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Mentoring and finance for widening access offer some hope of success

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The most recent data from HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) on widening participation at our universities shows that little has changed over recent years. The proportion of young students entering from lower participation areas

has remained virtually static at around 11% in recent years. It appears that efforts by many institutions to improve the situation are not working well. Yet there are numerous voluntary organisations offering advice and mentoring that are independent of the universities. These are making headway and may indeed be preventing the numbers from backtracking. However, without financial and other incentives, the situation is unlikely to improve. Some more radical suggestions have emerged this week and they merit serious consideration.

Earlier this month HESA released their latest statistics on widening participation at UK Higher Education Institutions ([HESA Widening participation summary: UK Performance Indicators 2018/19: 13th February 2020](#)). The data shows the percentage of young (<21 years old) first-year students entering in 2018/19 from POLAR 4 Quintile 1 low participation areas (see *NOTE below). However, although 'UK' is in the

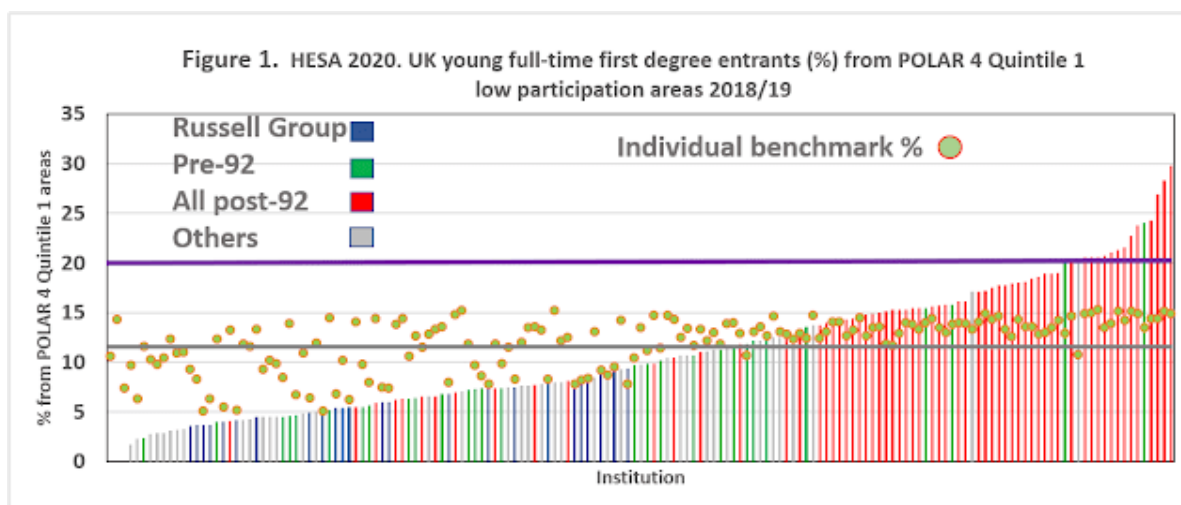
HESA title, the data does not include Scotland’s Universities as the Scottish Government does not use POLAR methodology in measuring access. Note that the situation in Scotland is very similar, as reported by TEFS 30th August 2019 in [‘Widening access in Scotland at WARF factor three’](#). Despite this omission, the picture looks bleak across the UK. The overall percentages have not improved from the previous year and by very little since 2015/16 (Table 1).

Year	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK
2018/19	11.4	13.1	N/A	9.8	11.4
2017/18	11.3	13.1	N/A	9.9	11.4
2016/17	11.1	12.9	N/A	9.3	11.2
2015/16	11.1	13.7	N/A	8.5	11.1

Source HESA Widening participation summary: UK Performance Indicators 2018/19. This excludes Scotland that does not use the POLAR methodology
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Spreading the load and the benchmark trap.

The widening participation profiles across our institutions are not evenly spread. Just as dropping out after a year is more likely in post-92 universities (see TEFS 21st February 2020 ["Turn on, Tune in, Drop out": Why are more UK students dropping out?](#)), these universities also take more students from low- participation areas.



