

Specialist
Institutions
with a
Specialism

Educational diversity and social & economic mobility

Introduction

The UK has a world-leading higher education system and our universities have a significant role in shaping a fairer society and a more successful economy. Higher education in the UK has matured into a sector where its diversity is a key strength of the system as a whole. The key message in this paper is the importance of preserving that rich diversity and recognising its role as an engine of social and economic mobility, so that the UK becomes a nation where no individual's talents are wasted because of social or economic barriers.

Who gains a place at university and how they succeed once they have left are critical factors in determining access to opportunities and a fairer society. Many universities do excellent work in adding value to the life chances of individuals from less advantaged backgrounds, but the evidence is compelling: universities that are often characterised as bringing diversity to the sector do particularly well.

The graph below from CentreForum Social Mobility Graduate Index, evaluates the success of universities in preparing all graduates for professional employment, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This briefing on educational diversity and social and economic mobility is the fourth in a series (links to the previous briefings are in the right-hand column). Each aims to raise awareness and develop understanding of the valuable contribution made by the range of institutions with distinctive characteristics and diverse strengths to the outstanding quality of UK higher education.

Celebrating the diversity of the higher education sector

Briefing 4: Educational diversity and social & economic mobility

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March/April 2015

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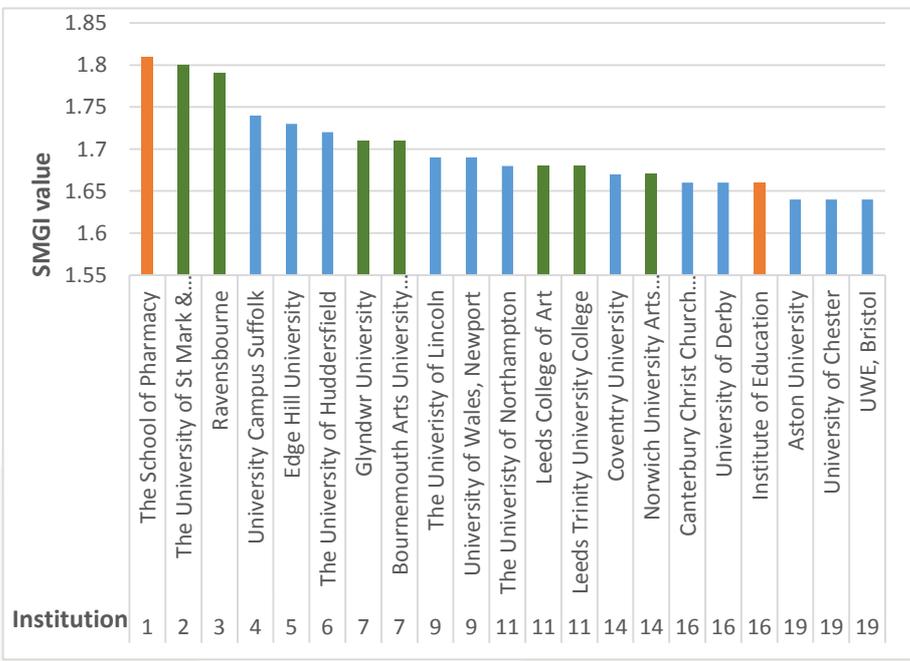
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Figure 1 Top twenty ranked universities according to their SMGI



1. Social mobility and educational diversity

Social mobility is defined by [Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: Government Strategy for Social Mobility](#) (2011) as: *'For any given level of skill and ambition, regardless of an individual's background, everyone should have an equal chance of getting the job they want or reaching a higher income bracket'*.

Further to this, the government makes a distinction between widening participation and social mobility as seen in the Government's [National Strategy for Access and Student Success for HE](#) (2014): *'Widening participation to higher education is about ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can access higher education, get the support they need to succeed in their studies, and progress to further study and/or employment suited to their qualifications and potential ...Social mobility is the outcome that the Government wishes to see: a society becoming less stratified by socio-economic class.'*

UK universities traditionally have enjoyed significant scope in fulfilling their missions, appreciating that there is no single model of an excellent university, and that no single standard can predict with certainty the lifetime contribution to a student.

