



POLAR OPPOSITE:

How the targeting of learners for widening access to HE work could be improved



An AccessHE Report

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→ Executive Summary

Background

- This report outlines the case for a change in the primary way in which disadvantage with regard to those under-represented in higher education (HE) in England is defined. Looking at the evidence regarding the drawbacks with how the present POLAR measure is being used, both nationally and regionally, it describes how a new approach could work based around an individual income based measure of socio-economic disadvantage and the creation of a **national widening access cohort**.
- While a range of groups are under-represented in higher education (HE) in England the main focus has been on those from geographical areas of low participation. However, this focus has proved controversial and there are growing calls for it to be changed in favour of an approach that concentrates more explicitly on individual measures of socio-economic background.

The problems with the POLAR measure

- At present the Office for Students (OfS) recommends that HE providers use the Participation in Local areas (POLAR) measure to construct targets in their Access and Participation Plans (APPs). It is also the basis by which an element of funds to support student retention and the majority of those to support outreach are distributed via the National Collaborative Outreach Project (NCOP). POLAR has also formed the basis for two of the OfS Key Performance Measures (KPMs).
- The POLAR measure classifies areas across the UK based on the proportion of the young population that participates in higher education. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups – or quintiles – based on the proportion of 18-year olds who enter higher education ages 18 or 19 years old.
- National research suggests that less than 20% of those living in the POLAR quintile are eligible for free school meals (FSM). However, in defence of POLAR the OfS have pointed out that this is a measure of educational not socio-economic disadvantage.

London: a sign of the future problems with POLAR

- London has significantly higher participation in HE than any other area and only 17 out of over 600 POLAR areas in the capital are defined being in the lowest participation quintiles. London HE providers are using a multiplicity of indicators of disadvantage to identify learners in schools to engage in their widening access activities. These include Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), Index of Deprivation Affecting Children (IDACI) and Free School Meals (FSM). This is placing a disproportionate burden on providers distracting from actual delivery of widening access work. The report includes 3 case studies looking at how different HE providers in London are dealing with this challenge.

The case for a National Widening Participation Cohort

- The report recommends the creation of a national widening participation cohort for widening access to HE work consisting of families earning under an agreed income threshold.
- This cohort would be the primary focus of widening access work and their progress into HE tracked over time centrally using linked administrative data. Data on household income would be collected from pupils over year 7 and verified centrally by whatever organisation has the responsibility for tracking learners over year 8 to create the cohort ready for work from year 9 onwards. It is suggested such an approach could be piloted in London.
- This approach would enable widening access work to have a greater impact and for this impact to be better captured. It would make partnership working and data sharing between schools and HE providers easier as well as providing the foundations for national evaluation of the impact of widening access work.

→ 1. Background

Widening access to higher education from those from under-represented groups occupies centre stage in English higher education policy placing England at the forefront of the agenda globally¹. Nearly £1bn a year is invested in widening access and participation in HE².

While a range of groups are under-represented the primary focus has been on those from geographical areas of low participation. However, this focus has proved controversial and there are growing calls for it to be changed in favour of an approach that concentrates more explicitly on individual measures of socio-economic background. As the recent review of post 18 education funding stated³:

'We believe that individual socio-economic indicators, such as FSM or household income, are a better measure of an individual's disadvantage and need for extra support and that these should be used within the sector more widely to report progress on social mobility.'

HM Government (2019:81)

This report looks at the problems with using geographical measures of low participation as the dominant metric which is driving how this close to £1bn of funding is used. Crucially it also aims to move the discussion forward regarding what other approaches to identifying and supporting learners who are under-represented in HE by virtue of their social background could be used. In looking at the challenges in the present system it focuses on the experiences of London, which highlights most acutely the problems with this system.

The report argues that change in how the widening access learners are defined is imperative. There has been significant concern for a number of years now regarding the level of evidence available that investing in widening access to HE activities works. The present approach is making it harder for widening access work to be effective. Persisting with it threatens the future of this work, and risks disconnecting it from the broader drive to address the deep social inequalities that are imperilling UK society in the early 21st century.

1. Salmi, J (2019) All around the world – Higher education equity policies across the globe – Lumina Foundation – <https://worldaccesshe.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/All-around-the-world-Higher-education-equity-policies-across-the-globe-FINAL-COPY-2.pdf>
2. Department of Education (2018) Access and Participation Secretary of State for Education Guidance to the Office for Students (OfS) – London: Department of Education – <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1112/access-and-participation-guidance.pdf>
3. HM Government (2019) Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding – https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf

→ 2. How the report is structured

The next section of the report outlines the present approach to how widening participation learners are identified and the evidence concerning its effectiveness. This is followed by an in depth look at the situation in London. For over a decade now London has been the region with the highest level of HE participation in the country. This has brought the problems with geographical measures of HE participation into sharp focus. This section draws on research undertaken with higher education providers who are part of the AccessHE network in London and looks at how they actually target their widening access outreach resources.

AccessHE is the network for social mobility through higher education in London. AccessHE was founded in 2011 and has 26 HE provider members. For more information on AccessHE please go to www.accesshe.ac.uk.

