

The Business of Widening Participation: the political economy of access in a neoliberal HE system

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THE BUSINESS OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION

Policy, Practice and Culture

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THE MARKETISATION OF ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION

A Policy Analysis of a Risk-Based System

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GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Drivers of WP policy

- Expansion and marketisation – the dual imperative
- Market-driven expansion of HE in name of Human Capital and international competitiveness
- Widening Participation policy subordinate to and reactive to these imperatives
- *WP practice* varies by institution type

- where is policy made?
- who has agency?

The expansionary imperative

1960s Executive/Ideological level:

Human capital theory – never seriously questioned by governments who only have an eye to international competition – ‘everyone else is doing it so we have to’

Wasted talent and the changing basis of demand for highly skilled labour

How to get the autonomous university sector to expand?

Binary fudge – the state had to pick up where universities wouldn't

The market imperative

Executive/Ideological level:

1986 Conservative government introduce competitive mechanisms (NPM)

1988-1992 abolished the binary divide (F&HE Act), reduced the unit of resource to fuel expansion and began to celebrate diversity

Diversity to competitive differentiation

Autonomous reaction – mission groups (RG and 1994) as existing pre-92 universities sought to differentiate and lobby for ‘top up’ fees as the prospect of fees came closer (Dearing)

2004 variable fees as the price of getting selectives onside for WP

Evolution of the market in WP/access



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 **GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Five stages of marketisation discourse

STAGES	POLICY STATEMENTS	ARGUMENTS
stage 1 efficiency and accountability; human capital (1986-1992)	Croham 1986; Jarratt, 1987 WP; 1988 ERA; 1992 F&HE Act	New Public Management; entrepreneurial thinking; academic capitalism; expansion of the system
stage 2 diversity as a good (1992-2000)	HEFCE 1994; Dearing Review; HEFCE 2000	Celebratory about the different types and modes of HE; essential for expansion and lifelong learning needs
stage 3 diversity becomes differentiation (2003-2010)	2003 WP; 2004 HE Act; 2009 WP	Need to differentiate by mission and price to protect established institutions; need to protect access; regulatory state
stage 4 competitive differentiation (2010-15)	Browne Review 2010; 2011 WP; OFFA 2012	Affordability post-crash; need to shift applicant choice behaviours; need to reduce average costs
stage 5 risk and exit	2015 GP; 2016 WP; HERA 2017	Opening a trap-door under the system to shake-up the market; quality and price linked

THEMES	STAGE	DISCOURSE SHIFTS
Opening up the market / choice for applicants	3	2003 White Paper & 2004 Act - £3k fees to stimulate market differentiation ; HEIs to 'play to strengths'; applicant choice drives market; consumer rights to information. Reforms to make it easier to attain DAP and University Title (UT). 2009 White Paper - number controls introduced; growth for HEIs now dependent on choice information for applicants.
Measurable outcomes and choice signals	4	2010 Browne Review - remove the fee cap to stimulate real market effect (not adopted). 2011 White Paper - Student Number Controls to stimulate differentiation and new providers encouraged to market ; more choice - Key Information Sets, better UCAS course information. 2013 Treasury - abolition of the number controls; 60,000 new places; open market from 2015-16.
Risk and Exit	5	2016 White Paper / 2017 HERA - new challenger HEPs encouraged - DUP and UT easier to achieve; new challenger HEPs offer more choice at different price points ; poorest performers allowed to fail and exit ; could lose DAP and UT; TEF ratings to enable applicant choice.

Opening up the market to competition

STAGE

DISCOURSE SHIFTS

- 1 1992 F&HE Act - diversity of student body encouraged.
- 2 1994 HEFCE statement encouraging diversity.
1997 Dearing and Labour government - WP actively encouraged.
1999 - Government introduce requirements from HEIs to say what they are doing to widen participation and state-funded WP programmes.
2000 - HEFCE statement that diversity must be justified by demand and efficiency 'not just more of the same'.
- 3 2003 White Paper - HEIs encouraged to have diverse missions, teaching or research focus; **celebrates the shift from elite to mass participation.**
2004 Act established **OFFA to regulate access**; proportion of fee income to be spent on access; Institutions to set own bursary levels (above min. £300).
2009 White Paper - HEIs should remove inefficient low-numbers programmes; STEM courses encouraged.
- 4 2010 Browne Review - **HEIs need to differentiate provision and access work**; let HEIs decide WP priorities and spending levels.
2011 White Paper - mandatory bursaries abolished; National Scholarship Programme (fee waivers rather than bursaries).
2011 White Paper - **new 'alternative providers' encouraged to market.**
- 5 2016 White Paper / 2017 HERA - opening-up of the market expands the numbers; new challenger HEPs encouraged - DAP and UT easier to achieve; increased range of providers adds to diversity of system.
2016 White Paper / 2017 HERA - **WP students best served by low cost providers; HE not for everyone** - some courses offer low ROI so should consider if low-rated HE is worth it.

