



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Regulating fair access to higher education in England, 2006-21

Chris Millward, Centre for Global Higher Education seminar, 11.1.2022

Introduction

- DFAP from 2018-21, previously HEFCE 2006-18 & AHRB/C 2002-06
- Purpose of the seminar: 'learn lessons'
- Access regulation in the context of reforms aiming to increase and widen participation, whilst sharing the cost with graduates:
 - White papers in 2003, 2011 and 2016;
 - Legislation in 2004 and 2017;
 - Implementation of reforms from 2006, 2012 and 2018.
- Problems and benefits of subjectivity and immediacy
- Reflections on the relationship between policy and academia



Questions for the seminar

- what issues have access regulation in England sought to address?;
- how have the access regulators pursued this and what have we learned?;
- how might this change and what might be the effects?

Four phases of access regulation

Directors for Fair Access (OFFA)

- 2006-12: annual agreement of bursaries and outreach
- 2012-18: annual agreement of bursaries, outreach, student support plus sector-level good practice

Directors for Fair Access and Participation (OfS)

- 2018-21: 5-year whole lifecycle / institution plans to reduce equality gaps / improving outcomes plus sector-level infrastructure and good practice
- 2021 onwards: pivot from university access and success to school grades?

Establishing the access regulator from 2006

- Labour 50% young participation target – ‘a society genuinely open and based on merit’
- Re-payable fees of up to £3k, subject to an access agreement, providing more money for students and universities
- Promotion of equality of opportunity for under-represented groups defined by university itself, with more spending by least accessible / most selective
- Spending increases from £99m to £387m from 2006 to 2011, with most universities charging the higher fee
- Bursaries do not change behaviour / concern about outcomes

A step change in scale and scope from 2012

- Coalition wants to continue increasing and widening participation, whilst maintaining quality and reducing cost
- 'Higher education benefits everyone. It helps individuals to unlock their potential...it is one of the best pathways to achieving a rewarding career...it also benefits the wider economy'
- Re-payable fees of up to £9k, with one third of the level above £6k to be devoted to outreach as well as bursaries
- Greater challenge to the most selective universities and sharing of good practice as spending increases from £564m to £785m, with most universities charging the highest fee

A review of progress

- 50% young participation target achieved in 2019
- Expansion of opportunity, not equality of opportunity
- Stratified entry based on school grades
- Differential outcomes at system and institutional level
- Decline of part-time, shorter-cycle, mature entry whilst in work
- Concerns about outcomes and return on spending
- Greater focus on the 'other 50%' and scrutiny of HE expansion
- Also its underpinning assumptions: merit and mobility; human capital and skills utilisation

A new regulator from 2018

- HERA 2017 and OfS Regulatory Framework – regulation to assure the benefits of increasing HE participation
- Strengthening access regulation: powers and levers; whole lifecycle and institution; focus on outcomes and progress – meaningful equality of opportunity.
- 5-year plans, based on self-assessment, theory of change, targets and evaluation.
- National infrastructure: data; collaborative outreach; ‘what works’
- Championing issues, e.g. contextual admissions and ethnicity attainment gap, deploying insights and evidence
- Behavioural change and commitments to reduce equality gaps

A new environment from 2020

- Coronavirus disruption to learning and assessment, reflected in school grades and university admissions
- Shift in government policy: focus on people and places not benefiting from HE; concern about cost and returns
- Promotion of entry to FE and work / push back on access and success measures in HE
- School grades to determine academic / mobile or technical / local pathways

Conclusion

- Will the rhetoric on HE participation be put into practice through the Augar response in 2022?
- Problem of student / family ambitions and expectations
- Also, 'higher' does not mean academic / mobile: 21st century HE is academic, technical, professional and creative / local, national and international.
- But the student-led system has exacerbated the effect of school attainment gaps and minimised calibration with work: access regulation has reflected this.
- A new settlement is needed for tertiary education in England, with access regulation positioned in support of it.