The increasing diversity of the student population and of higher education institutions means that transitions to and experiences of higher education are becoming more varied. Yet, educational discourses continue to focus on a traditional view of being a student, in which an 18 year-old, gaining A-level qualifications and studying a three-year full-time undergraduate degree at a research-intensive university is normalised, with a funding model to support it. Little attention is paid to the less traditional routes for students and the different educational experiences that would most enable them to prosper.

As Michael Brown¹ points out, *"despite the political focus on access to Russell group universities, the most selective institutions do not necessarily deliver the best professional graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students"*. If we shift the widening participation focus away from those highly-selective institutions, then a rather different and more positive picture emerges.

Institutions deliver HE in different ways, with regard to discipline, ethos, mode of study and qualification-type. This diverse provision is preferred by many different types of students, and attracts a high number of widening participation students:

- 1) Discipline:** Some institutions specialise in unique areas, with high numbers of creative, teacher education and land-based courses. This expands the choice and opportunities for students who are attracted to studying towards a specific vocation in an environment focused on that field. This is important especially when operating in sectors such as the creative industries where employment is traditionally harder to secure and based on a portfolio of careers.
- 2) Ethos:** Some institutions provide particular learning environments to cater for individual student needs. For example, faith-based universities such as Newman University and Leeds Trinity University provide inclusive educational environments that cater for Catholic values but that are open and welcoming to all faiths. Some students are particularly attracted to these institutions as values and identity are important to their student experience.
- 3) Mode of study:** Many institutions recruit higher proportions of their students from within their immediate localities and deliver more flexible approaches – whether part-time, accelerated or credit based courses. This is particularly attractive to some students such as mature students or those with family commitments. This allows for further acquisition of specialist skills within their discipline, in a focused environment, with most staying or returning to their communities after graduation to find work.
- 4) Qualification-type:** Compared to the sector overall, many GuildHE institutions recruit greater proportions of students with a wide range of qualifications such as BTECs for students seeking more vocationally-orientated HE courses. They offer technical and professional education opportunities for people that may not have been well served by secondary education until they have come to tertiary education and have the opportunity to enter through different pathways and reach their full potential.



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¹ Brown, Higher Education as a Tool for Social Mobility, CentreForum, 2014: <http://www.centreforum.org/index.php/mainpublications/614-he-as-a-tool-of-social-mobility>

Politicians and employers increasingly emphasise the value of work-based learning, and institutions such as the University of Winchester are successfully expanding the number of Degree-Level Apprenticeships available to people who wish to access higher-level learning alongside formal work experience.²

Courses with access modules prepare students for university-level study and help to develop or refresh their study skills. This provides them with additional prospects and aid in the effort to assure that all groups in society have an equal opportunity of access into higher education. These additional pathways into higher education are vital to enriching the higher education system in the UK and increasing upward mobility and without them, students' face a more limited and restricted outlook.

It is important that these specialist options and routes outlined are clearly identified in Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) for prospective students, especially for school leavers. The best route for particular professions, or for particular types of learners, is not always to study in a very large, city based institution. As we move into a quasi-market for higher education, the provision of specialist IAG must become the cornerstone of a system that supports and facilitates access and progression.

Case study – Goldsmith's, University of London

Open Book Project

The Goldsmiths Open Book Project aims to improve equality in higher education and access for the broad population who perhaps for institutional, structural and cultural reasons would not consider higher education or would find barriers to their aspirations in approaching the higher education sector.

The project works with those from offending and addiction backgrounds and people with a history of mental health problems to encourage academic ambition and for them to take up appropriate further and higher education level study.

(Case study: Goldsmith's ...Cont.)

It offers them ongoing emotional and practical support throughout their course and thereafter. By doing so it transforms their lives and those of their families.

The project has enabled more than 60 adults from socially excluded groups find places on undergraduate courses at Goldsmiths University and other institutions including; Greenwich University, Birkbeck University and London South Bank University.