The final section explores other potential approaches which focus widening access work more explicitly on socio-economic background and outlines recommendations regarding the work forward.

The report focuses in particular on the use of indicators of disadvantage in relation to the targeting of widening access outreach activities with schools and colleges by HE providers. However, the arguments presented regarding alternative approaches to identifying disadvantage to those that prevail at present can also be applicable to the HE admissions and the allocation of funding to access and participation activities.

→ 3. Why POLAR and why the problem?

In the early 2000s as widening access work was becoming established as a priority for policymakers and HE providers, the then Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) undertook a significant piece of analysis looking in as granular a way as possible at how HE participation varied across England. The resulting report ‘Young Participation in Higher Education’, published in 2005 entrenched the use of the POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) measure in shaping how widening access work has been defined & delivered⁴. The POLAR measure itself first emerged in 2002 using earlier analysis brought together in the 2005 report. Since the mid -2000s it has been the primary mechanism by which funding related to widening access has been allocated to outreach work and that to support retention/success by successive governments. The POLAR measure classifies areas across the UK based on the proportion of the young population that participates in higher education. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups – or quintiles – based on the proportion of 18-year olds who enter higher education ages 18 or 19 years old.

At present the Office for Students (OfS) recommends that HE providers use POLAR to construct targets in the Access and Participation Plans (APPs) and is the basis by which an element of funds to support student retention and the majority of those to support outreach are distributed via the National Collaborative Outreach Project (NCOP)⁵. Two of the Key Performance Measures (KPMs) for OfS announced in 2019 are also focused on geographical measures of HE participation⁶.

They are reproduced below:

- *To eliminate the gap in entry rates at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups (Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) 5 quintiles 5 and 1 respectively) by 2038-39.*
- *For 18- and 19-year-olds, our target is to reduce the gap in participation between the most and least represented groups from a ratio of 5:1 to a ratio of 3:1 by 2024-25.*

4. HEFCE (2005) Young Participation in Higher Education – Bristol:HEFCE

5. For more information go to: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-ncop/>

6. Office for Students (2019) Regulatory advice 6 How to prepare your access and participation plan – Bristol: Office for Students – <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1413599d-37bc-42ae-938a-d760d98c285b/regulatory-advice-6-how-to-prepare-your-access-and-participation-plan-guidance.pdf>

3.1 The critique of POLAR⁷

The critique of POLAR is based on the ecological fallacy i.e. the idea that an individual's characteristics can be inferred from the characteristics of a general population. Several studies have pointed to the weaknesses of the POLAR measure in identifying 'disadvantaged' learners. Harrison and McCaig in 2014 illustrated that the majority of learners in POLAR lower quintile areas were not from lower socio-economic groups as measured by the NS-SEC indicator based on parental occupation classifications. More recent work looking at the relationship between POLAR and individual measures of socio-economic disadvantage, in particular Free School Meals (FSM)⁸, has shown that:

'Just thirteen percent of those in receipt of free school meals at age 15 lived within a disadvantaged area as indicated by a POLAR Quintile 1 postcode'

'Of those coming from POLAR Quintile 1 postcodes, just 10% were free school meal recipients at age 15 whereas the remaining 90% were not.'

It may be the case that those in POLAR areas are from low income backgrounds, but their families are not be in receipt of FSM. Less than 20% of pupil are in receipt of FSM and the number has been dropping in recent years.⁹ But where FSM is concerned there is hardly any relationship with POLAR.

In particular parts of the country especially London with very few low participation quintiles, as argued in section 4 below, the concentration by the OfS and its predecessors on the lowest POLAR quintiles has also prevented such areas from contributing to the widening access effort as much as they could. While this problem is centred on London now, it is one that will spread across the country if levels of HE participation increase. It is conceivable that we may be in a situation where no lower quintile areas exist in future decades if the OfS reach their targets. It is unlikely that this will be associated with the eradication of socio-economic inequality.

Hence, while POLAR may be useful at measuring participation in HE at the area level, the evidence suggest that it is at best an imprecise means of identifying young people who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. This matters greatly because addressing socio-economic disadvantage is seen by many across the HE sector as not the only, but the main goal of, widening access work.

Finally, the problems with POLAR in terms of widening access outreach work are its lack of currency with schools. The accepted metric, set by the Department of Education, for how schools measure disadvantage is the free school meal (FSM) measure which is an individual measure of disadvantage. It is difficult for schools to isolate pupils on the basis of postcode and this makes collaborative work time consuming and often difficult to achieve or evaluate.

7. Harrison, N & McCaig, C. (2014). An ecological fallacy in higher education policy: the use, overuse and misuse of 'low participation neighbourhoods'. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 39. 1-25. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271942454_An_ecological_fallacy_in_higher_education_policy_the_use_overuse_and_misuse_of_low_participation_neighbourhoods

8. Boliver, V, Gorard, S and Siddiqui, N (2019) Using contextualised admissions to widen access to higher education: a guide to the evidence base - Durham University Evidence Centre for Education

9. Department of Education (2018) Schools, Pupils and their characteristics - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719226/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2018_Main_Text.pdf

3.2 The defence of POLAR

The arguments used in support of POLAR are both practical and philosophical, yet also in a way contradictory. In a recent defence of POLAR¹⁰ the Office for Students stated that:

‘.....It is, perhaps, not widely understood that the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (which established the OfS) and regulations require us to address under-representation in higher education, not other measures of deprivation and disadvantage.’

