite low parental income and no family background in HE, fail to qualify for an OB because their school did not lie within an EiC or EAZ area. It fills a useful role in enabling more low-income students to receive financial support and brings the total number of bursary students to 362 or just over 10 per cent of the young entrants.

Retention and performance for mature students

The first year in HE has been described as 'the make or break year...a critical, if not the critical interface between the student and the institution' (Oldham 1988:6). During the first few weeks, new entrants undergo a series of educational and social transitions and withdrawal rates are higher at level 1 than at subsequent levels of study. Students who successfully complete level 1 have a good chance of completing their programme of study. A number of studies have investigated the reasons for student non-completion (Tinto 1982; Yorke et al 1997; Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998) and many of them have focused on the student's integration into the university, pointing in particular to the first term. This study will compare the first year performance of bursary students with that of other young entrants.

There is a considerable body of evidence about the 'old' widening participation students. In one study by Macdonald and Stratta (2001) non-standard mature students were perceived as being

'more articulate and more assertive. Within a group situation they are more likely to be prepared to say what they think and to argue and to counter' (2001: 251).

Despite the positive approach to study, some studies (Osborne, Leopold and Ferrie 1997; Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998; Hatt, Baxter and Kimberlee 2002) have found that mature students have lower completion rates and have pointed to the significance of non-academic factors, such as finance and family pressures. Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998), for example, concluded that mature students

'become non-completers despite being well prepared and exhibiting high levels of compatibility with the course.....Mature students were forced into non-completion because of external circumstances that required their presence at home or in paid employment' (1998: 327).

When mature students do complete they often perform at least as well as - if not better than - other students (Richardson 1994; Hoskins, Newstead and Dennis 1997). Some studies however, note that particular groups of mature students appear to perform rather better than others. For example, Osborne, Leopold and Ferrie (1997) investigated mature students at the University of Stirling and concluded that

‘within the Access group students from courses over which the University has some control over the content tend to do better than those from courses which the University has less control over' (1997: 166).

To summarise, although some groups of mature students complete their course and perform well, others are likely to withdraw, although usually for reasons not associated with academic failure. Mature students, the focus of previous widening participation initiatives, were therefore risky for institutions. They raised different issues from the 'traditional' young entrants; they might require special pre- and post-entry support and their attrition rates might jeopardise the institution's place in the league tables.

Retention and performance of students from low income backgrounds

By contrast, this study suggests that the 'new' widening participation students have a lower risk of withdrawal during their first year than any other group as table 2 shows. The bursary students were all school leavers and predominantly A level qualified. They had not had a substantial break from studying and they were free from the family commitments that caused mature students to withdraw. The difference between the bursary students and the 'traditional entrants' lies in their family background. The bursary students come from backgrounds where it is unusual to enter HE

and yet these students performed better than students from backgrounds with a tradition of HE entry.

TABLE 2: WITHDRAWAL RATES BY BURSARY

	Entrants	Number withdrawn	% withdrawn
Non-bursary	3123	220	7.0
Bursary	362	10	2.7
<i>Start Up</i>	273	8	2.9
<i>Opportunity</i>	88	2	2.3
All students	3485	230	6.6

It is tempting to attribute the low rate of withdrawal to the additional financial support offered by the bursary. The data, however, does not support this conclusion as table 3 shows. All those students whose family income fell below £20,000 per annum had a low withdrawal rate regardless of whether they received additional financial support through one of the bursary schemes. It appears to be a low income effect, not a bursary effect. Interestingly, only 2.5 per cent of students whose fees were paid in full withdrew during the first year of study compared with 9.1 per cent of those who were not entitled to support with fees. These preliminary findings appear to challenge the hypothesis that widening participation is risky for institutions and suggests that the new wave of widening participation students might actually perform better than their middle class peers. Had the students who paid full fees displayed similar rates of withdrawal to the bursary students, only 49 of them would have withdrawn as opposed to the actual figure of 167. In this study, the 'traditional' students were the risky option.

TABLE 3: WITHDRAWAL RATES BY FAMILY INCOME

	Total	Withdrawn	% withdrawn
Full fee support (annual income below £20k)	892	22	2.5
Partial fee support (annual income between £20k and £30k)	457	23	5.0
No fee support (annual income above £30k)	1831	167	9.1
All students	3485	230	6.6

Conclusion

Institutions have often seen widening participation as a moral imperative but an academic risk. The 'old' widening participation students were a gamble; mature students, those without A levels, those from Access routes might perform well, but only under certain circumstances or if they were offered additional support. During the last decade, however, the focus of widening participation initiatives has shifted from mature students towards school leavers from working class backgrounds. This study suggests that these students perform well and are more likely than other young entrants to complete their first year. The risks for institutions would appear to lie with the traditional middle class young entrants while the young widening participation entrants offer HEIs an opportunity to raise their retention rates and their place in the league tables.

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