‘Disadvantaged Learners’: Who Are We Targeting? Understanding the Targeting of Widening Participation Activity in the United Kingdom Using Geo-Demographic Data From Southwest England

Neil Harrison, University of the West of England, neil.harrison@uwe.ac.uk
Sue Hatt, University of the West of England, Susan.Hatt@uwe.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper analyses the definition of the appropriate target group for widening participation activities advanced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in their Targeting Disadvantaged Learners advice to Aimhigher and higher education providers. This definition includes components of area deprivation and higher education participation rates, which are apparently intended to act as a proxy to reach learners from lower socio-economic groups. Through statistical analysis of geo-demographical data from the Southwest region of England, this paper questions whether the HEFCE targeting guidance is likely to meet the policy aims that underpin it and reach the ‘disadvantaged learners’ of its title. It is found that the geographical proxy tends to miss learners from lower socio-economic groups in areas of wider affluence and those in rural areas. The paper concludes by questioning whether the areas identified by a rigorous application of the targeting guidance are likely to be the most fruitful locations for outreach activities in the short-term given the ingrained, multi-faceted and multi-generational challenges which they face.

© 2009 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2009 Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4, 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.
Targeting learners to widening participation

Targeting is central to widening participation. It determines those who do or do not take part in widening participation programmes; those whose awareness of higher education is or is not increased and those whose aspirations to progress to higher education are or are not supported by activity programmes. If the targeting criteria are not fit for purpose, scarce resources will be misdirected towards young people from groups that are already well-represented in higher education (Thomas, 2001). Alternatively resources will be spent on those for whom higher education is not at present a realistic option. Accurate targeting is therefore of prime importance in evaluating whether funding has been used effectively.

Although ‘good’ targeting is an essential prerequisite for widening participation, finding the ‘right’ participants is challenging. It requires clarity of definition, appropriate selection criteria and accurate processes for operationalising the criteria. Since 1997, the focus of widening participation policy has been on groups that are under-represented in the higher education student population. These were defined within the Dearing Report as being ‘those from socio-economic groups III to V, people with disabilities and specific ethnic minority groups’ (NCIHE, 1997, p. 14, para 29).

Although the profile of higher education participation has changed in the last ten years, particularly with respect to minority ethnic groups, the largest under-represented group remains those from the lower socio-economic groups: now defined by the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) as groups 4 to 7. They maintain their position as the priority for widening participation (DfES, 2003; Greenbank, 2006; HEFCE, 2007a) as the social class gap has proved difficult to close (NAO, 2008).

In recent years, the two main policy initiatives for addressing this social class gap have been individual university outreach efforts and Aimhigher; a national programme operating across England to raise awareness of and aspirations for higher education amongst young people from groups that are currently under-represented within the student population. It was formed in 2004 through the merger of two closely related programmes, Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression and is delivered through area partnerships spanning schools, colleges and universities.

Clarity of definition has been available for over a decade but choosing appropriate selection criteria and putting them into practice has proved
more challenging. Difficulties with collecting information from pupils, lack of direct access to parents and data protection issues all conspire to make it very difficult for Aimhigher partnerships and widening participation managers to use data on the occupational background of young people’s parents as the basis for selection. There are also methodological concerns about the use of more readily-available markers for social class such as means-tested eligibility for free school meals (Hobbs & Vignoles, 2007).

In response, widening participation managers and practitioners have turned towards other proxies that pick up on particular dimensions of social class as a means of identifying young people from the lower socio-economic groups, as defined by their parents’ occupation. For example, the link between class and parental education has been a popular criterion. This approach focused on the families’ ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1997) and resonated with policy documents that made explicit references to young people ‘who come from families with no HE in their backgrounds’ (DfEE, 2000, p. 3). Indeed, Aimhigher partnerships have shown remarkable accuracy in reaching those with no parental experience of higher education (Hatt, Baxter & Tate, 2005) but this has not proved to be a good proxy for parental occupation. Efforts to use parental income (Hatt, Baxter & Harrison, 2003) or school type (Universities UK, 2005) as a proxy have been similarly unsuccessful.

An alternative approach has been to focus on the geography of under-representation, an approach that was validated by recommendations to target those ‘living in deprived geographical areas, including deprived rural and coastal areas’ (HEFCE, 2004, p. 10) or ‘from inner city comprehensives’ (DfEE, 2000, p. 2). Postcodes are easy to obtain (from official records or directly from young people) and can now be linked simply and effectively with a range of statistics made available by various government agencies. Although they are relatively easy to operationalise and provide contextual information about the neighbourhood to assist the selection process, their reliability as a proxy for social class has been questioned in both rural and urban areas and it can lead to, “the wrong side of the street” issue where a young person on one side of the street qualifies for help but someone on the other side does not’ (Blicharski, 2000, p. 179).