This is a striking statement as it implies that officially widening access is not about reducing socio economic inequalities. It also though is part of the fuzziness and ambiguity regarding the definition of widening access that has bedevilled the work over the last two decades. As even though the OfS states addressing socio-economic inequalities is not their goal, they also state in their guidance for HE providers who have to produce Access and Participation Plans for 2020-21 to 2024-25 that:

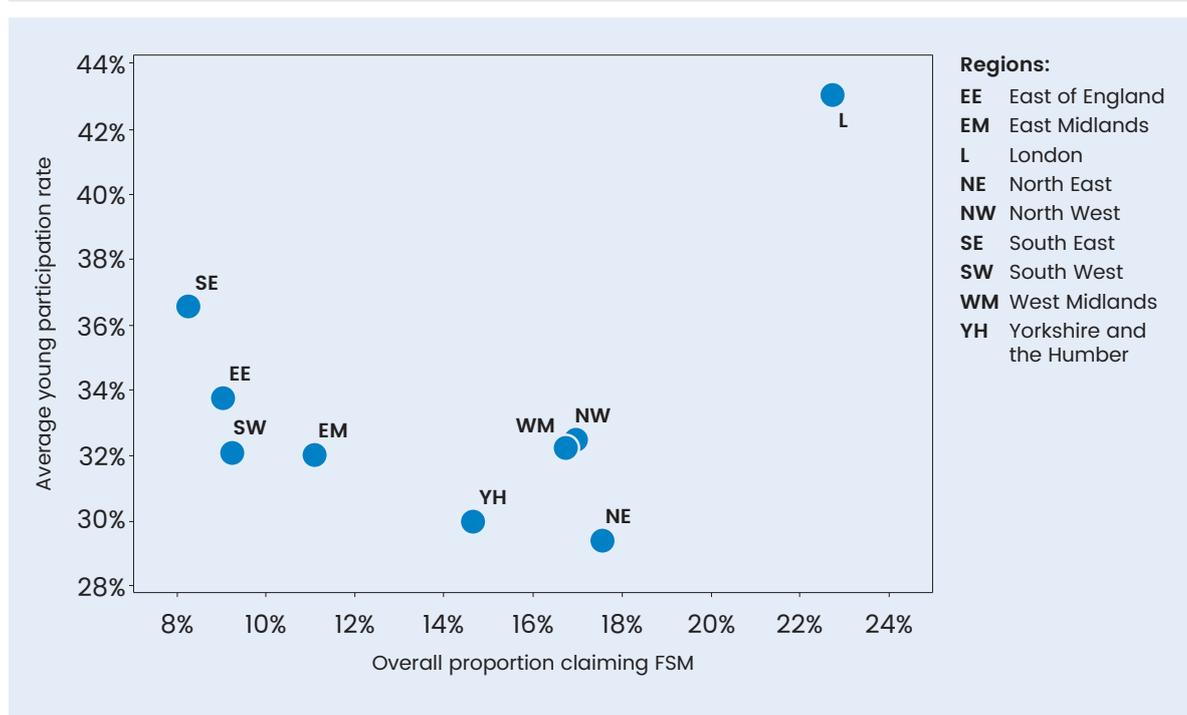
‘As a minimum, a provider’s assessment of performance must cover groups of students who share the following particular characteristics:

*Those living in areas of low HE participation or from **lower household income or socio-economic status backgrounds**’.*

Hence, while the goal in the act of 2017 is not to address inequalities based on socio-economic status, HE providers are asked to do this. It has also been argued that while POLAR is not a measure of socio-economic disadvantage at a practical level it can do this job as it correlates well with other measures that do focus explicitly on socio economic disadvantage anyway. As the Diagram 1 below shows POLAR does indeed correlate well with FSM for every region of the country apart from London.

It appears there is a lack of clarity here where arguments and policies with regard to the targeting of disadvantaged learners are concerned. It is not clear whether widening access is about socio-economic inequalities or not and POLAR appears to both not an indicator of socio-economic inequalities but also can be used like one. Given the amount of money invested in this area and the time the work has been going on these issues need to be resolved.

