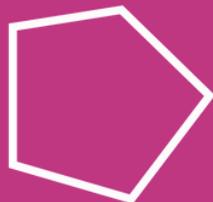


Risks to equality of opportunity facing London HE

October, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The regulation of widening access and participation work in England is changing. In September 2022 the Office for Students signalled its plans to move towards a risk-based approach to ensuring equality of opportunity in higher education; it has today (6 October 2022) opened a consultation on this new approach.

This London Higher-AccessHE briefing note sets out key considerations for HE providers in London as they formulate responses to the consultation and establish their individual and shared access and participation goals for the period 2024-25 to 2027-28 and beyond. It analyses data on London HE from the recently updated OfS Access and Participation Data Dashboard and points to common areas of challenge for providers in the capital that could form the focus of collaborative work over the coming access and participation plan (APP) cycle.

ACCESS AND OUTCOMES GAPS IN LONDON

The Access and Participation Data Dashboard indicates sector- and provider-level performance against a range of metrics spanning the full student lifecycle (access; continuation; attainment; progression). To assess the risks facing London HE specifically, in this briefing note we focus on four access and outcomes gaps, several of which relate to OfS key performance measures. The gaps are:

- Access gap by participation of local areas (POLAR4), between quintile 5 and quintile 1 for young (under 21) students [OfS KPMs 5];
- Attainment gap by deprivation (IMD), between quintile 5 and quintile 1;
- Attainment gap by ethnicity, between White and other ethnic groups (we focus here on the gap between White and Black students) [OfS KPM 7];
- Attainment gap by disability, between No disability reported and Disability reported.

As the findings below indicate, London HE is making progress in closing participation and attainment gaps, but progress varies from institution to institution and some gaps appear to be more entrenched than others.

ACCESS

With respect to area-based participation gaps, the average POLAR4 gap across London Higher members in 2020-21 was 28.5pp – more than 10pp larger than the average gap at a national level. A contributor to this is the large gap (> 35pp) reported at 11 institutions. Encouragingly however, of the institutions included in this analysis, over half (18 of 31) had succeeded in closing their access gap between 2019-20 and 2020-21.

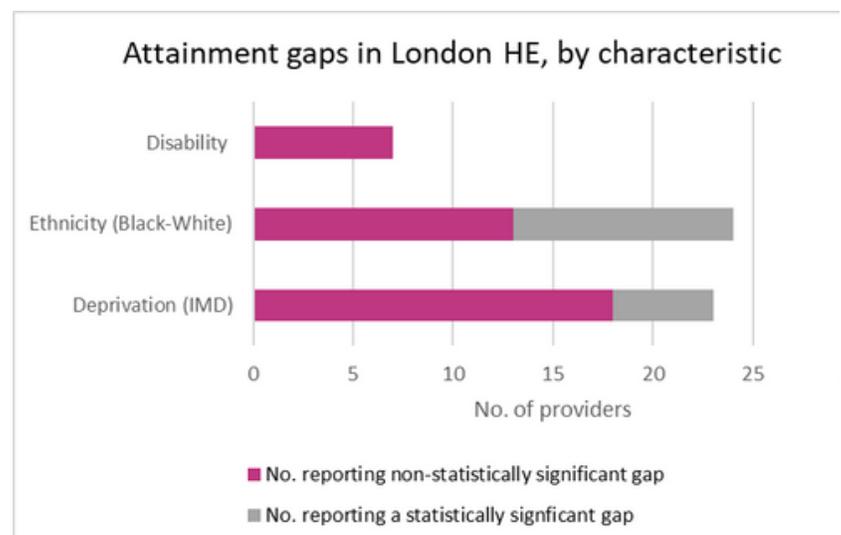
CASE STUDIES: CLOSING ACCESS GAPS

- AccessHE's own *Choose Your Own Adventure* programme is designed specifically for KS3/4 students in low-participation neighbourhoods in London.
- Queen Mary, University of London's *Access to Queen Mary* programme targets schools in Kent, Medway and Essex.

