Access to higher education in Europe: issues, trends and barriers
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Abstract

Access and the related matter of widening participation are re-emerging as crucial, complex and pressing priorities in terms of the governance and the social and economic effectiveness of higher education in the regions of Europe. This paper presents data from seven EU countries: Czech Republic, Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and the UK collected as part of the IBAR (Identifying Barriers in Promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level) Project. IBAR is a three-year project funded by the EACEA and led by the Centre for Higher Education Studies in Prague and the University of Durham. One of the aims of the project is to identify gaps in the current European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) and to make recommendations for future pan-European guidelines to support institutions developing effective quality systems. A key question is whether access to higher education should be recognised as a quality assurance challenge and recommendations on widening access be incorporated into the ESG. This paper considers the current status of the UK's national widening participation agenda with the findings from other countries participating in the IBAR project and asks whether a revised ESG can accommodate the very different systems and philosophies which underpin national and institutional approaches to higher education participation.

Introduction

Access and the related matter of widening participation are re-emerging as crucial, complex and pressing priorities in terms of the governance and the social and economic effectiveness of higher education in the regions of Europe. Concern about barriers to entry to higher education has been debated across Europe since at least the 1960s. In 1963 the UK Robbins Report on Higher Education established the principle that university education should be available to all who were suitably qualified to benefit from it and led the way to the creation of a group of new universities being established. These were often termed the 'green field' universities as they were built on sites in the countryside. Warwick and Sussex are good examples. The UK government proposed in 1966 the setting up of polytechnics to further supplement existing tertiary provision in the UK. These offered degrees of a more vocational nature validated by a new body, the Council for National Academic Awards. The binary system, thus introduced, greatly expanded the provision of UK higher education.

  In 1967 a UNESCO conference of ministers of higher education held in Vienna debated the implications of increased demand for higher education places at the very start of what we now recognise as massification of the sector. The extensive list of outcomes from this conference included the recommendation that UNESCO member states sign up to the Convention against Discrimination in Education, consider ways of removing economic barriers to secondary and tertiary education and undertake studies into "special topics" relating to access including socio-economic origins of students, linguistic minorities and enrolment and wastage rates. At institutional level, tertiary providers were asked to consider enhanced training for staff in welfare/guidance to reduce wastage rates and to consider ways of recognising entrant attainment "by means of a policy based more on aptitude and factual knowledge more than formal attainment".

The demand fir higher education continued to grow steadily during the following decades, with mounting pressure on European governments. At the Lisbon Meeting of European Ministers of Higher Education in 2000 it was agreed to set a target of 50% participation in higher education. By the early years of the new century, this rate had been exceeded, achieved or nearly achieved by the majority of countries participating in this study (Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, UK). The Netherlands remains an outlier in this group, having smaller, although growing participation rates. It has set a projected date of 2050 to reach the Lisbon target.

In 2001, the Prague Communiqué concentrated on the inclusion of students and the need to make mobility opportunities available for all. In 2003 in Berlin, ministers focused more broadly on social cohesion of the student population and social and gender inequalities. In particular, they mentioned the need to remove obstacles related to students' social and economic background based on comparable data. These general and specific commitments to make higher education accessible to all were renewed in Bergen in 2005, emphasising the obligation of governments to help students from "socially disadvantaged groups" to get access.

Despite this repeated reference to the social dimension aspect of building the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), there was no precise and commonly accepted definition of the social dimension in higher education until 2007. In that year in London, the ministers agreed on a comprehensive definition and the goal to achieve. Accordingly, ministers agreed "the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations". Ministers also emphasised that "students [should be] able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background."

Meeting, or indeed exceeding the Lisbon target plainly does not mean that the social dimensions of widening access are "complete" in any nation state. Access to higher education is highly dependent on a huge number of socio-economic and other social factors, some of which are linked to higher education policy, some of which are the result of broader changes to demographics, economic climate or cultural and social perceptions and expectations. In the UK, for example, the impact of the introduction of higher undergraduate fees for domestic students in England and Wales from 2012-13 has yet to be fully felt. Whilst the rhetoric of widening access remains widespread, it was feared that the effect of average annual university fees of £8500 on students from lower socio-economic backgrounds might be detrimental to the sustainability of fairer and wider access to higher education (Moore et al, 2011). However, the most recent figures on university admissions for the 2012/13 intake indicate that the percentage from the low socio-economic groups is holding up. The withdrawal of well-regarded (Hatt et al, 2007) nationally-funded widening participation schemes (particularly Aimhigher[1]) has led some commentators (McCaig and Adnett, 2009; Butcher et al, 2012) to view the current time of change in the UK as marking the transition between a "golden age… in which generous resources flowed in support of a national [widening participation] strategy and an emerging austere age in which the infrastructure is being drastically dismantled".