Widening participation

Beyond the 5th stage?

Driving differentiation

Teaching quality

Expanding supply to (finally) meet demand

The growth of monitoring and regulation

Longitudinal Education Outcomes

Stage 5: TEF as a quality driver?

The TEF should change providers' behaviour. Those providers that do well within the TEF will attract more student applications..... We **hope providers receiving a lower TEF assessment will choose to raise their teaching standards in order to maintain student numbers. Eventually, we anticipate some lower quality providers withdrawing from the sector, leaving space for new entrants, and raising quality overall**

(Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice, DBIS 2015, Chapter 1, para 1.4).

Risk and Exit as a driver...

In a changing and more competitive sector, providers that innovate and present **a more compelling value proposition to students** will be able to increase their share of total students – in some cases this may be at the expense of other institutions. (ibid, para 2.3)

removing provision may indeed lead to it being replaced by higher quality provision" (DBIS 2015, para 2.4).

..... *but what about those HEPs that recruit?:*

"students from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds...[and] support them to remain on their courses (such students are **often at a higher risk of dropping out**) and help them to progress to further study or a high skilled job" (ibid, Chapter 1, para 1.3)

Risk Signal: to HEPs – ‘don’t recruit low tariff students’

Caveat Emptor: ‘if you have low tariff, **be careful of where you choose to study** because it may fail’.

Competition begets diversity

Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception. There is **no compelling reason for incumbents to be protected from high quality competition. We want a globally competitive market that supports diversity**, where anyone who demonstrates they have the potential to offer excellent teaching and clears our high quality bar can compete on a level playing field..... (*Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, DBIS, 2016, Executive Summary, paras 7- 8)

For competition in the HE sector to deliver the best possible outcomes, students must be able to make informed choices. Universities provide an environment for deeper and wider learning, allowing for the development of analytical and creative thinking, objective inquiry and primary research. But **evidence suggests that for most students, the most important outcome of higher education is finding employment. The teaching students receive can transform their life chances, as demonstrated by the strong graduate premium, and low graduate unemployment rates.** (*ibid*, para 18)

The limits of diversity ... the wrong students?

Information, particularly on price and quality, is critical if the higher education market is to perform properly. Without it, providers cannot fully and accurately advertise their offerings, and students cannot **make informed decisions**. But there is currently little pressure on providers to differentiate themselves in this way. This is a cause for concern as **poor decisions by the student as to which course and institution to attend can prove costly not just for them but for the broader economy and the taxpayer.** (ibid para 19)

(Enter LEO, stage Right)

"while the graduate premium is still significant and was sustained over the recession" [there was evidence of] "huge variance in graduate earnings depending on **choice of subject and institution, as well as background**". "some graduates are **not in jobs most suitable to their skills**" (ibid, para 19).