Case study – University of Winchester

Supporting care-leavers

The University of Winchester began working in partnership with Hampshire Children's Services in 2005 to develop discrete outreach programmes for children in care and care-leavers. More than 200 young people have taken part, with many participating in multiple events and activities.

In parallel with the programme we have steadily developed support for undergraduates and have seen an increase in numbers of care-leavers recruited from 2 in 2006/7 to a total of 26 studying at the University in 2013/14. Retention has been high throughout this time, though some students have required considerable welfare support from Student Services.

In 2006, Winchester was one of the first 10 universities to be awarded the Buttle Quality Mark for holding 'exemplary' status. The award has helped to substantially improve the services which surround care-leaver students, including Admissions, Housing, Student Services, Widening Participation team and Student Finance. For example, they provide care-leavers a £1,000 grant at the end of their final year to finance rental deposits. This is in addition to an annual scholarship of £2,000 pa, £75 catering card on arrival in Halls in the first year and 365 day housing. They also seek to employ care-leavers as paid HE Ambassadors. Many choose to take up this offer and it is hugely helpful to engage them in outreach to children in care, creating a virtuous circle.



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² See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-rolls-out-flagship-degree-apprenticeships> as well as the webpages of the [University Vocational Awards Council](#),

2. Widening participation and access

We are becoming more and more aware of rising inequality across the UK. Despite every child under the age of eighteen having access to a free education in the UK, the educational sector remains highly unequal. In the second annual [State of the Nation Report](#) published by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCP) it is claimed that 'Britain is on the brink of becoming a permanently divided nation'. A key solution advised is for the government, universities and employers to commit to widening participation within higher education, by recruiting from a broader range of talent. The benefits of widening participation and access to higher education are largely associated with helping to increase social mobility; however, as the National Strategy for Access and Student Success notes, higher education does not achieve it on its own. A number of other institutions also have roles to play in aiding social mobility, including schools, colleges, employers, communities and the Government.

According to HEFCE, institution type (e.g. regionally focused, small, specialist or selective) has an important influence on the strategy and approach to widening participation. Many universities place a firm emphasis on supporting schools and colleges to improve the attainment levels of disadvantaged students in order to ensure they are able to meet the necessary entry requirements. GuildHE members perform well in terms of recruitment of students from backgrounds or neighbourhoods which are traditionally less likely to attend higher education.

Some regionally-focused universities such as Southampton Solent or Bucks New University have high numbers of local students and also high numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These institutions make a major contribution to social mobility but would face significant financial uncertainty with any reduction in Government student opportunity funding.

Through Access Agreements, OFFA is now rightly challenging all

universities on the scale and effectiveness of outreach programmes for all types of under-represented students. But where particular institutions already cater well for particular subject-areas, industries or particular types of students, policy-makers face the important question of how to balance national targets with local or sectoral priorities.

Case study – St Mary's University College Belfast

Outreach Measures

St Mary's is committed to tackling educational disadvantage and to promoting aspirations for study at Higher Education level for those groups who are under-represented in the third level sector.

To achieve its objectives the College has a Student Support Officer who works in collegiate partnership with Area Learning Partnership programmes aimed at raising aspirations. St Mary's also work in close co-operation with schools and, where appropriate, state agencies and a range of community groups to organise the following outreach activities:

- Taster experience - the focused Taster Experience is aimed specifically at under-represented groups.
- IME Early Reading Programme - the on-going IME ER programme assists nine primary schools in developing capacity-building in primary schools with an attainment raising objective for literacy.
- Higher Education Student Links - the College develops specific links between HE students and school-children from non-traditional backgrounds to develop an awareness of HE and address challenges and issues that create barriers to tertiary education.
- SciArt programme - SciArt involves implementation of research findings to, 'engage the disengaged' and works with three post-primary schools.
- STEM primary school programme - The six-week STEM programme in collaboration with Stranmillis and other ITE providers involves student teachers and approximately ninety primary schools.