In other countries participating in IBAR, universities have enjoyed a certain amount of protection from the market forces impinging on UK institutions by virtue of high levels of state intervention in higher education planning, admissions and funding. However, many national policymakers in Europe have been much less inclined than their counterparts in the UK to pursue systematic widening participation strategies and there is little evidence of local widening participation strategies at institutional level. Evidence from the IBAR study suggests that increased competition in the higher education sector and concerns across Europe about the relationship between local and cross-border provision as an outcome of the Bologna process may however

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[1] The Aimhigher programme was established to encourage progression to higher education. Working through 42 partnerships across England, the programme encompassed a wide range of activities to engage and motivate school and college learners who had the potential to enter higher education, but who were under-achieving, undecided or lacking in confidence. The programme particularly focused on students from schools from lower socio-economic groups and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in higher education is low. See: http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/sites/practitioner/home/

mean that other countries start to have different conversations about the meaning of access and widening participation within their own national systems.

Context of the research

This paper reports on data collected as part of one part of a much larger project, IBAR. IBAR (Identifying Barriers in Promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level) is a three-year project (January 2010 to December 2013) funded by the EACEA Life-Long learning Programme. The project is led by the Centre for Higher Education Studies in Prague and the University of Durham and includes contributions from five additional partner countries: Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia.

The aim of IBAR is to identify challenges faced by European institutions in implementing the EUA/ENQA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education Part 1 (ESG1), which were adopted in 2005 and are currently under review. Detailed research is being undertaken at 28 European HEIs, 4 in each of the 7 IBAR partner countries. Outputs from the project include description, comparison and analysis of current institutional practice in implementation of ESG1, identification of barriers to implementation and identification of local practice and policies not yet included in pan-European quality assurance guidelines.

Access, or widening participation is one pan-European concern that is not explicitly mentioned in ESG1. The project team identified access to higher education as an area for potential expansion of ESG1 and one of the work-packages of the IBAR project was dedicated to collecting institutional data on this issue. Data was collected between June and October 2011. Data methodologies included examination and analysis of national legislation or policies and institutional policies on access; individual interviews and/or focus group interviews with key respondents including senior university managers, academic and administrative staff, students and (where applicable) staff with particular responsibility for developing or supporting access policies; questionnaires or short surveys of larger groups of staff and/or students.

Framing the research

A recent article by John Butcher, Rohini Corfield and John Rose-Adams in the UK's *Times Higher Education*[2] identifies the "fluidity of discourse" around access or widening participation and the multiple terms and concepts (inclusion, equity, diversity) with which access shares increasingly un-delineated territory. In order to frame our research, we turned to previous work, the 1992-1996 Council of Europe project on "Access to higher education in Europe"[3] which usefully related the concept of access to that of quality and offered a model that allowed us to link

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[2] See: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=417374
[3] See: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/completedactivities/Access_EN.asp

access or widening participation to the wider principles and goals of ESG1. The interpretation of *"access"* agreed by the Council of Europe project group encompasses both quality and equality, within three inter-related elements:

- greater participation in higher education of good quality
- the extension of participation to include currently under-represented groups
- a recognition that participation extends beyond entry to successful completion.

Taking these three framing elements as defined by the Council of Europe project our own project network agreed a short set of questions to be applied locally at participating institutions. As the countries participating in IBAR have had very different histories and experiences since access to higher education became a widespread topic of debate in the early 1960s it was also agreed that each national study should also include a short description of relevant national policies and/or legislation.

Greater participation in higher education of good quality

One commonality across all of the IBAR countries has been a huge rise in enrolment numbers in recent decades. This is particularly true for Eastern European countries, which have enjoyed a spectacular rise in participation in a short time period. In Poland, for example, participation rates for the academic year 2008/09 were 52%, compared with about 13% in 1990/91. Expansion rates over the same period in the Czech Republic show remarkably similar patterns (17.1% in 1990/01, rising to 52.3% in 2007/08).