Thank you for listening

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Response to *Regulating fair access to higher education in England 2006-2021*

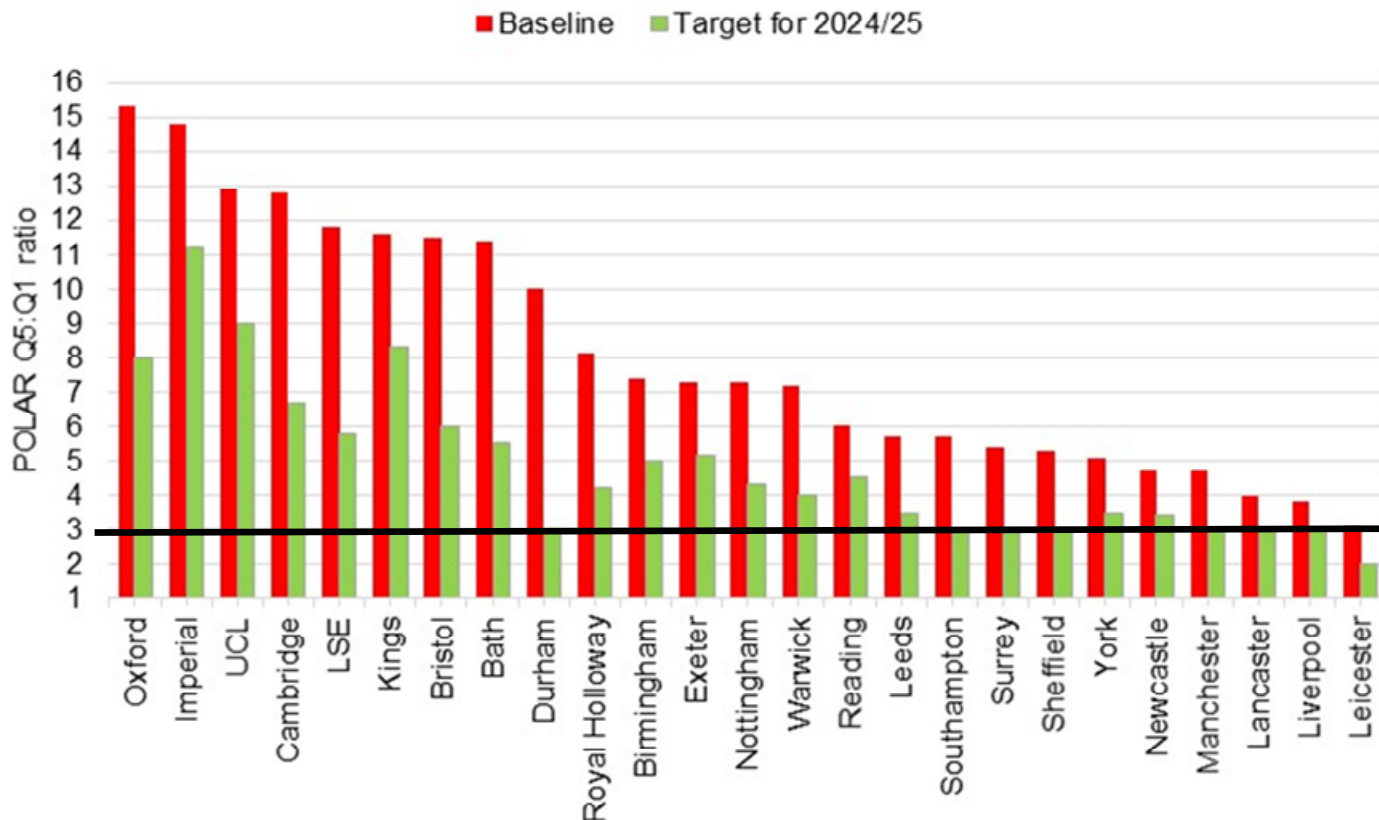
Prof. Vikki Boliver
Department of Sociology
Durham University

CGHE webinar
11th January 2022



Higher-tariff HEIs have set more ambitious widening access targets than ever before