Serious practitioner concerns about the use of postcode data for targeting learners were expressed in the Universities UK’s (2002) Social Class and Participation report, while Osborne & Shuttleworth (2004) found that although postcode proxies could be effective at the extremes, they had much lower validity in the middle ranges. Given that, nationally,
around half of young people come from households where the main wage earner is employed in an occupation classified within NS-SEC groups 4 to 8, focusing on extreme deprivation is unlikely to be sufficient. As UK Secretary of State John Denham said in his speech to HEFCE’s 2008 conference: ‘Widening participation is an issue for the majority, not the minority’ (Denham, 2008).

By the mid 2000s, there was growing concern that inaccurate targeting was dissipating the widening participation resource that could be more effective were it used more selectively. Consequently, HEFCE (2007a) published guidance to reiterate the emphasis on lower social groups and to provide a methodology for effective targeting.

The guidance from HEFCE proposed a three-stage targeting process by which partnerships: (a) identified the schools with which they would work most intensively, (b) worked with teachers to locate individuals who met the targeting definition and, (c) monitored the socio-economic status of those who took part in their activities to feedback into the cycle and improve the process. This article will focus on the second step in that process, that is the targeting of individuals. While it is important to acknowledge that ‘there is no correct way to target’ (Blicharski, 2000, p. 179) and that no methodology will be 100% accurate in locating the target group, this article will explore the proposed methodology to consider the extent to which it is likely to be accurate in locating individuals from lower socio-economic groups who have the potential to benefit from higher education.

Using geographical proxies to identify individuals

A policy feature of recent years has been the increasing governmental emphasis on so-called ‘area-based initiatives’, where resources and other forms of intervention have been employed on a geographically targeted basis in order to reach individuals and communities considered to be deprived or disadvantaged under some form of criteria. Examples from the field of education in the UK have included Education Action Zones (to raise school attainment) and the Sure Start initiative (to improve pre-school provision).

Area-based initiatives have been justified on the basis that disadvantage tends to be geographically concentrated and that there are specific effects in deprived areas that heighten levels of disadvantage and that need focused solutions. A review of the debate on the theoretical foundation of area-based initiatives is beyond the scope of this paper (see Dorling et al., 2001 for a useful overview). However, doubts have been
expressed about the success of these initiatives in meeting their objective of reducing educational inequalities (Gewirtz et al., 2005; Batey & Brown, 2007; Rees, Power & Taylor, 2007).

Against this background and the government policy objective to widen participation in higher education and increase equity of opportunity (Labour Party, 2005), the key passage from the HEFCE targeting statement to which this paper will refer explains that:

resources should be targeted at learners with the potential to benefit from higher education who come from under-represented communities. Overwhelmingly these learners are from lower socio-economic groups . . . and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in Higher Education is low. (HEFCE, 2007a, p. 8, para 21)

The first aspect of the statement is that the focus is on individuals with ‘the potential to benefit from higher education’. This was first established as a key principle within the sector’s thinking as early as the 1960s (Robbins, 1963). Widening participation is about extending opportunity to enter higher education to those who have the potential but, due to their educational or social background, might not consider it as a realistic option. These young people can be extremely able and studies indicate that, once at university, students from under-represented groups can demonstrate a high level of commitment to their studies that tends to reinforce success (Hatt et al., 2003; Harrison et al., 2007; Crozier et al., 2008a). Widening participation is not about ‘more means worse’ and the targeting guidance reinforces this by recommending a focus on those with potential to benefit from higher education.

The second aspect is about increasing equity and has two components: first, to target learners from households that fall into NS-SEC groups 4 to 8. Second, to target learners who are resident in geographical areas where deprivation is high and youth progression to higher education is low.

The first component is self-explanatory and refers directly to the target audience established over a number of years due to the historic under-representation of these groups (NCIHE, 1997; Thomas 2001; Hatt et al., 2005; Gorard et al., 2006; NAO, 2008). However, the identification of these individuals is often problematic as schools, colleges and local authorities do not collect information on socio-economic classification and so individuals from these groups are usually located through various proxies.

This is precisely what the second component seeks to establish. The theory underpinning this geographical proxy is not discussed but it
would appear that there is a working assumption that individuals in NS-SEC groups 4 to 8 are most likely to be found in these sorts of areas. There is a clear danger with this assumption. As Batey & Brown (2007, p. 2775) explain:

a degree of inefficiency is built into targeting by area, because people who are not the intended beneficiaries will be included. At the same time, targeting will be incomplete, because intended beneficiaries living outside the targeted area will be excluded.

There is also an implicit assumption within HEFCE (2007a) that these two types of area (high deprivation and low participation) are correlated to a significant degree.

Research question

This paper examines the inter-relationship between the three pieces of data that are used by the HEFCE targeting statement (NS-SEC group, area deprivation and participation rates). It will use spatial data from the Southwest region of England to explore to what extent area measures of deprivation and participation in higher education provide a useful proxy for identifying individual disadvantaged learners with the potential to benefit from higher education.