Growth in Western European countries has taken place over a longer timescale. In Portugal, high participation rates of around 52% have been achieved through gradual expansion since the 1974 revolution. In the UK, rates differ across the countries of the union. High rates of participation in Scotland (around 52%) are not replicated in other parts of the country. Overall, the official rate for 2010/11 was 47%. Failure to meet the EU target of 50% has been blamed on a lack of places, rather than a lack of demand. Similarly, reaching the 50% participation target has proved to be problematic in the Netherlands and the Dutch government has now set a target date of 2050 to achieve a workforce with a higher education qualification.

Regardless of local variations in the ways in which IBAR countries are meeting the EU participation targets, all of the countries participating in the project can be said to have moved from an elite to a mass participation system. Mass participation can be seen as a corollary of vastly improved access, in the sense that many more people are able to take advantage of higher education opportunities. However, it might be argued that enhanced access in terms of numbers does not necessarily correlate with equality of opportunity and national variations in the nature of participation routes can create additional complexity.

Most national systems offer variant forms of higher or further education to learners who have completed secondary level qualifications. In the UK, there are two routes for continuing education at post-secondary level: higher education in the form of universities, leading to a first cycle degree, or a network of further education colleges leading to a vocational qualification, higher national diploma or foundation degree. A third route, that of polytechnics (or technical or central institutions) became obsolete as a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, which enabled polytechnics to become independent universities and greatly increased the size of the university sector in the UK.

A report published by HEFCE in August 2012 notes the increasingly important role that the UK's further education colleges play in supporting widening participation in post-secondary education. Of particular interest is the extent to which boundaries are increasing blurring between first cycle degree pathways that start at higher education institutions and those which start through the further education sector (often through partnerships with local higher education providers). Further education colleges are perceived as a crucial access point for both school leavers and for continuing learners in "low-participation" areas.

In other national systems, increasing numbers participating or aspiring to participate in higher education have been accommodated in different ways. In some systems (for example, in Poland) legislation now allows private institutions to operate alongside state-funded universities. The Netherlands and Portugal operate binary systems, which retain polytechnics or technical universities alongside institutions offering a broader curriculum portfolio.

In the UK, changes in funding arrangements for first cycle degrees mean that universities in England wishing to charge tuition fees above the basic level set by the government are required to commit to an Access Agreement approved by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA)[4], which is an independent public body that helps safeguard and promote fair access to higher education. Much of the focus of OFFA Access Agreements is the removal of financial barriers to higher education for students from poorer backgrounds. However, barriers to access are not just financial and the diversity of the UK higher education system is reflected in the diversity of approaches to encouraging and supporting the aspiration of different groups of students.

The IBAR study includes UK universities who might be broadly described as "recruiting" institutions that do not always fill all the places on all courses and whose focus on widening participation strategies might serve different purposes from those universities (also represented in this study) who are traditionally over-subscribed and could be described as "selecting" institutions. OFFA allows institutions to determine their own strategies and so each group of institutions tends to pursue highly variant approaches to widening participation.

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[4] http://www.offa.org.uk/

Despite the abolition of the UK's binary higher education system, significant differences between the types of educational experiences offered to students and the perceived value of qualifications from different types of institution perpetuate and call into question the extent to which "access" in the UK means the same as "equality of opportunity". Regardless of the volume of national (or government) rhetoric about "widening participation", differing views about the meaning of widening participation have not been resolved in practice and that there can be an unhelpful tendency for simplistic views and solutions to emerge (Thomas, 2001). One (perhaps broadly "academic") position is that young people with talent should be encouraged into an unreformed higher education system, regardless of their background. Another is that the higher education system should be reformed to reflect the changing educational needs of society, although these needs often tend to be skewed significantly towards the concerns of employers rather than those of learners. Another position is that the meaning and purpose of higher education should be re-examined, diversity should be celebrated, different learning opportunities should be explored and the burden of change should not be placed on entrants (Jones and Thomas, 2006).