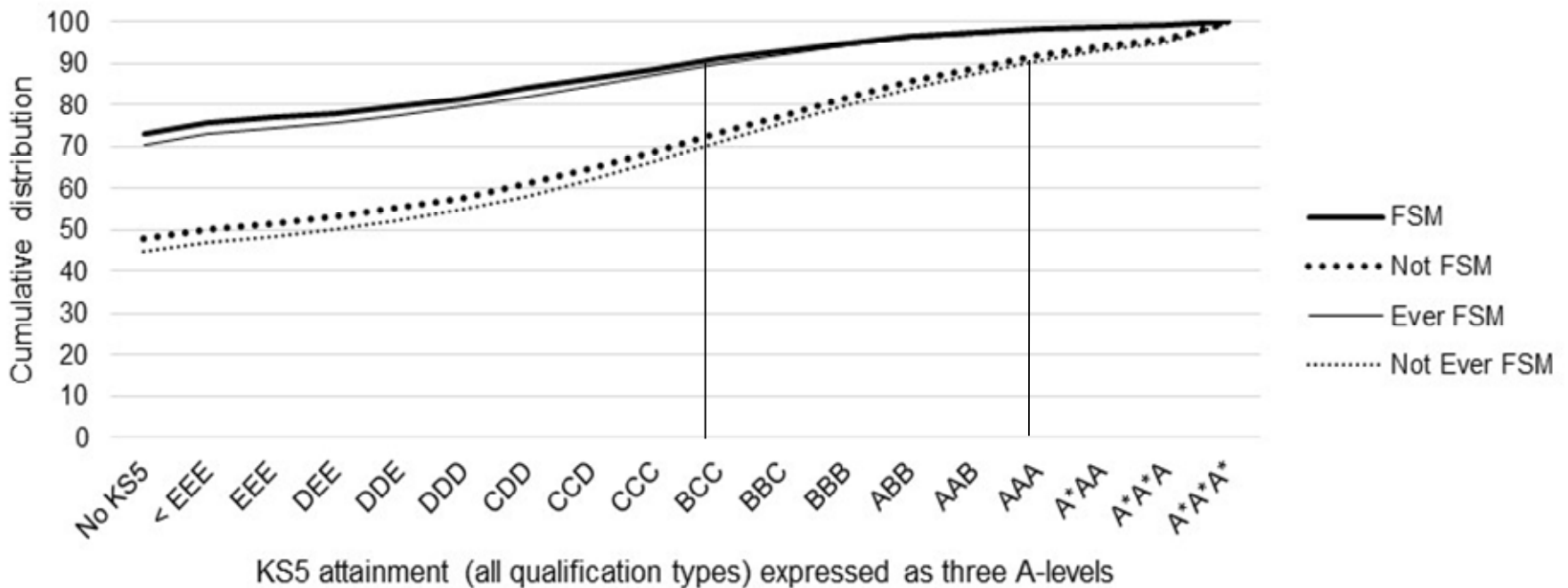
Figure 1. Baseline and target ratios of entrants from POLAR Q5:Q1





Mainstreaming of contextualised admissions across (almost) all higher-tariff HEIs

Figure 3. Bivariate associations between measures of disadvantage and KS5 attainment (including non-progression to KS5)



Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui (forthcoming) Who counts as socioeconomically disadvantaged for the purposes of widening access to higher education? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. NPD data for those aged 17/18 in 2018/19 or 2019/20.



Higher-tariff universities have accepted more responsibility for degree completion and awarding gaps

Commitment to improving academic support

[Our new] inclusive teaching and learning approach aims to improve the student experience for all students [... and] purposefully moves away from the deficit model, which attempts to 'fix' students to match the existing university culture. (LSE pp18-19)