Diagram 1: Proportion of Key Stage 4 pupils claiming free school meals and young participation rate for each region in England¹¹



10. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/in-praise-of-polar/>

11. HEFCE (2014) Further information on POLAR3 An analysis of geography, disadvantage and entrants to higher education Bristol: HEFCE

→ 4. Targeting disadvantaged learners - how it works in London

It has long been the case that HE participation amongst younger learners in London significantly exceeds the rest of the country. The implication of these higher than average participation levels where POLAR is concerned is shown below:

Diagram 2: Progression of young London learners to HE in 2015–16 by POLAR3 quintile¹²

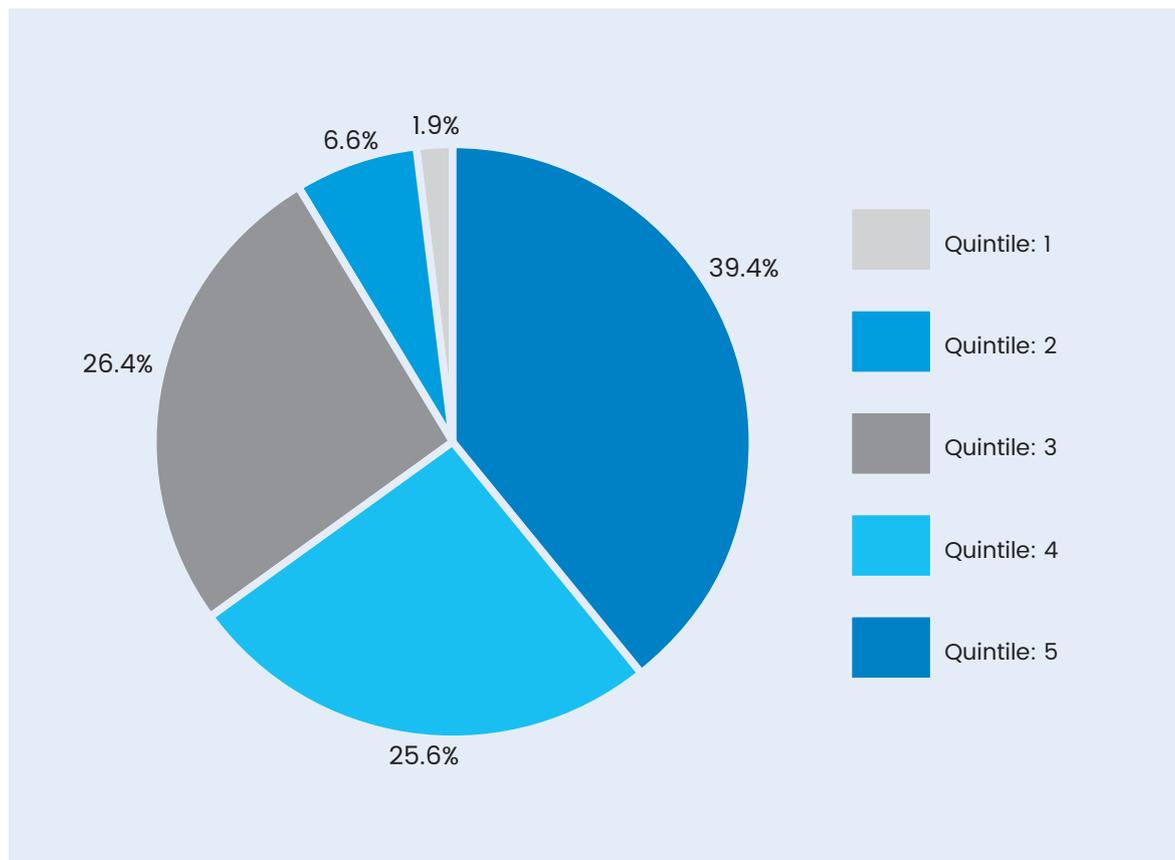


Diagram 2 shows how few young London learners progress to HE from quintile 1, the lowest area of participation. This presents significant challenges for London HE providers. Over 50% of young London learners study within London itself thus for many London institutions their pool of students will inevitably come from the capital¹³.

The consequences for London HE providers and learners of the lack of POLAR quintile one areas (those areas with the lowest levels of HE participation) are threefold:

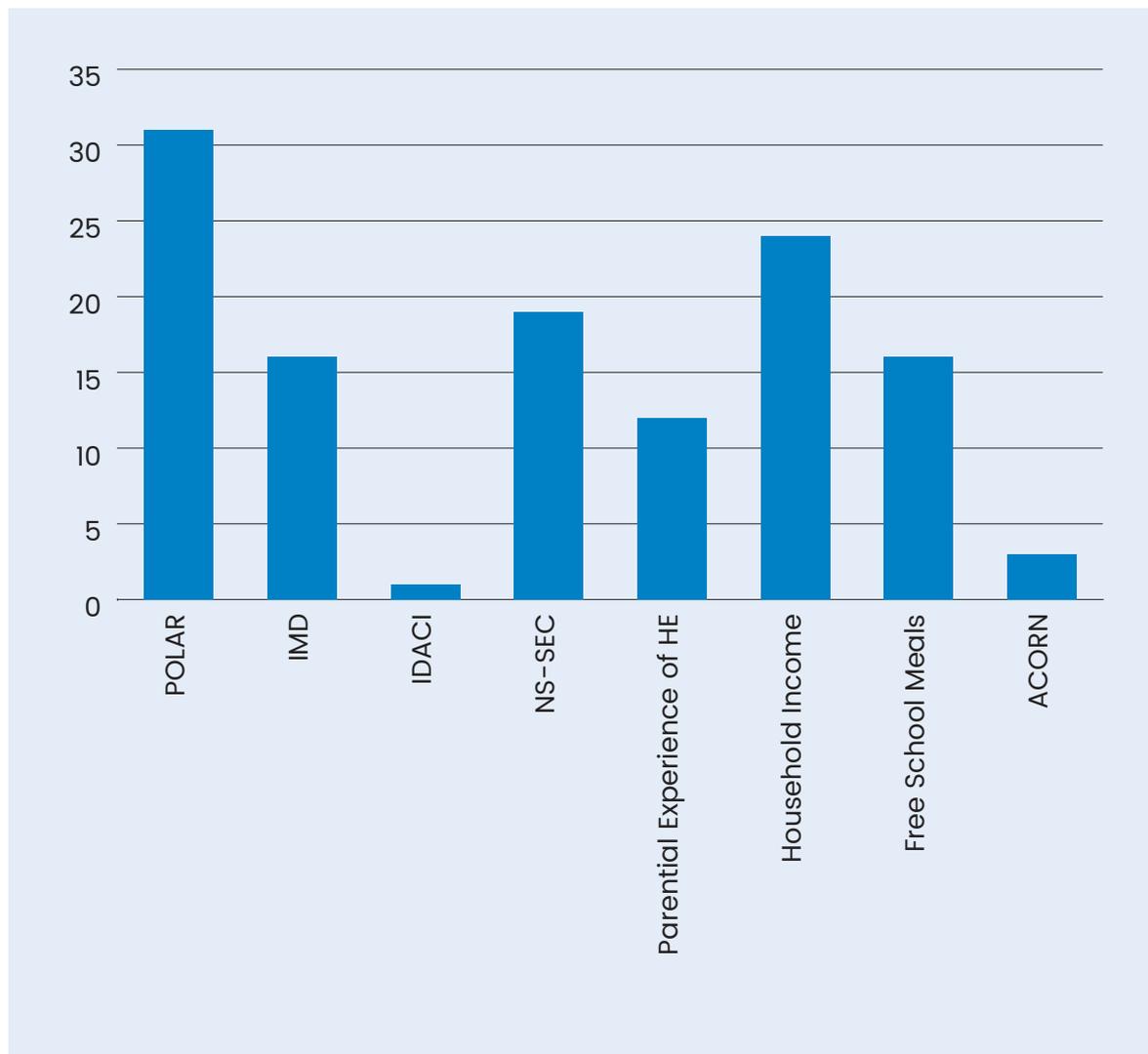
- It is very difficult for the majority of London HE providers to contribute to the Office for Students targets described section 3.
- London learners are disadvantaged when funds to support widening access & participation work are distributed.
- London HE providers are pushed into trying to contribute to POLAR whilst also using a range of other often conflicting measures to target learners.

12. London Councils (2017) The Higher Education Journey of Young London Residents December 2017 - <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/our-key-themes/children-and-young-people/14-19-young-peoples-education-and-skills/ypes-0>

13. HEFCE (2017) 'The geographical mobility of students' Available at: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/maps/mobility/mobdata/> (Accessed September 2018)

Despite the paucity of POLAR areas in London though as Table 1 below which looks at the indicators used by HE providers in the capital shows, the majority of them are using POLAR. They are also using however, a range of other indicators some of which are geographical and some individual.

Table 1: Indicators of disadvantage used by London HE providers



We undertook some more detailed work with members of AccessHE to understand how they are using the range of indicators described above to target learners for their outreach work.

4.1 The challenges of POLAR

Unsurprisingly, the day to day experience of the HE providers points to the challenges that POLAR presents to London. Significant conflicts with other datasets including Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and NS-SEC were highlighted within the comments, such as the example below. Others highlighted its insight into only one dimension of disadvantage only – (progression to higher) education – compared to other indicators which took a more holistic view of the different influencing factors.

“Whilst POLAR seems reasonably valid for outside of London, we do not believe it is valid for London... looking at our enrolled students from London, 15% of the students in high participation areas are also in the 30% most deprived areas. We have a similar issue when we compare to SEC, 32% of those in high participation for POLAR4 are in the lower SEC (4-7).”

Specialist HE provider

“We believe that POLAR is a poor measure of disadvantage for our student body and that we are particularly subject to a ‘London effect’ in this regard... Whereas only 5% of the home student population falls into POLAR Quintile 1, 18% fall into IMD Quintile 1... 26.4% of students from POLAR Quintile 3 and 28.91% of students from POLAR Quintile 4 postcodes are from IMD Quintile 1 areas. Further analysis of household income demonstrates that students from POLAR Quintiles 1 and 2 come from wealthier (on average) households than those from Quintiles 3-5.”

Large multi-faculty institution

“As a vignette – last year, 38% of all our pre-entry project participants were eligible for FSM (a highly targeted and individual measure of financial deprivation), but only 12% came from postcodes classified as POLAR3 Q1 or 2.”

Research intensive university

“If you take our overall student body, in 2015-16 we had only 8.2% of students from LPNs, but 44% came from households of incomes below £42,000 (and 30% from households below £25,000).”

