

Measuring diversity: an analysis of the changing profiles of the higher education (HE) community across the UK

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Increasing diversity within the learner population can be measured by a number of demographic characteristics, such as an applicant's age, gender, ethnicity, school or socio-economic background. This analytical paper explores data collected on all UK applicants accepted to UK full-time higher education at the point of HE application to examine the extent to which the learner population really is increasingly diverse. As the presentation itself is largely graphical and interactive, this paper represents an extract of the data available, using examples of detailed findings to demonstrate the research.

Regional socio-demographics

Focusing on the full-time undergraduate higher education community, this analysis considers the regional profiles of HE access, concentrating on a number of applicant groups, extending on historic widening participation data published by UCAS which identifies the lower social classes, ethnic minorities and council residents as groups most affected by under-representation on entry to higher education (UCAS, 1999).

Mature access

Furthermore, UCAS figures show that, 'the fewest ever UK mature applicants were accepted to degree courses in 2000', suggesting that 'accessibility to higher education in general is becoming more difficult for this cohort' (UCAS, 2001). This analysis investigates the trends in mature access to all HE courses over the last three years (between 2000 and 2002 entry) to determine if this is occurring across the sector as a whole, considering the various age and socio-demographic segments within the wider mature cohort.

Distance travelled

The analyses also further explores UCAS findings that the HE population is collectively experiencing more localised access (UCAS, 2002). The extent to which this is exaggerated for non-traditional learners will also be examined, drawing on existing UCAS research which identifies that the distance travelled acts as a useful proxy for determining non-traditional groups entering HE:

'Accepted applicant profiles play a significant role in the average distance travelled. For example, 18-year-olds travel further, on average, than mature accepted applicants; Whites travel further than Blacks and Asians; men travel further than women; applicants accepted from Professional backgrounds travel further than those from Unskilled backgrounds; and applicants accepted from High Income Families travel further, on average, than those living in Council Flat areas.' (UCAS, 2001)

So, an 18-year-old, White, male, professional applicant from a High Income Family will travel further, on average, than an older Black or Asian women from an Unskilled background from a Council Flat area.

Clearly then, if accepted applicant profiles play a significant role in the reducing distance travelled to university and college, particularly for mature entrants, consideration of the interplay between these variables in a widening participation context contributes to a clearer understanding of diversity in higher education, and higher education's role in lifelong learning.

Subject of study

Furthermore, existing UCAS research shows that levels of representation among the mature cohort vary not only by the widening participation demographic characteristics identified above, often in combination, but by institution, faculty and even subject. The result is a gendering of subjects, which ‘announces pockets of discriminate participation’ (UCAS, 1999). As such, further analysis in this area would consider a sample of subject areas and the extent to which accepted applicant populations to these vary in the period 2000 to 2002. Such analysis is presented visually in the full presentation.

Summary data

UCAS processed nearly two million applications to UK universities and colleges in 2002 from almost 500,000 applicants, and the number of students who were accepted increased by over 10,000 on 2001 entry. This represents the fourth consecutive year-on-year increase in UK full-time HE accepts. Applicants to higher education increased in 2002 by 1.7% to 461,365. By the end of the applications cycle, 368,115 people had accepted places on full-time undergraduate courses, compared with 358,041 in 2001, an increase of 2.8%.

Over ninety percent of applicants accepted through UCAS in 2002 were home (UK) domiciled, the majority from England (a total of 74.9% of the whole accepted applicant cohort). The number of applicants accepted from the UK has increased overall since 2000 by 7.5%, from 308,718 to 331,725.

A total of 311 out of 335 UK universities and colleges in the UCAS scheme recruited students to full-time HE courses in autumn 2002. Please note that UCAS membership changes from year to year, and the number of institutions can contribute to fluctuations in the data.