It is important to bear in mind that only 17 of the more than 600 POLAR4 areas in London belong to the lowest participation quintile (Q1) and issues in using the POLAR measure for targeting widening participation work in metropolitan areas have been well-documented (including in AccessHE's report looking at London specifically). When drafting new access and participation plans, providers in the capital will therefore need to consider what is causing the POLAR4 gap in their setting and whether that constitutes a genuine risk to equality of opportunity.

ATTAINMENT

The attainment gap in 2020-21 between students from the most and least socio-economically deprived areas, as measured by the index of multiple deprivation (IMD), is smaller in London (11.8pp) than it is for England as a whole (14.8pp).



Likewise, the gap in attainment between disabled and non-disabled students is smaller in London than it is nationwide. 22 of 28 London-based providers with data available for 2020-21 reported no gap at all. It is worth noting that the disability gap may be more difficult to accurately quantify than other gaps, as disabilities are not always disclosed or diagnosed.

Whilst the picture above is positive in many respects, more providers in the London Higher membership saw their IMD attainment gap increase or remain static relative to 2019-20 than reported a narrowing of the gap. This underscores the need for bold and sustained action if differences in outcomes by socio-economic status are to be eliminated altogether in future.

CASE STUDIES: CLOSING ATTAINMENT GAPS

- City, University of London's *Student Attainment Project* foregrounds student co-creation.
- London Metropolitan University's *Fixing the Pipeline* initiative aims to diversify the staff base to better reflect London Met's students and communities.
- Royal Holloway University of London's *Narrowing the BAME Awarding Gap* programme has led to the creation of a series of school-level interventions.

An inequality which appears to as a particular issue for London-based providers is awarding gaps by ethnicity. This analysis focuses on the gap in firsts/2:1s between White and Black students specifically as this is the largest ethnicity awarding gap by some distance and forms an OfS key performance measure. Whilst the average gap in London (13.5pp) compares favourably to the national average (18.4pp), the gap increases when looking at first class attainment specifically, as AccessHE research has shown. As the graph above shows (see Fig 1), the highest number of statistically significant attainment gaps reported by London-based providers are gaps relating to Black student attainment. In 2020-21, 11 providers included in this analysis reported gaps that had increased or remained static relative to 2019-20.

THE NEXT PHASE OF WIDENING ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN LONDON

The gaps outlined above represent some but by no means all the risks to equality of opportunity faced by London HE. Likewise, the nature of the gaps and the differences in rates of progress towards eliminating them suggest that some present a greater risk than others, whether that is to individual providers or to the wider regional HE ecosystem. As they begin to develop APPs using the framework provided by an OfS 'Equality of Opportunity Risk Register', London-based providers may wish to consider the following points:

- At a regional level, the most commonly reported challenge for providers, and the challenge most likely to form a statistically significant outcome gap, is the awarding gap between Black and White students.
- It will be important to identify, as far as is possible, the causes of any stated risks and the extent to which these are most effectively addressed individually or collectively. New APPs could fruitfully combine individualised approaches to tackling risks that are unique to that institution with collaborative, pan-London commitments and strategies where causes of certain risks are common to multiple institutions.
- The theories of change underpinning APPs in London should recognise the unique 'hyper-diversity' of the capital's student population. Unlike elsewhere in England, providers are doing access and participation work in a setting where diversity is the norm and HE demand is being driven by students from widening participation backgrounds, a trend which will continue to accelerate in the coming years.
- The OfS consultation and the proposed changes to the regulation of access and participation presents an opportunity for London HE to consider the place of targets-based approaches in the next iteration of APPs. Solutions to some of the most commonly-faced access and participation challenges in London – for instance the ethnicity awarding gap – involve, in part, long-term culture change that is not easily measured through conventional targets.

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