All of these philosophical positions were expressed by one or more participants in the UK part of the IBAR study on access. Jones and Thomas (2006) suggest that as UK universities experience higher levels of differentiation (as a result of increased de-regulation, fewer state controls on admissions and increasing competition to attract students), different types of institutions are likely to adopt different definitions of access as part of distinctive mission statements. In fact, whilst data from the IBAR project supports this assertion (and there is considerable evidence of increasingly strategic views of access as a differentiation indicator across UK universities), individuals across the *same* university were also likely to hold diverse philosophical or ideological positions on widening participation. In numerous cases, individuals holding positions dedicated to furthering their institutions' access policies reported difficulties in securing the support of (often senior) colleagues or difficulties in securing funds for widening participation activities. These challenges have become more pressing because the withdrawal of nationally supported activities under Aimhigher and similar programmes has left responsibility for widening participation rather more squarely at the doorstep of universities themselves. Some UK interviewees remarked on their frustration with institutional policies or practices that are perceived as "politically timid" or that reflect the values of senior managers who don't understand the real-life experiences of non-traditional learners.

Whilst OFFA agreements might increasingly be perceived as *de facto* institutional access policies and/or plans of action in UK universities[5] they can also be viewed with some skepticism at institutional level. This is partly because the agreements are written with an external audience in mind and are inevitably carefully constructed to create a favourable impression of institutional activity. Similarly, the agreements are perceived to be weak on measureable targets or real indicators of effect. As one member of staff at a UK University noted, "the OFFA agreements are

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[5] Although OFFA does not operate in Scotland, Scottish universities are required to have similar agreements with the Scottish Funding Council on widening participation strategies.

all about money spent and not about impact". OFFA agreements can be understood as having a fiscal thrust: they are agreements that allow institutions and government to justify the leveraging of student tuition fees by demonstrating what proportion of the income generated is being spent on access-related activities.

A number of UK interviewees with responsibility for implementing widening access activities at their institutions unequivocally stated that their ambition is to influence institutional culture and practice to create an environment in which widening access is no longer seen as an "add-on" or "tokenistic" but is part of normal day-to-day business. In particular, there is a desire to avoid a deficit view of access in which certain groups or individuals are perceived as problematic or deserving of special help. However, the more that an access-oriented culture permeates all institutional activity, the harder it is to argue for special allocation of funding or targeted activities, or for dedicated posts. This tension operates at both institutional and national level: it may be impossible, or at least highly undesirable to set fixed benchmarks for access-related activity, but in the absence of any quantifiable standards, there will always be debate about how much resource is needed and how it is leveraged. One interviewee described an environment of almost perpetual debate at his university about the scope and scale of widening access activities: "how wide is 'wide' meant to be?" This discussion is echoed in all the institutions surveyed as financial constraints mean that every aspect of university activity is increasingly judged on fiscal grounds. One interviewee commented:

> "The challenge is how to manage the balance between mainstreaming the use of money for widening participation and determining funding for specific groups and activities... it's too easy for widening participation to get lost if it is not articulated explicitly. The interesting thing is where the strategic 'hooks' are... resources follow what is seen as important, what's in the strategic plan."

In some other national systems, higher levels of state coordination of admissions and a lack of coordinated national policy on widening access mean that universities have fewer opportunities or incentives than their UK counterparts to select entrants or to influence who is able to access higher education. In some systems, lack of institutional control over entrants has created tensions. In the Netherlands, for example, universal national competition for places is being gradually replaced with greater freedoms at institutional level to select candidates. In Portugal a similar national system of competition has created dissatisfaction in some subject areas (particularly in arts), which would prefer to select at local level by portfolio rather than accept candidates assigned on the basis of school leaving grades. The trajectory of change in both these systems is towards greater institutional control over selection and admissions processes. Institutions in Poland and in the Czech Republic enjoy relatively high levels of autonomy over admissions procedures and are able to choose whether or not to apply local criteria (for example, entrance examinations) to supplement school attainment data.   However, there is little evidence to suggest that institutions in these member states are choosing to deliberately pursue widening access policies.