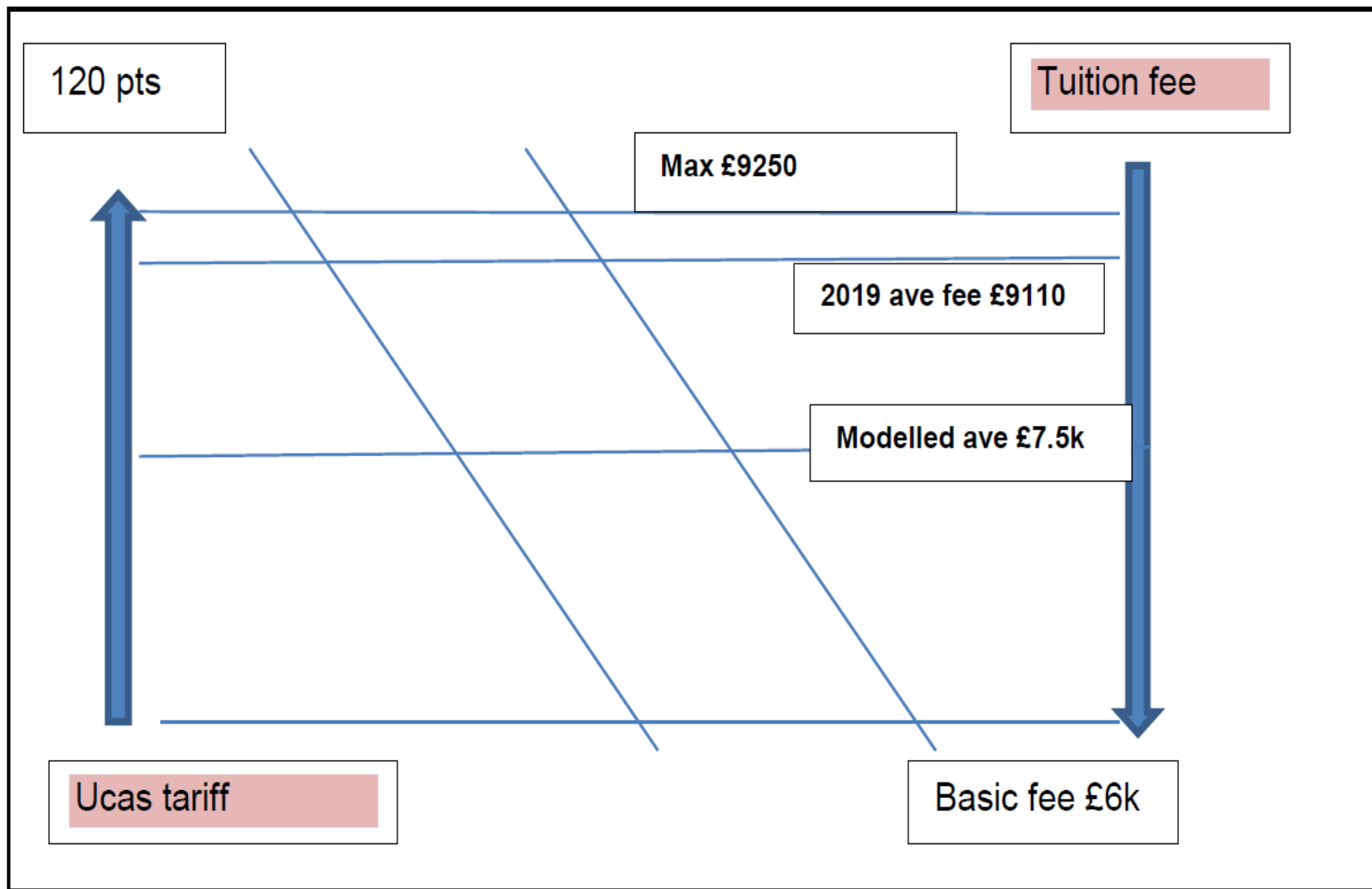
Market effect in policy

Variable fees regime, ramp up the competitive market effect (DfE 2003, HE Act 2004) and OFFA access agreements – to regulate WP spend from Additional Fee Income

Students at the Heart of the System (DBIS 2011) – incentivising higher tariff recruitment