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Case study – Plymouth College of Art

Free School - Plymouth School of Creative Arts

Plymouth College of Art (PCA) has a long history as an independent specialist in arts, craft, design and media education in Plymouth and the South West. In 2012, PCA founded the Plymouth School of Creative Arts, a 4-16 mainstream, all-through city centre school, which opened its Primary phase in September 2013 and its Secondary phase in 2014, encouraging progression for children all the way through into Higher Education.

The vision for the school is very much intertwined with that of PCA's ethos in response to the serious erosion of the arts and creativity in schools. The school aims to secure academic excellence through developing within pupils a sense of individual creativity and purpose in their approach to learning – opening up the practice of **learning through making**. As such the curriculum has a strong focus on bringing creativity into all subject areas from science through to PE, helping students work with their imagination and an open mind to achieve a foundation for later life. The school has its own guide - [Creating Individuals, Making Futures](#) - which details how it is going to achieve its unique vision.

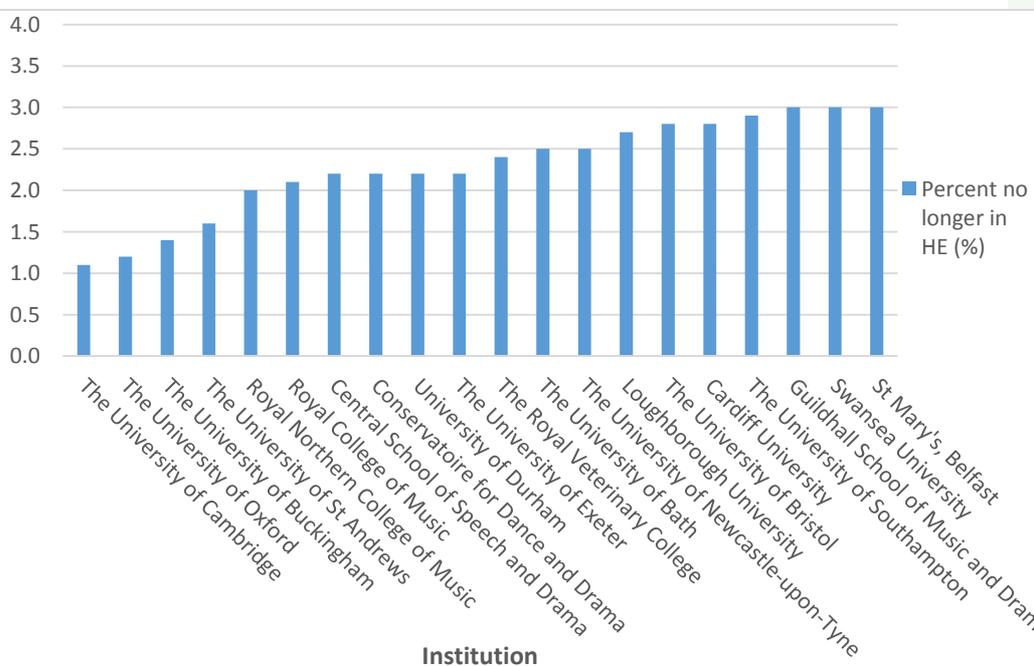
Critically, the school is situated within the heart of the community and this in turn will provide a transformational opportunity for change in the lives of residents and children alike.

3. Student retention

International evidence highlights that student retention rates in the UK are amongst the best in the world. However, as the government report, [University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility](#) highlights, there are some important issues still to be addressed. In particular, improvement in retention within institutions has been too slow, there are large inconsistencies between universities and the drop-out rate for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is comparatively greater than those from moderately wealthy backgrounds. Yet, looking at those institutions that do best at retaining their students there are a number of quite specialist institutions as well those more regularly cited, as the graph below illustrates.

Some of the more selective specialist institutions (e.g. conservatoires, Royal Veterinary College, etc.) tend to perform best in student retention, as well as many research-intensive institutions. But there are also a number of GuildHE specialists who do well, for example The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama only had 2.2% of students no longer in higher education and St Mary's University College, Belfast had 3.0%. Furthermore, the non-continuation data also reveals that many highly-specialised institutions have the highest retention rates in the sector and that those institutions whose rates are above benchmark were all small and/or specialist institutions.