The UK is a net importer of students and domestic demand for higher education remains high despite rises in tuition costs in England. Despite the anxieties expressed by some individuals about unregulated growth, institutional strategies are most likely to focus on three areas of activity: growing overall student numbers, attracting highly qualified students and maximising income per student. Institutions report difficulties in resolving these demands with the demands of the widening participation agenda. In particular, there is considerable anxiety about the misalignment between the government's push to widen participation in higher education from under-represented groups and the pressure on universities to pursue excellence by setting high admissions criteria (AAB grades at A-Level) and removing the cap on places available to high-performing students. One interviewee at a prestigious UK university described a seminar she attended to discuss the recent Government White Paper *Higher Education: students at the heart of the system* (2011):

> "[The speaker pointed out that] it was like the chapter on AAB admissions had been written by one person and the chapter on widening participation had been written by someone else. I find it hard to see how the push for AAB students can do anything else but squeeze out students from less advantaged backgrounds. At the moment, we accept students with 3 Bs [as part of our access activities]."

In some other systems, access concerns focus on the loss of domestic students to other markets. The challenge here is not that high-performing students will choose to cluster around a few, high-prestige domestic "super-universities" as in the UK, but that they will choose to study (and eventually live and work) abroad. Access and quality are thus explicitly linked in the minds of learners because if students perceive local provision to be of a lower standard than in other systems they are more likely to choose to study outside their own country. In most systems, massification has led to increased student/staff ratios, concern about the overall standard of entrants, particularly in the early years of study and anxieties about the relationship between new modes of learning in a mass system and the maintenance of high academic standards. In Latvia, for example, a drop of 30,000 in the number of enrolled students is being blamed on emigration and on a perception amongst students that higher education is better funded and of higher quality in other parts of Europe.

In The Netherlands and Portugal, efforts to maintain or grow student numbers have tended towards attracting overseas students (in both systems, programmes in English are increasingly common) and in attracting students over 23 years old. Although institutions in these systems enjoy relatively low levels of freedom in selectivity, some opportunities do exist for institutions to market their programmes to targeted groups.

Extending participation

Greater learner numbers do not necessarily deliver greater diversity in the student population. In the UK, almost all school-leavers from middle class backgrounds now attend university, but working-class learners remain under-represented (Archer et al, 2005). Whilst issues of gender inequality have largely been overcome (in the UK, women outnumber men in higher education and similar patterns are visible across the European higher education area) issues of social mobility remain highly problematic. In the broadest sense, widening participation can be understood as a long-term activity that raises the aspirations of generations within previously excluded social groupings, rather than a short-term intervention in the life of a single individual. Interviewees in the UK pointed to the "political naivety" of agencies or institutions who might believe that widening participation in higher education is an easily-achieved goal or one that can be implemented quickly and uniformly.

One UK interviewee spoke at some length about the need to convince senior management of the added value benefits of widening participation to the whole institution, particularly in a time of financial constraint:

> "There's been a lot of investment, but demonstrating what has changed [as a result of widening participation] has to be thought about more carefully. We need to include both quantitative and qualitative stories and be much more subtle about our message... but you sometimes just don't feel able to have these sort of debates when you're fighting for survival".

At another UK institution, one interviewee described the tendency for academic departments to contest the interpretations of data made by senior management or by staff members responsible for monitoring and supporting widening participation:

> "Causation and correlation are difficult... we often hear 'we are a busy academic department and we have better things to do.' There is a perception that some years are just better than others. Trend data is important, but no one really knows past 2012 what the 'typical' demographic will be and how we can prove that we are special."

A number of UK interviewees described the emotional, or personal nature of the access or widening participation agenda. To challenge often deeply held beliefs about "fairness", "equity" or the role or purpose of higher education in society, the types of data needed might be different. Case studies of success and personal narratives from people who have entered higher education through non-traditional routes are perceived as highly effective, but there are sensitivities associated with their collection and use. As one interviewee explained:

> "We need more examples [of success] that we can publicise but we don't want to make people into sideshows at the funfair. People need to get on with their lives."

In other systems, there is much less evidence to suggest that universities either choose, or are encouraged by national policy, to pursue strategies to extend the

availability of higher education to formerly under-represented groups. Typically, institutional policies on access are in line with national equality legislation frameworks, which state that higher education must be available to all prospective learners, regardless of gender, ethnicity, disability, social background etc.