Socio-demographics

The growth in the number of female accepted applicants continues to exceed that of males, and the gender gap shows signs of widening in 2002. Over half (53.3%) of the UK accepted HE applicant population in 2002 were female, an increase of 13,341 since 2000 entry. Despite a proportional decline since 2000, the number of males entering higher education in the UK has increased by 6.7% in this time.

Overall, the numbers of applicants represented by ethnic minorities have increased. The mixed ethnicity category, which was introduced in 2001, exhibited the largest rise in accepted applicants between 2001 and 2002 entry (+11.8%), whilst the Asian ethnic group saw the first fall in numbers since UCAS started reporting in 1994 (-2.9%). Please note that the mixed category was only introduced in 2001, so trend observations from 2000 entry should be treated with caution as the introduction of a new category may affect applicants who might previously have assigned themselves to another ethnic groupingⁱ. This change also accounts for a 63.2% fall in accepted applicants of Other ethnic backgrounds.

In terms of MOSAIC lifestyleⁱⁱ group, High Income Families represented almost one-fifth of accepted UK applicants in 2002, and calculations of indices of representation against the Great Britain household distributions illustrate that this group is significantly over-represented in terms of accepted applicants to HE. This over-representation has shown signs of levelling in recent years, with a fall in of almost ten index points 2001. Similarly, while ‘Low Rise Council’ and ‘Council Flats’ accepts remain under-represented in 2002, representation has improved over time.

The greatest proportion of accepted applicants for each of the three years were from Maintained schools (over one-third), with approximately one-third also applying to higher education from further and higher educational establishments. The number of applicants

accepted from the Independent sector has increased slightly in this period, while witnessing a small proportional decline (9.75% in 2000 9.13% in 2002).

Numbers of mature UK applicants (those aged 21 and over) taking up places in universities and colleges has increased by 5.2%, since 2001 to 67,011 for 2002 entry. This growth is largely within the 21 to 24-year-old cohort, which saw an increase of 7.6%, and an overall increase of 22.3% since 2000. A steady increase has been witnessed in the number of under 21-year-old accepted applicants, although this represents a proportional decline from 2000 to 2002 entry (81.2% to 79.8%, respectively).

These data suggest, then, that participation among non-traditional groups has increased slightly, particularly for the mature cohort (when looking at full-time higher education as a whole). However, engaging with the 'more access versus wider access' debate, it illustrates that participation has not really been widened in terms of the distribution of accepted applicants among these groups.

Of course, consideration of the interaction between these demographics is key to an understanding of the nuances within and between cohorts. For example, much of the mature accepted applicant increase is accounted for by those aged 21 to 24 years and those of White or Unknown ethnic origin, and this relationship is complicated further when looking at age bracket and ethnicity together. Many combinations can be effectively presented visually (and the conference presentation supported by this paper affords consideration of such relationships using interactive charts and tabulations). As such, the multiple-facets of the various groups within the mature accepted applicant cohort are exemplified in the next section.

Mature access

The mature accepted applicant distribution in 2002 is weighted significantly towards those aged 21 to 24 years, who represented just under half of the mature accepted applicant population in 2002 (49.1%). This compares with 46.2% in 2000, and represents an actual increase of 5,982 (22.3%). Notably, the 21 to 24 years age range is dominated by males in similar proportions to that witnessed by females for the UK accepted applicant population as a whole. Conversely, in the 30 to 39 years age group, females represented almost two-thirds of the accepted applicant population. And while Whites represented 67.7% of females in this age range (and falling in proportion but not in number) the male proportion was just 55.4% (declining both in actual and percentage terms). So it is only among the declining gender in this age cohort that ethnic participation is actually widening.

Regional trends

Over half of those UK applicants who were accepted in 2002, opted for a university or college within their own region of domicileⁱⁱⁱ (52.1%) and many more were accepted to institutions in neighbouring regions.