Source HESA Widening participation summary: UK Performance Indicators 2018/19. This excludes Scotland that does not use the POLAR methodology
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Figure 1 shows how this is spread across institutions. The first thing obvious is that there is a lot of red for post-92 institutions (included here are all the former Polytechnics and Colleges that became universities after 1992) on the right-hand side. Many of these have been set high benchmarks to aim for and some even exceed the level set. At the other end of the spectrum are the Russell Group Universities in blue that inhabit the left-hand side. Despite being set lower benchmark levels, they mostly fail to meet the targets. They are accompanied by the green older pre-92 universities in many cases. The grey bars represent a range of smaller institutions, such as music and art colleges and private universities. The problem is that benchmarks are set very low for many of the elite universities and they, therefore, only aim to get close to what is set. But the overall benchmark for parity of access is logically at 20%, as shown in the purple line. Very few exceed this target and the grey line shows the current mean of 11.4% that illustrates the extent of the task ahead. There seem to be two areas where a shortfall is apparent. Firstly, in advice and mentoring and secondly, financial assistance. Both should be in place if they are to complement each other and offer a way forward.

Outreach and mentoring our way out of a corner.

All universities have an outreach programme that seeks to improve the numbers of students from low participation areas. On the face of it, this seems a noble effort. However, we should not forget that their aim is to improve their own institution's profile. There is thus a fine line between encouraging students to think about 'university' in general as an option and raw 'marketing'. There is a vast amount of information available for would-be students, but it can be confusing to navigate. Those with families experienced in universities get ready advice at home, whereas others seek advice elsewhere. The counterbalance to such a marketing strategy is provided by numerous organisations that offer independent advice. These seem to be gaining some traction over time. Organisations such as [the Education Endowment Foundation](#), [The Access Project](#), [NEON](#), [Impetus](#), [Career Ready STEM](#) and [Dell Stem Aspire](#) offer a wide range of advice and help. With such a range of information available, then mentoring must be added to help in decisions as well as offering more encouragement. Schools clearly encourage and offer mentoring for their students, but it seems more is needed to bear the load of work needed. One to one mentoring is part of many schemes and this seems to be effective in improving confidence and aspiration. The question raised concerns the likelihood of a deficit in advice and help that needs to be filled.

This week, the mentoring organisation [Brightside](#) released an analysis of its progress between 2009 and 2017. This was a sub-sample of over 130,00 students they have helped online since 2003. It shows that one to

one mentoring online is having a positive effect. A summary of their report, [The power of online mentoring: Students three times more likely to access Higher Education](#) indicates that they considered POLAR Quintiles 1 and 2 combined. The national average of students from these areas going to university is 24%. The [Higher Education Access Tracker \(HEAT\)](#) database of 9,253 students registered with the Brightside programme was used to see the outcome. An amazing 77% of these students progressed onto university as opposed to 44% of all students in the HEAT database. This shows that Brightside is filling a clear deficit of advice and help that is not available otherwise.

University is a now a financial risk for many students.

There seems little doubt that the availability of finance and projected lifetime debt means that many would-be students will tend to be cautious. Value for money will be a key factor for students whose families have little for them to fall back on. A detailed report for the Department for Education last year summarised very well the dilemma faced by many students under financial stress ([‘Impact of the student finance system on participation, experience and outcomes of disadvantaged young people: Literature review May 2019’](#)). There are many reasons why students will be both cautious and consider value for money.