In most systems, rhetoric about extending access is generally less developed than in the UK. Fair access is widely conceptualised as a corollary of equality of treatment in both national legislation and university admissions processes. In Latvia, for example, entrants are judged solely on secondary attainment and admissions interviews or other selection activities are rare: "open access" institutions are those that do not apply additional entrance exams of other forms of local selection. Data on disability, ethnicity or social background is not considered as part of admission criteria: to collect and use data to inform admissions activities is more likely to be perceived as encouraging discrimination rather than as a mechanism to support affirmative action. Universities may offer discretionary bursaries or reductions in tuition to students facing economic hardship. There is an explicit assumption that access to educational opportunities is enshrined in national legislation, is based on merit/academic achievement and that universities are not required to play any kind of role as agents social equality. Similar arrangements are in place in Slovakia, although here there are more anxieties about the status of minority ethnic groups and legislation is in place to ensure that significant minorities (Hungarians, Romanians etc.) are able to access education in their own languages. Of particular concern is the Roma community, who account for 1.7% of the Slovak population and tend to suffer exclusion from secondary education, which affects their ability to access higher qualifications. At least one Slovakian university has created dedicated departments to focus on the development of Roma teachers and social workers to address these challenges but in general, special measures to support university entrance for learners from the Roma community are not in place.

In most systems, however, there are mechanisms for publicising programmes of study to prospective students and many institutions undertake outreach activities at local schools. For some institutions, this represents a conscious strategy to raise the aspirations of local learners. For example, one university in Scotland offers a schools outreach programme, which has been designed to give school pupils from under-represented groups an insight into degree-level study with no obligation to proceed to a degree course. From January to March each year over 500 local high school pupils participate in interactive workshops, meet university students, enjoy subject tasters, receive campus tours, visit the University's Student Union and work with pupils from other schools. Participating pupils are required to meet at least one of the following eligibility criteria:

- Little or no parental experience of education post-16
- Limited family income
- Unskilled, semi-skilled or unemployed parent(s)
- Living in neighbourhood or other circumstances not conducive to study
- Educational progress blighted by specific family events at critical times (e.g. bereavement, illness or family break-up)

- Other exceptionally adverse circumstances or factors specified by [school] nominator

The university sees these kinds of activities as central to its mission as a civic institution with responsibilities to its local area and staff members who are involved in these activities are proud of their achievements. However, there remains a frustration that social background and school experience remain such a strong determinant of academic and economic success. One staff members involved with this initiative noted that the potential students from low-participation groups he works with "have the ability, but not the passport or the confidence. We give them the passport and the confidence."

At other institutions, the aim of schools outreach is less overtly about raising aspiration, but instead offers the university the opportunity to attract more potential candidates to its programmes, especially those which tend to be under-subscribed in some systems (in particular, sciences and mathematics). However, it seems likely that school-level learners participating in, for example, the Chemistry summer schools, open days and competitions organised by one of the universities participating in the IBAR project in the Czech Republic are also likely to enjoy raised aspirations and ambition as a side effect of these activities. In fact, science-based outreach activities appear to be a common feature in most systems, suggesting a pan-European anxiety about the attractiveness of tertiary science provision to young learners.

Supporting completion

In all of the UK universities participating in the IBAR study there is recognition that access is a broader issue than merely the management of enrollments. In some cases the admissions process could be understood as "aspiration-raising at 10 or 11" (UK respondent) when school pupils are first exposed to careers or to continuing education advice. One UK interviewee remarked that it might be even better to work with younger children in primary education to expose them to the possibility of a university education before other social barriers take hold. Patterns of funding for university places in the UK mean that universities are significantly incentivised to ensure that as many students as possible complete their chosen course of study. Participants in the IBAR survey described typical institutional retention strategies which include the following types of activities:

- ensuring that incoming students have been accurately informed and appropriately advised on their choice of programme, and are aware of the demands that higher education will place on them;

- supporting students in their transition to university studies, ensuring that they are aided in the development of appropriate study skills;
- providing social and personal support to facilitate integration into the University community;
- ensuring that a range of student services, including financial and personal support, is accessible to students;
- monitoring student progress and achievement and to identify, and where possible to reduce, barriers to retention;
- ensuring that staff are aware of the factors influencing student retention and can implement appropriate strategies for improving it.