Figure 2 Top twenty ranked institutions for student retention following year of entry for UK domiciled full-time first degree entrants in 2011/12 (HESA)



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Another important issue to consider in terms of student retention is the proposed reforms to the funding of Disabled Student Allowance (DSA). Given that there is ample evidence to suggest that DSA supports student access and retention and given the high concentration of disabled students in specialist institutions, the reforms pose a risk both to the institutions that provide support to disabled students and to the students that want to study at such a place. Higher education institutions with the highest proportions of DSA recipients are almost all small and specialist HEIs, not only in the creative sectors but also in the land-based subjects and veterinary sciences. Many such institutions have DSA numbers far in excess of the sector average. As reforms are introduced, such institutions will have to take particularly difficult decisions about how to support their students in the years ahead.

“Student Advice have supported my disability needs throughout my studies. They have liaised on my behalf with the teaching staff, ahead of the semesters starting, so that things run as smoothly as possible. If things have gone wrong they have been there to assist in sorting out the problems.” **David, Education Studies and English graduate, Bishop Grosseteste University**

4. Student outcomes

Institutions specialising in different ways contribute to social and educational mobility in different ways. The CentreForum "graduate social mobility index" is useful in measuring student outcomes since it ranks institutions based on the number of widening participation students they admit, versus graduate employment. Specialist institutions fill up most of the top 20 of this index (see Figure 1), scoring highly as large numbers of their graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds get a graduate level job. This reflects how well many specialist institutions do in equipping graduates with the skills necessary for the labour market and supporting them in making a rapid transition into the workforce. Furthermore, specialists are excellent for graduate employability in fields relevant to their HE course as they often have well developed links and interactions with employers and industry because of the specialist nature of the subjects taught. For example, the 2012-13 DLHE results reveal that the Arts University Bournemouth and Harper Adams University have graduate employability rates at 98% and 96% and the Royal College of Music and the Institute of Education at 100% respectively. Similarly, Ravensbourne is a vocationally-focused specialist whose course curricula are directly influenced by professionals working in the creative and digital industries -

“As I knew I wanted to enter a competitive industry, I chose a university that wouldn't only provide the knowledge to achieve my degree, but one that would also prepare me practically for work. The MA course has a tremendous reputation, and the level of expertise and support from the tutors and technicians was superb, as they're well established in their fields of work and study. The course's reputation also secured numerous sponsorship opportunities, which actually led to my first and second jobs after graduating!”

Emily Martin, MA Furniture Design & Technology, University of Worcester

ensuring students learn current industry practices and get direct access to industry practitioners.

The Future Earnings and Employment Record (FEER) is another method of measuring student outcomes, recommended by Lord Young in his [Report on Small Firms 2010-2015](#). The publication of this record, according to Young, will provide prospective students with a course-by-course indicator of likely earnings and employment after graduation at different institutions, enabling young people to make decisions about their education choices based on the benefits and future career prospects they stand to gain. Lord Young affirms that this would be transformational to the way in which young people assess and compare HEIs before investing in tuition fees, alongside promoting competition and improvement amongst educators in their relevance to work and enterprise.

However, when considering measures of student outcomes this raises some questions about the limitations of what this data can tell us about what universities do for students. Information on graduate salaries will be interesting but may not reflect the full picture of the benefits of the university experience, or the value of training for a profession where salaries are not the initial primary motivation.

5. Why does this matter?

A diverse HE sector needs supporting. The institutions described in this briefing offer a range of courses to suit a vast range of students from different ages, backgrounds, financial situations and learning styles. Increasing student choice and responding to student needs widens access and raises educational attainment in society. There are real concerns about the impact that cuts to specific funding streams may have on diversity and unintended consequences for (a) student diversity and (b) social mobility. We should seek to understand this better if we are committed to the reality of widening participation and achieving student success across a diverse student body.



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