Specialist HE provider

4.2 How other indicators of disadvantage are used

Indicators other than POLAR are being used in different ways by HE providers in London. The FSM indicator for example, was used more commonly to select individual pupils to participate in particular activities. However, geographical indicators were more frequently used to identify schools/colleges from which learners are then identified. The research also showed that parental occupation (in the format of the NS-SEC)¹⁴ was still relatively commonly used as a target. However, a number of institutions had very recently removed or were in the process of phasing this indicator out, particularly within specific targets, due to HESA's decision to discontinue the inclusion of NS-SEC within its widening participation UK Performance Indicators.¹⁵

In addition to the indicators in Table 1, providers also used a range of other indicators when targeting schools and young people to support via outreach work. These included Attainment 8 scores, percentage with English as an Additional Language, number of students living in areas of low HE participation, and percentage progressing to HE, in addition to institution type (e.g. non-selective state, Pupil Referral Unit or FE College) and the location in determining which schools or colleges to work with. For specialist institutions (e.g. conservatoires or creative specialists), course provision was also a consideration.

“A close cooperation with feeder schools and strong partnership with schools with above-average FSM eligibility has been the cornerstone of our targeting strategy. Combining this main criteria with supplementary information (IDACI, Acorn, IMD) allows for more nuanced identification of students in need.”

There is no one indicator that does not according to the respondents, come without its limitations. Parental occupation, parental experience of HE and household income were seen as valid only when the data was available and honestly reported to allow for appropriate coding. It was also noted that in London earned income may be low with capital high.

FSM or Pupil Premium eligibility was seen as strongly representing disadvantage at the individual level. However some concerns were raised in practice due to differences in those eligible for and those in receipt of FSM, and potential disruption to validity through changes to uptake in coming years. Additionally, the number of years a learner has been FSM-eligible was raised needs to be considered.

For those engaged in making decisions regarding how to allocate resources and target disadvantaged learners there were trade-offs between validity, reliability and availability in deciding what data to use. Household income and FSM were deemed to be very precise given their link to individuals or households for example but their availability at the individual level may be limited. Returning to POLAR it is easily available but its validity in the London context is low. Parental occupation can be extremely valid and precise, but only when available and collected reliably.

The use of a number of measures together is seen to offer the most comprehensive picture when deciding on to deliver outreach work. The view amongst the London providers was that that any criterion taken in isolation will have its inherent limitations. The approach taken here most closely resembles the use of a 'basket of indicators'. This approach was advocated by the Social Mobility Advisory Group, convened by Universities UK in behalf of the then Minister for Higher Education in 2016 in their final report¹⁶. In this approach a number of indicators of disadvantage are identified from which providers select combinations of them which meet their individual goals.

14. For more information on NS-SEC please go to: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatisticsocioeconomicclassificationnssecbasedonsoc2010>

15. For more information on these indicators please go to: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/changes>

16. Universities UK (2016) Working in partnership: Enabling social mobility in Higher Education: The full report of the Social Mobility Advisory Group

4.3 Identifying disadvantaged learners in practice

The defining characteristic in terms of this basket of indicators approach is diversity. It leads to each provider putting their own ‘spin’ on what socio-economic disadvantage means. It also involves dealing with the everyday balance between practical and ideological concerns that all of those working in this field have to achieve. Outlined below are three case studies which look in more detail at how HE providers in London deal with these issues to try and target their work at the learners who they feel need it the most and will benefit from it.

The first case study in Box 1 shows how multiple indicators of disadvantage are used in practice and how school-level targeting is used for group activity.

Box 1: How funding shapes targeting

Our approach to targeting depends in part on who is funding the activity. External funders have different requirements to projects that are run internally.

For projects focused on schools then we would typically look to engage with schools or colleges with over 50% FSM learners. In addition if the project is related to attainment raising, we consider factors such as the proportion of children for whom English is an additional language, Ofsted results, and GCSE results. We ask the schools/colleges to return students they think stand to gain the most from the intervention. This does of course mean that the profile of the groups sent by schools can differ. In certain instances the schools do the targeting and share the data with us. Finally there is a geographical element to the targeting, in that we also engage local schools with whom we have worked over a longer period of time.

Where Individual-level targeting is concerned, unless there is a stated focus on a specific learner group such as disabled students a range of factors are used. The key indicators here include things like parental experience of HE. We do look at postcodes but we use IMD – to be honest that tends to be our last port of call. FSM is an important indicator too and we assess this on both current entitlement and historic entitlement in the past five years.

Particularly for larger programmes such as our summer schools we are quite stringent in targeting processes; we will ask both the individual learners and the schools for the data used to determine eligibility. For heavily oversubscribed programmes such as the year 12 projects we run, we look at those who hit multiple indicators across postcode, parental occupation, disability, and school/college profile.

In terms of how POLAR features in this process, the data is automatically collected whenever we put data on HEAT, but we know it is not representative of our student body. Over 80% of our students come from the lowest income bracket and the average household income for our students is very low indeed. The proportion of POLAR Q1 students is comparatively low, but it is clear that our students are overcoming multiple challenges. When it comes to POLAR targets we meet this (and other WP targets) because of the community nature of our university rather than because of tailoring our methods to meet targets.

Multi-faculty, post-92 University

Box 2 reveal how the present system places different burdens on particular HE providers where targeting their outreach work is concerned. The new approach suggested in Section 5 would hopefully reduce the burden on providers such as this and free them up to focus on the widening access work they wish to do.