One UK interviewee commented on the difference between "widening access", which can be seen as removing barriers to entry, and "widening participation" which can be seen as supporting the whole student journey from enrollment to future employment and encompasses support for retention, progression and all aspects of the student experience.

A common theme across all the UK institutions surveyed is the perception that students who may have entered the university under special access arrangements should not be singled out for special attention or otherwise differentiated. Whilst the very specific needs of some students with particular disabilities are carefully managed, the overall perception is that opportunities for successful study should be available to all students regardless of their access route and that concern for retention and progression should permeate the institution's educational and student experience provision. Support might take many forms, including the design of the curriculum, and might not be immediately visible or identifiable as a "widening participation" initiative. This creates dilemmas for staff members with particular responsibility for widening participation activities. Mainstreaming support for learning and providing the best possible experience for all students is a highly desirable ambition, but there is a real danger that "widening participation" as a strategic, and separately-funded, endeavour might get lost as a result.

In other systems, differentiated support activities tend to be directed at groups who have been identified as "at risk" in local contexts. For example, in Portugal, adult learners and foreign students are most likely to benefit from special measures (for example, in the scheduling of classes to assist those learners with family or work commitments). In some faculties additional learning support is provided for students who find aspects of programmes challenging (for example, extra mathematics tuition for engineering students).

There is a strong perception amongst the UK participants in this study that many powerful national drivers, including the statistics collected by HESA, reinforce a unitary view of the value of higher education that is antithetical to the widening participation agenda. Narrow definitions of "success" (e.g. a degree classification of 2.1 or above and subsequent participation in full time employment) do not reflect the differing aspirations of many potential learners. Universities are increasingly scrutinised and judged on a small number of performance indicators, which create a

barrier to the provision of alternative routes and diverse learning experiences. Messages from government are confusing: universities are required to direct resources to widening access to under-represented groups, but at the same time are encouraged to compete for the highest performing school leavers.

In many systems, high withdrawal rates, particularly in the first year of study are recognised as a significant problem. In systems with low levels of institutional control over admissions, participants in IBAR report difficulties with low levels of motivation amongst students who find themselves at institutions other than their first or second choice, or studying on programmes that are a poor fit with their interests or employment expectations. These difficulties can be compounded in systems where there is a perceived low level of fit between funded programmes and national economic demand for graduates (for example, in Poland).

Many universities are able to take local steps to address low retention rates. Typical responses include stronger profiling of programmes and enhanced information about programme content and learning opportunities to help students make informed choices; enhanced study and pastoral support for all students, with (in many cases) tailored support for students in "at risk" categories (for example, Turkish women students in The Netherlands). In some systems (notably Latvia), there is evidence of a prevailing assumption that withdrawal is a result either of poor teaching at secondary level which leaves students ill-prepared for university study, or a lack of motivation on the part of individual students. In some institutions, the proposed strategy is to limit numbers of entrants in order to offer enhanced contact time and smaller class sizes to assist students who need to catch up in order to meet required standards of progression.

Conclusions

All of the countries participating in the IBAR project are signatories to a variety of European directives, including the Bologna Declaration, which have implications for the accessibility of higher education. 'Access' is however a poorly defined term in the context of European higher education systems and subject to considerable variation in the way it is articulated through national legislation and institutional policy and practice.

Whilst the current absence of any standard or guidance on a matter of such importance to the future effectiveness of the European Higher Education Area, and to ministerial commitments to enabling social mobility, is an obvious shortcoming in the current policies and directives from the EU, the complexity of the access agenda does not easily lend itself to inclusion in pan-national guidelines.

Our data exposes at least three major dilemmas that face policy-makers developing pan-European guidelines intended to function at European level. Firstly, there is enormous variation in the extent to which institutions in different systems are able or willing to take local responsibility for the implementation of European initiatives

to promote access to higher education because of varying levels of national planning and control of admissions, differing levels of institutional autonomy in developing admissions strategies and widespread lack of national incentivisation to pursue widening access agendas at local level.