A fascinating webinar from the survey firm [Youthsight](#) earlier this week added to the sense of caution that Generation Z students have acquired. A substantial 41% of their large survey panel (total of 157,630 Millennials and Gen Z) of people born since 1995 did not see a positive financial future. The majority are risk-averse and job security was more important than money for 53%. More telling was that ‘employability’ was the second most important reason, after subject interest, for going to university. It is therefore no coincidence that the Government is pushing for more data on employability to be available to students. However, they must not ignore the idea of social benefit and ‘job security’ that also attracts interest from students. A report out today from the Institute of Fiscal studies for the department for Education ([‘The impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings’](#) and [data and methodology](#)) highlighted the dilemma that students face in their choices. Using HESA statistics and tax records, there emerges a highly authoritative report. So much so that prospective students will take the premium on offer for certain subjects very seriously. The headline media attention focussed upon the fact that [‘One in five students lose money by going to university’](#). Over their working lives, men earn substantially more than women on average. Subjects such as medicine, economics, mathematics and law out-perform subjects such as creative arts and social care. More concerning are the differences between types of university. There is a substantial premium in earnings by studying at a Russell Group University compared to pre-92 universities

and then post-92 institutions. Although not fully analysed in the report, there is a clear implication that more students from low participation areas attend the post-92 universities and gain the least in earnings (see Figure 1). Simply put, they invest the most to see the least gain in the long run. To do well, it seems you are best paced if you are male, advantaged, attend an elite university and opt for professions such as medicine, law or engineering.

A deficit in funding and financial incentives.

To counterbalance the financial risks, and to provide some better incentives for poorer students, some imaginative solutions also emerged this week. A report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), [‘Making Universities Matter: How higher education can help to heal a divided Britain’](#) proposed a ‘First-in-Family Allowance’ so that those with parents who had not studied for a degree did not pay fees in the first year. Added to this was the idea of a substantial “£25 million each per annum for five years to build on the National Collaborative Outreach Programme”. Current UCAS data indicate that 541,240 students entered university in 2019. [Reports from 2017](#) showed that around 50% of students were the first in their family to enter a university that year. The cost of a first-year ‘First-in-Family Allowance’ subsidy could, therefore, come to around £2.5 billion per year at current fee levels.

We should also consider the many calls for the restoration of maintenance grants, as proposed in the Augar Report, [‘Post-18 review of education and funding: independent panel report’](#) from last year, (see TEFS 30th May 2019 [‘Augar stirs up the system: The ripples will go far beyond his remit’](#)). This would be a clear incentive for poorer students. However, the calls have fallen on deaf ears. Again, the clue to the deafness might lie in the cost to the exchequer. A report for parliament last year on [‘Student Loan Statistics’](#) calculated that around £3.5 billion was spent on grants per year up to their abolition in 2016/17.

The idea of reducing fees for some students might seem like a good incentive, but most evidence points toward the high cost of living and accommodation being a major disincentive. Many stay at home and commute to lower these costs. For those with family support, TEFS has calculated that their families subsidise students to the tune of around £2.3 billion per year. However, many students from various backgrounds find that they must also work part-time to make up a financial deficit whilst studying. To bring the time in employment down to 10 hours per week would cost around £1.18 billion per year (see TEFS 29th November 2019 [‘The cost of equalising the HE experience’](#)). There is no low-cost solution whatever the strategy.

Conclusions.

The progress in making access and success in Higher Education in the UK equal for all has effectively stalled. The tremendous efforts by schools, universities and many organisations appear to work in promoting access, but realising it is another thing. One to one mentoring seems a very productive route. However, this might be effectively a way of 'treading water' and simply keeping widening access afloat in the face of the many financial burdens for students. It might be considered more sensible to offer better financial support for those taking the most risk by going to university. Then widening access and mentoring schemes would be in a stronger position to offer a lifeboat to get into rather than a life vest to stay afloat in.

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*NOTE. POLAR refers to Participation of Local Areas and there are now four versions. The data used here is based upon POLAR Version 3. The POLAR3 classification is formed by ranking 2001 Census Area Statistics (CAS) wards by their young participation rates for the combined 2005 to 2009 cohorts. This gives five quintile groups of areas ordered from '1' (those wards with the lowest participation) to '5' (those wards with the highest participation), each representing 20 per cent of UK young cohort. Students have been allocated to the neighbourhoods on the basis of their postcode. Those students whose postcode falls within wards with the lowest participation (quintile 1) are denoted as being from a low participation neighbourhood. See [HESA Definitions and benchmark factors: definitions](#).