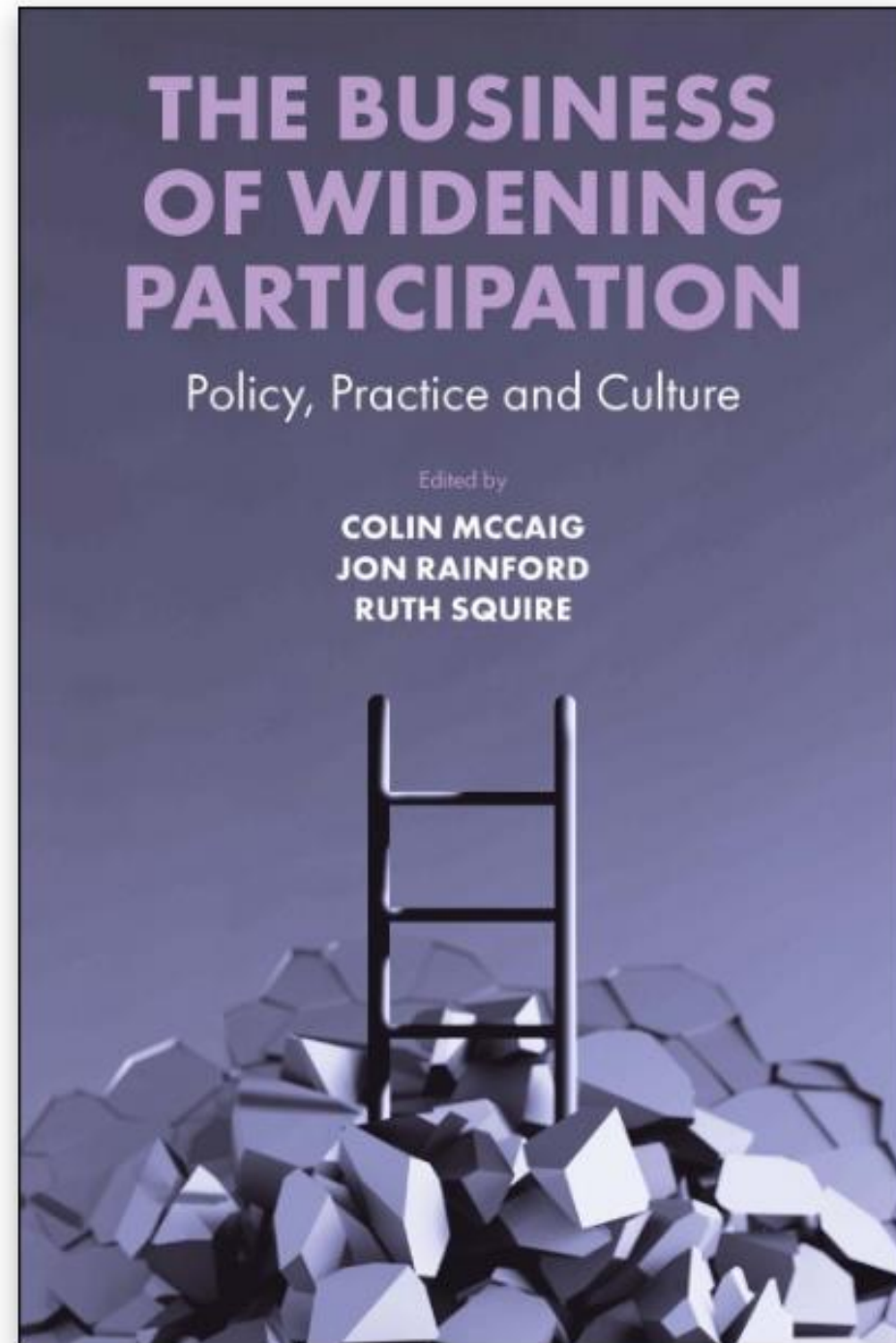
Designed to show applicant consumers where the 'good stuff' is

Dual price mechanism:
how the market is
supposed to work.....



adapted from McCaig, C and Lightfoot, N (2019) Higher Education, Widening Access and Market Failure: Towards a Dual Pricing Mechanism in England, Soc. Sci. 2019, 8, 268; published online September 23rd 2019
<https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/8/10/268/htm>