Secondly, there remains the question of the extent to which higher education institutions should be expected to be agents of social justice. Eurydice examined the social dimension in the European Higher Education Area (EACEA/Eurydice 2010, 2011b) and concluded that very few countries have set specific targets related to the social dimension of higher education and a monitoring of the participation of underrepresented groups has not yet been developed to any significant degree. Eurydice reports also indicate that while special measures to assist specific groups based on socio-economic status, gender, disability, ethnicity, etc. exist at institutional level in many systems, these are rarely a central element of higher education policy. The IBAR data supports these conclusions, but it also raises the question of whether, even when national steering demands attention is paid to widening participation (as in the UK), institutions will readily accede. Although widening participation remains high on the national agenda in the UK, high levels of institutional autonomy and high levels of institutional differentiation mean that this agenda is played out in very different ways in different universities.

Thirdly, even when the national climate supports widening access activities at local level, access remains highly contested territory. Although the UK staff interviewed as part of this study were all passionate and committed to the activities they organise, there is a recognition that WP schemes are expensive, can often only target a small number of individuals and that there are "huge problems of aspiration" in some parts of UK society that universities alone might not be able to challenge. Even in institutions where the idea of widening access is very well established, there is a perception that the territory needs to be regularly re-defined, and that "the battle needs to be regularly re-fought".

The "success" of widening participation activities is often highly subjective and by definition hard to measure (Thomas, 2011). Whilst a number of UK participants in this study spoke about the long-term social effects of their activities and the difficulty of measuring impact over long time periods, senior managers and other key stakeholders are much more likely to be interested in short-term, quantitative data. There is concern that quantitative data (for example, on enrollments, progression, degree classification, employment) should be enriched with qualitative data to give a better picture of the real experience of students and a richer data set in which to base future activities.   Widening participation initiatives can also be costly: in a time of widespread fiscal constraint across Europe, high cost activities with hard-to-measure results may be a difficult concept to "sell".

Despite these challenges, based on the findings of our study, our final report for the IBAR project included the following tentative recommendations that might offer some guidance for the revision of the ESG:

1. Include access as a key dimension of a revised set of *Standards and Guidelines*.

Access and the related matter of widening participation have emerged from the national reports within this study as crucial, complex and pressing priorities in terms of the governance and the social and economic effectiveness of higher education in the regions of Europe. The current absence of any standard or guidance on a matter of such importance to the future effectiveness of the European Higher Education Area, and to ministerial commitments to enabling social mobility, is an obvious shortcoming in the current directive and needs to be addressed in the current spirit of ESG as a guiding framework for institutions to adopt and adapt.

2. Encourage higher education institutions to take 'ownership' of access, embedding a culture of good practice in this area.

There is variation in the extent to which institutions are taking responsibility for the implementation of governmental initiatives to promote access. Individual institutions vary in terms of the respective degrees of proactivity and caution they demonstrate in this regard. Caution, even inertia, may arise through a professed dependency on state 'law' in such matters, or conversely through an attempt to balance or subvert competing and sometimes contradictory government agendas and directives which set responsibilities for access uncomfortably against rankings of institutional prestige and perceived excellence. Institutions should be supported and encouraged to adopt identified effective practice and such barriers to adoption minimised.

3. Introduce greater capacity for HEIs to choose their students directly.

Institutions across the participating member states are often hampered and impeded by restrictive national legislation and policy measures that reduce their capacity for organisational responsiveness, imagination and agility in relation to access initiatives. Such constraining factors need to be identified and where possible eliminated to enhance provision.

4. Encourage higher education institutions to track their students

There is currently inadequate tracking of students and provision of helpful information to guide them. In general terms, institutions should be enabled to develop structures and mechanisms, not necessarily always formalised or systematised, which are aimed at collecting pertinent data on students' enrolment, progression, and rates of graduation and dropout, to better inform policy and enhance practice.

5. Improve outreach measures

Institutions need to develop stronger administrative capacities to be able to reach out to prospective students, to support and inform them through appropriate study programmes. Although the national research undertaken for this study identified

examples of good practice in outreach activities (summer schools, mentoring, after-school tuition and links with schools and colleges in disadvantaged areas), financial support for underrepresented students and additional expenditure on activities to support student retention and success need to be more widely encouraged.   Access agreements can be established to identify achievable targets that institutions set themselves to make progress.

6. Promote inclusion

Access should be more clearly defined as open to life-long learning possibilities, and as accommodating all age groups, social classes and ethnic groupings. It should embrace a broad variety of modes of study and focus not only on traditional student school-leaver cohorts in full-time study programmes.

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