

A New Social Segregation? The Impact of Tuition Fees, Student Number Controls and School Leaving Age On the Composition of Student Cohorts, On Academic Practice and Student Experience, In UK Universities

Gabriella Cagliesi^{1*}, Denise Hawkes² and Clare Saunders³

¹University of Sussex

²University of Greenwich
mgc25@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract

Almost a generation has passed since the Dearing Report (1997) triggered the reintroduction and subsequent escalation of tuition fees within UK higher education alongside a mandate for universities to widen participation. It is timely to reassess how this and other policy changes, such as the increase in school leaving age, have changed the student cohort composition; and the consequential impact on both academic practice and student experience. We use a unique data set created by combining HESA, DLHE and our own institutional data, to present evidence of the impact of these fee changes, as well as the removal of student number controls and the introduction of private providers, on the composition of student cohorts at a large multi-faculty post-1992 university. We discuss the implications for academic practice, curriculum and co-curricular provision, and critically explore the wider implications for the widening participation agenda, in terms of the changing distribution of student cohorts across the sector and its impact on students' (and staff) experience. Our university data suggest that the cohort has become increasingly local and dominated by students with widening participation characteristics. The most significant impacts are the combination of the removal of the student number controls and the raising of the school leaving age. The combination of these two policies has led 66% of our undergraduate student's drawn from the students with widening participation characteristics living locally to the university.

Keywords: diversity; equality; inclusion; participation; widening