The Business of WP in a differentiated sector

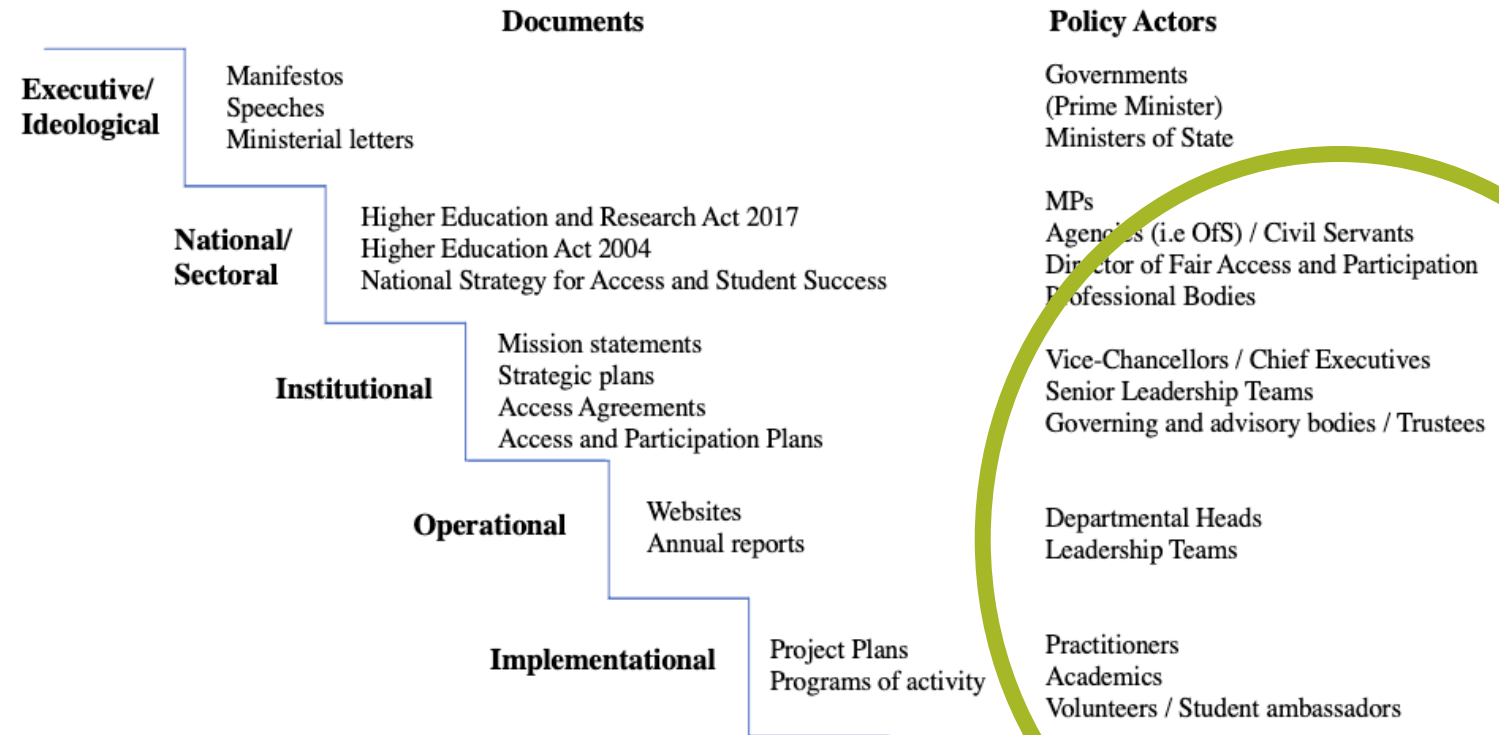


Policy enactment

- Multilevel approach to understanding policymaking
- Many steps between Legislation, Policy and practice
- Made, enacted and implemented at different levels
- ‘policy is struggled over, not delivered in tablets of stone’ (Ozga 2000, 1)
- Shaped by institutional values, and **individual's values and experiences** (Thompson 2017)

Enactment staircase

adapted from Reynolds and Saunders (1987 cf. Trowler 2014, 15) implementation staircase (Fig.1) and builds upon a previous iteration (Rainford, 2019; 2021).



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WP in policy since Dearing

Getting selectives onside? – variable fees regime, ramp up the competitive market effect (DfE 2003, HE Act 2004) and OFFA access agreements – to regulate WP spend from Additional Fee Income

Henceforth we see **differentiation** in access statements, financial support and outreach priorities – Foucauldian projection - positionality in the market

Ramping – from international to global excellence; from ‘we can make you employable’ to ‘we can be the gateway to professions’

2010 and new 9k fee regime, 2011 White Paper signals the shift to **‘participation-in’** rather than **‘access to’** as WP priority for post92s

Increases the fixed **stratification between pre and post92** (Boliver 2011; 2013) as does the more recent OfS regulations based on **‘risk’**

Now and the future: the end of widening participation?

[T]oday I want to send a strong message – *that social mobility isn't about getting more people into university.* For decades we have been recruiting too many young people on to courses that do nothing to improve their life chances or help with their career goals. **True social mobility is about getting people to choose the path that will lead to their desired destination and enabling them to complete that path.** (emphasis added by authors)

.... there has been too much focus on **getting students through the door, and not enough focus on how many drop out**, or how many go on to graduate jobs. Too many have been **misled by the expansion** of popular sounding courses with no real demand from the labour market.

And too many universities have felt pressured to **dumb down** – either when admitting students, or in the standards of their courses. We have seen this with grade inflation and it has to stop. We need to end the system of arbitrary targets that are not focused on the individual student's needs and goals. And let's be clear – **we help disadvantaged students by driving up standards, not by levelling down.** (Donelan 2020)

Subverting the market.... 2022 reforms

Minimum Eligibility Requirements

Changes to repayment regime

lengthened debt repayments starting at a lower salary threshold - negative impact on female and low-income graduates (of any gender) would repay more than under the previous conditions

the highest earning graduates (coming, of course, from on average more advantaged backgrounds) would repay less than before (DfE 2022b).

SO... **do we still need variable fees** (to differentiate providers) and all the new challenger providers (419 on OfS register) if we **remove the applicant-consumer choice driver**?

Binary redux?

"**Talented students** from disadvantaged backgrounds will be given the extra help that they need to achieve their dreams through education."

"We also know that there are **some people** who need a second chance, an opportunity to get into higher education through a less conventional route."

(DfE 2022)

MER and LEO as the new class divide in HE access

what of the challengers in this 'level playing field'?

'institutions that **do the most to welcome students from a range of disadvantaged background**' (DBIS 2015, Chapter 1, para 1.3).

Last word

A level playing field in English HE is akin to laying a table cloth over the Himalayas and not expecting the tea-cups to slide off down the mountain

(McCaig, Rainford and Squire, 2022)

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