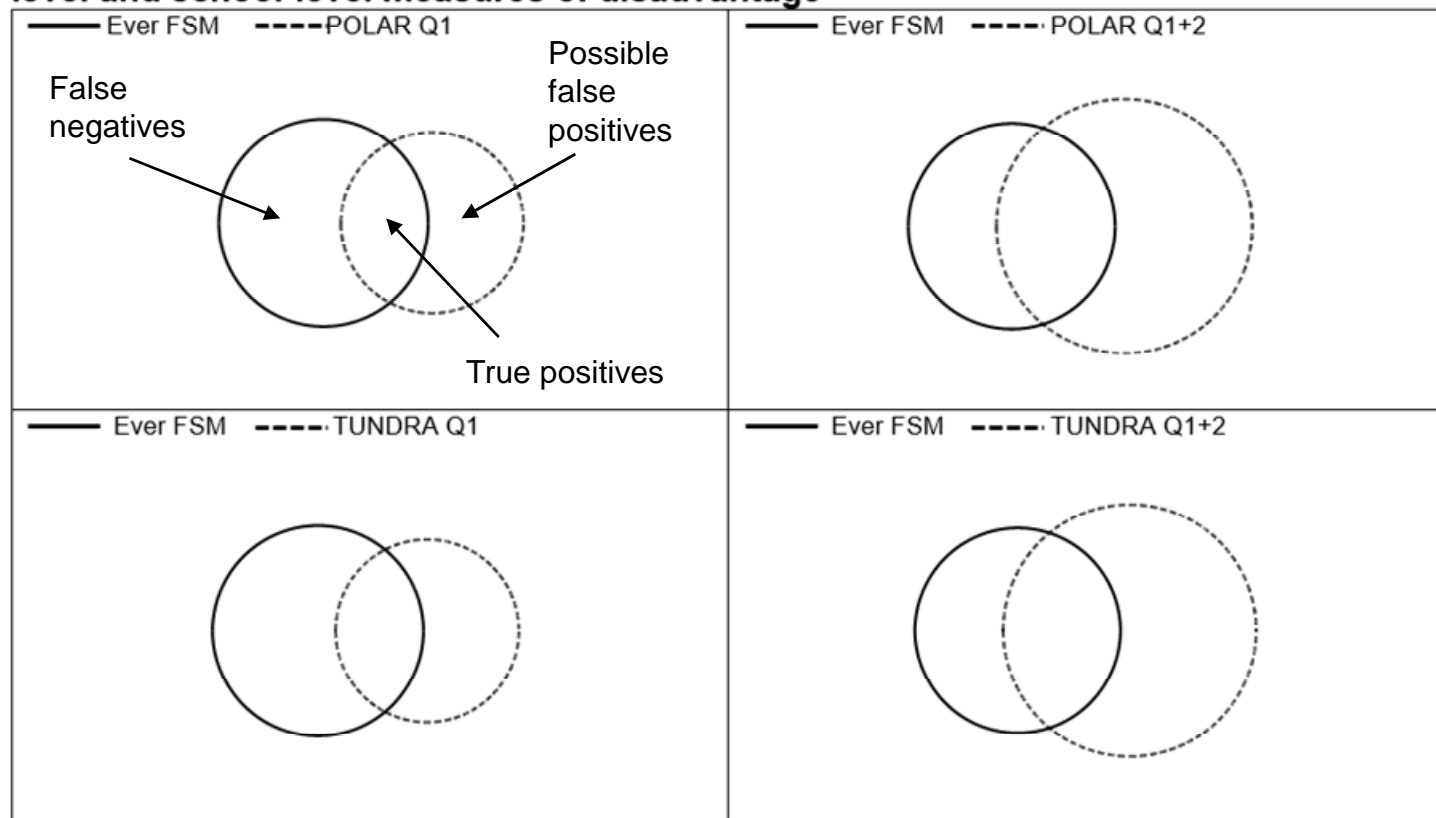
We will review and refine our approach to the delivery of academic skills, by focusing our approach on providing more support to those students where there are gaps in their attainment and continuation. (Southampton p16)

Commitment to developing a more inclusive teaching and learning culture



Continued use of flawed area-level measures of disadvantage

Figure 4. Venn diagrams showing bivariate relationships between Ever FSM and area-level and school-level measures of disadvantage



Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui (forthcoming) Who counts as socioeconomically disadvantaged for the purposes of widening access to higher education? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. NPD data for those aged 17/18 in 2018/19 or 2019/20.



Risks to the 2018-2021 OfS legacy

OfS consultation on strategy for 2022-2025 focuses on:

1. Quality and standards

We will ensure that all providers satisfy our **minimum requirements for student outcomes**. [...] Our initial focus will be on implementing a revised condition of registration following consultation; following implementation we will identify priorities for our enforcement activity. Where appropriate, we will investigate compliance concerns and use the full range of our powers to take action (p.15)

2. Equality of opportunity

“We will keep our approach to access and participation plans under review, **including our national targets**.” (p17)