Box 2: Targeting and building relationships with schools

Historically, as a small institution with relatively limited capacity to analyse data, we had fallen back on the most easily available indicators – not only POLAR and state-school indicators but also NS-SEC. Generally speaking, a lot of our access and outreach activity is focused on our local area. We haven't specifically set out a targeting strategy based around POLAR Q1 wards. Instead we identify areas where, practically speaking, we can build relationships with schools and have a good chance of engaging with multiple priority groups. If we know that there is a group of schools with broadly relevant demographics in terms of who we are looking to reach, we then deliver work, and we see what the breakdown of those participants was. So in that sense, the data informs our evaluation rather than guiding our targeting.

We do use indicators however; they vary depending on the type of outreach activity. For our schools work the indicators tend to be FSM and PP, alongside which we take a view at the local authority level. For another sub-set of our pre-HE activities that run on a consistent basis, for instance weekend programmes, richer data is available to us. There we can look at family experience of HE and income information. Gender is of course an important metric for our disciplines too. When it comes to the more structured training we offer it is more a case of talent identification through audition to gain entry onto the programme than of targeting per se.

Specialist HEI

The final Box looks at the different challenges that research intensive universities face in identifying the 'right' disadvantaged learners. It reveals the serious attention paid to ensuring that learners who benefit from access work are those who are from genuinely disadvantaged positions.

Box 3: Identifying learners for selective programmes

We don't regard any one single indicator as a gold standard. All three of POLAR, IMD and Acorn work at different levels and group more or fewer postcodes, Acorn being the most granular.

With respect to targeting our pre-entry work, for some of our schemes that involve a school sending a group to spend a half-day on campus, we would look at and make a decision based on school-level metrics. For instance: is the school/college underperforming against the national average at GCSE and A-Level? Do they have a high proportion of FSM students? We also consider other contextual information the school can provide.

For the higher intensity schemes where the individual is making the application supported by their school/college, we look at a range of individual criteria, including postcode-based metrics but also indicators of family experience of HE, parental occupation, ethnicity (based on ethnicities that are

particularly underrepresented at this and similar institutions), care experience and so on. These are assessed in conjunction with school-level factors, so we look at how many of the criteria an applicant meets together with the status of their school or college. POLAR3 Q1/2, IMD 1/2 and Acorn groups LMOPQ are looked at together.

We will take a view based on those alongside other information. Postcode-based metrics are not an end in themselves when it comes to the individuals we work with. We try and look as holistically as possible. This means giving a weighting based on the number of criteria an applicant might meet, but also looking at personal statements and school/college letters of recommendation we receive for application-based schemes, as postcode-based measures will tell you nothing about the individual circumstances that sometimes can be the biggest barrier to access to ongoing education.

Russell Group provider

→ 5. How to improve the targeting of disadvantaged learners

Much effort has gone in over the last decade to developing POLAR and the focus of the OfS is that more and better data on the relationship between disadvantage and HE participation is needed. The analysis above though has shown that there are problems with the present way in which disadvantage is defined and measured. It is unclear at the level of national policy exactly what we are trying to achieve with widening access work. Is it widening access to HE for those who are socio-economically disadvantaged or not? The unintended consequence of this situation is that groups of learners – by background or geography in the case of London are being annexed from the main widening access effort.

This section will outline a new approach to identifying learners to participate in widening access to HE work which will better identify those from lower socio-economic groups, improve the effectiveness of outreach work and enable its impact to be better captured.

5.1 The basket of indicators?

The basket of indicators is in the main a pragmatic approach to the present situation where in London for instance, POLAR does not work or the availability of data is limited. It is also a result of a policy approach that allows HE providers to define disadvantage and deliver widening access work in ways that meet their own context and priorities. However, it is inconsistent with the national targets for widening access the OfS has set itself and it also embeds the ecological fallacy in practice. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) or IDACI suffer from the ecological fallacy problem almost as much as the use of POLAR does. Only 30% of those resident in the most deprived IDACI receive free school meals for example.¹⁷ The real issue with the basket of indicators approach though is the inconsistency it leads to in who actually benefits from widening access support. It can be different within and across schools, localities and regions dependent on the HE provider. The multiplicity of approaches make it harder for schools to understand what HE wants and contrasts with the more uniform approach they take.

5.2 The case for a national widening access cohort

The most accurate way of identifying socio-economic disadvantage is via the use of individual level data. This data could be related to measures of social class or income. The use of individual measures of social class has fallen out of favour due to the difficulties in collecting accurate information from young people about their parents/caters occupations. The obvious income related measure to form the basis of what would be a genuine commitment to addressing socio economic disadvantage instead of educational disadvantage would be free school meals. It is used by schools to identify pupils hence would make building relationships to deliver outreach work far easier and FSM pupils are more evenly distributed across the country thus avoiding the issues that have bedevilled London already and will be affecting all areas of the country over time. However, FSM eligible pupils are relatively small in number. There are large numbers of children in living in families who are in working poverty earning less than the living wage for instance who are missed out by focusing only on FSM.¹⁸

17. Boliver, V, Gorard, S and Siddiqui, N (2019) Using contextualised admissions to widen access to higher education: a guide to the evidence base - Durham University Evidence Centre for Education

18. According to the 2018 report 'UK Poverty' by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, eight million people live in poverty in families where at least one person is in work. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2018>

It is proposed that a new ‘**national widening access cohort**’ is created made up of pupils from families earning under an agreed income threshold.