Profiles of applicants vary by UK country and region. For example, more than one-quarter of English accepted applicants assigned themselves to an ethnic minority category, or were of unknown ethnic origin in 2002. Furthermore, less than one half of applicants accepted from Greater London were White in 2002, and less than one third of mature accepted applicants (and this proportion has decreased year-on-year in the period 2000 to 2002 entry). However, the proportions of mature accepted applicants represented by Blacks, Asians and Other ethnic origins from London in this period has decreased; ethnic minorities collectively represented 40.7% of applicants accepted from London in 2002, compared with 45.0% in 2000.

Exploration of the South West on the other hand, shows that while only 4.75% of mature accepted applicants were of ethnic minority backgrounds, this had increased slightly from 2000.

Females dominated the accepted applicant populations from all UK regions, to the greatest extent in Wales (55.7%) and the South West (55.3%). A total of 49.5% of applicants accepted from Northern Ireland were male. The distribution is not significantly different when considering only mature accepted applicants.

Full information of regional nuances, including mature age breakdowns and socio-economics, is illustrated interactively in the full presentation.

Distance analysis

Distance travelled^{iv} by accepted applicants similarly varies by region, as well as by age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economics. Applicants accepted from Greater London travelled the shortest distance on average (with 84.1% of this cohort travelling less than 24 miles). Whites from Greater London travelled the furthest overall, while those from mixed ethnicity in Greater London travelled further, on average, than their ethnic minority counterparts. Applicants accepted from Northern Ireland travelled the furthest, followed by applicants from the South West and Eastern regions. It should be noted that institutional provision is likely to affect the distance travelled by applicants in a regional analysis.

In general terms, as age increase, distance travelled decreases. Males, and those from Independent schools travelled furthest. Overall, those accepted from Low Rise Council and Council Flat areas travel the least distance, and this trend is exacerbated among the mature population.

Summary

While this paper is only able to touch upon the full range of quantitative analysis that feeds this research and presentation, and undoubtedly raises many questions about profiling of the UK higher education accepted applicant cohort, it identifies that there are many nuances both between and within applicant groups. For example, trends in the mature population as a whole are conversed, and reflected to different degrees, by the various mature groupings. Further analysis will also reveal variations within individual ages over 21 years.

Finally, the analysis highlights a cautionary observation that areas of increased participation do not necessarily represent areas of widened participation.

UCAS data on a wide range of demographics is available from the Department of Data and Analytical Services.^v

References

- UCAS (1999) *Statistical Bulletin on Widening Participation, 2000 Edition*, pp. 3, 11.
UCAS (2001) *Statistical Bulletin on Widening Participation, 2001 Edition*, pp. 6, 7.
UCAS (2002) *Annual Report 2001-2002*, pp 23-44.

ⁱ Ethnic origin classifications changed for 2001 entry onwards, resulting in the division of White into British/Irish/Other and the introduction of mixed groupings. In terms of data comparison, this latter addition is likely to affect applicants who might have previously declared themselves White, Black, Asian or Other.

ⁱⁱ From 2002 entry, socio-economic status replaced social class in UCAS data, rendering the data for 2002 entry not directly comparable with data for previous years. As such, this paper

reports MOSAIC lifestyle data, an alternative socio-economic indicator, to afford time-series analysis. MOSAIC is a lifestyle classification of clusters of people living within specified geographical areas. Using a combination of census, electoral role, housing and financial data, it classifies households into groups and residential postcode areas into distinct neighbourhood types based on statistical information on the people who live in them. Note that MOSAIC is only given for UK domiciled applicants. Northern Ireland households have an unknown MOSAIC lifestyle because their postcode information is classified differently. Unknown MOSAIC values are excluded from the indices calculations.

ⁱⁱⁱ UCAS employs the UK Government Office Regions when assigning applicants to a region of domicile. Applicant region is based on the home postcode (UK) or the area of permanent residence.

^{iv} Distance travelled is calculated as the distance (in miles) from the applicant's home postcode to the postcode of the accepting university or college.

^v Statistical and data enquiries should be addressed to stats@ucas.ac.uk (telephone: 01242 544896) in the first instance.