This cohort would be the primary focus of widening access work and their progress into HE tracked over time centrally using linked administrative data. Data on household income would be collected from pupils over year 7 and verified over year 8 to create the cohort ready for work from year 9 onwards. The collection of this data, its verification and subsequent tracking could be done centrally to minimise the burden on HE providers. There would need to be work done to engage parents/carers and schools at year 7 and 8 as described below to ensure data is submitted but the administration is done centrally.

5.3 Why create a national widening access cohort?

The creation of this single defined cohort makes widening access to HE a central part of the broader effort to address socio economic inequalities in England. It makes it more straightforward to deliver widening access locally and identify its impact nationally. It removes the administrative burden from schools of postcode based learner identification and from HE providers the burden of dealing with a multiplicity of measures of disadvantage some of which require purchasing. It also gives greater consistency and transparency to schools in what widening access work is and how to engage with it. There is a huge amount of resources expended in widening access work with schools and HE providers operating to different criteria for disadvantage which is seriously hampering its effectiveness.

5.4 What would the challenges be and how they could they be overcome?

There are of course challenges with the approach. There is a danger that the parents/carers of those who we wish to benefit from this work will not divulge information. Hence the benefits of being part of the cohort in terms of enabling better future decision making will need to be thoroughly communicated to parents/carers. Giving year 7 and 8 to collect and analyse information should help here. Indeed it may be interesting in a pilot phase to explore the benefits of establishing a new phase for widening access work at year 7/8 focusing mainly on communicating with parents/carers. There is strong evidence that shows the importance of parents/carers in shaping the decision making of children¹⁹.

In addition, the engagement of the Department of Education would be crucial here in ensuring that the benefits to schools of ensuring their learners are part of the cohort.

With this proposed approach, there should still be latitude for HE providers to utilise other measures of disadvantage to help target learners for activities where capacity is limited for example. There will also be judgements that need to be made regarding which learners in the cohort are best positioned to benefit from widening access work at that point in their educational careers. However, national guidelines here developed by the OfS in consultation with the widening access community would be recommended here otherwise the risk is that some of the problems for schools associated with the basket of measures is repeated.

A piloting stage would be potentially beneficial to learn about how this project could work in practice. Given the relationship that London has with POLAR, and more importantly the historical strength of the cross sector networks in the capital there would be a case for undertaking such piloting in London. The outreach hubs which the OfS has initiated from 2019–20 onwards as part of the National Collaborative Outreach Project (NCOP) provide a timely vehicle through which such a pilot could be delivered in London, subject to sufficient resourcing.

19. Department of Education (2019) Choices that students make between different post-18 routes and whether these choices are effective and reliably informed: Review of relevant literature and evidence Final Report May 2019 Peter Dickinson, Institute for Employment – London: Department of Education

→ 6. Summary: Improving targeting will improve impact

In 2008 the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) stopped funding the then Aimhigher partnership for central London as there were not enough learners in the area to justify such funding despite more than 40% of children living in poverty in the area²⁰. Just over three years later the Aimhigher programme was abolished, ostensibly due to a lack of evidence about its impact. More than 10 years after the closure of Aimhigher in central London, and approaching a decade since the end of the programme itself POLAR remains the dominant metric where the use of nearly £1bn of spend on access & participation itself is concerned and there is still a commonly held view that the evidence base for this work is too weak. As the review of Post 18 Funding also stated:

'We note with surprise the absence of any over-arching assessment of the impact of different approaches to widening participation and success. There has been some evaluation at institutional level, and some national evaluation of specific programmes, but despite the substantial investment of resources, no comprehensive national evaluation.'

HM Government (2019:81)

There are multiple reasons for the apparent weakness of the evidence base where the impact of access & participation work is concerned including inconsistencies in national funding and a focus on practice over theory/evaluation in the national widening access community. However, the lack of shared targeting criteria between schools & HE providers and of common shared approaches across providers to who disadvantaged learners are has played a large hitherto underestimated part. The kind of national evaluation described above will prove challenging. The policies pursued particularly since 2011 have encouraged the development of a national widening access landscape characterised by hundreds of relatively small similar but different projects targeted in a way that is individual to each HE provider. There is a real need for greater uniformity in targeting here to enable the evidence for the impact of widening access work to be strengthened.

The OfS should be commended for making genuine long term targets for widening access work recognizing that addressing disadvantage requires sustained effort over decades not years. However, these targets need to be ones that also genuinely focus on socio-economic inequalities. It is accepted that POLAR does not do this. In order to maximise the chances of widening access work making an impact, new ways of measurement are required together with the creation of a national widening access cohort.

20. Trust for London (2011) London's Poverty Profile 2011 London: New Policy Institute





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