The article will conclude with a discussion about the policy implications of the findings and about the extent to which widening participation activity needs to work differently with contrasting communities and groups of learners. For example, some learners from under-represented groups already have the appropriate entry qualifications but have never considered accessing higher education. For them, attainment is not the issue and, if higher education can be presented as a meaningful opportunity, a significant difference can be made in a relatively short period of time. For others, on the other hand, multi-generational disengagement with education coupled with limited access to post-16 provision presents a substantial challenge that can only be addressed in the longer term. As a result, outreach activity may need to work to different aims and be evaluated against different criteria depending upon the communities and individuals at which it is targeted.

Methodology

A dataset was assembled containing the following pieces of information, indexed by Output Area². Each Output Area represents around 100 to 150 contiguous households:

© 2009 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2009 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
1. Proportion of NS-SEC 4 to 8 households (SEC2001): drawn from the 2001 Census (ONS, 2008a) and using the NS-SEC classification of the household reference person. The metric analysed in this paper is the percentage of households that are classified within NS-SEC groups 4 to 8 relative to the total, excluding households that were defined as ‘unclassifiable’. It therefore ranges from 0% to 100%. The SEC2001 dataset followed a normal distribution with a mean of 51.3% households being classified within the lower socio-economic groups. The English mean (from the 2001 Census) is 49.9%; the Southwest region thus has slightly more households from lower socio-economic groups than the national average.

2. Index of Multiple Deprivation score (IMD2007): drawn from data published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in late 2007 (DCLG, 2007). It provides a single scalar ‘score’ that represents the relative deprivation of an area across a range of factors including income, employment, education, crime and health. Scores range from 0 (low deprivation) to up to around 100 (high deprivation). The Index of Multiple Deprivation scores are only available at the lower level super Output Area (SOA) level and so the same IMD2007 scores are shared in this study by all the Output Areas in the same SOA. A lower level Super Output Area comprises a collection of Output Areas totalling around 1,000 households on average. The index of multiple deprivation dataset showed a distribution that is heavily skewed, with the majority of Output Areas clustered at the lower end of the deprivation scale and with a long tail of increasingly deprived areas. The mean index of multiple deprivation score was 17.88 for the Southwest; when compared with the English mean of 21.67, this shows the region overall to be less deprived than average.

3. Youth rate of progression to higher education (POLAR2): drawn from the POLAR2 dataset published by HEFCE (HEFCE, 2007b). It relates to the proportion of the estimated 18 year old cohort progressing to full-time higher education aged 18 or 19 and remaining on their course until at least 1st December on their year of entry. The metric provided is a five-point ordinal ranking between 1 (low participation) and 5 (high participation), which broadly represents the quintiles of the continuous distribution for the entry cohorts between 2000 and 2004. POLAR2 categories are only available at the ward level and so the same figure is used in this study for all the Output Areas in the same ward. (Wards are of highly variable sizes,
but are comprised of one or more Super Output Areas.) As can be seen in Table 1, the POLAR2 scores for the Southwest region are somewhat skewed towards the mid-range (POLAR categories 3 and 4), being less well represented at the extremes than the picture for England as a whole.

In addition to the three main components of the dataset, information was also collected from the National Statistics Postcode Directory relating to the relative rurality of the each Output Area (ONS, 2008b). This is expressed on a four point ordinal scale: 1 = urban, 2 = small towns and fringes, 3 = villages and 4 = hamlets and isolated dwellings.

As can be seen in Table 2 the Southwest region is notably less urban than the English average. It can be typified as being comprised of a small number of cities and large towns, with large rural expanses in between, dominated by villages and hamlets. Some of these rural areas (for example, Dartmoor and Cornish coastal areas) are very remote and there is concern about access to higher education from locations like these (Shucksmith, 2000; Commission for Rural Communities, 2006).

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLAR2 category</th>
<th>Southwest %</th>
<th>England %</th>
<th>Difference %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (progression rate &lt; 16%)</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (progression rate 16 to 24%)</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (progression rate 24 to 32%)</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>+3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (progression rate 32 to 40%)</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>+4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (progression rate &gt; 40%)</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>-5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rural/urban category</th>
<th>Southwest %</th>
<th>England %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (urban)</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>80.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (small towns &amp; fringes)</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (villages)</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (hamlets &amp; isolated dwellings)</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis of the interaction between the measures

**Participation vs. socio-economic classification**

As predicted by the HEFCE targeting statement, households classified within NS-SEC groups 4 to 8 are more likely to be found in areas where youth participation in higher education is low. However, the variation within the POLAR2 categories is such that the correlation, while statistically significant, is not strongly predictive.

There is a clear correlation between the SEC2001 percentages and the POLAR2 categories ($r = -0.470$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 3). However, the interquartile ranges overlap for each of the POLAR2 categories except 1 and 5 (Figure 1). Whilst the relationship between POLAR2 and SEC2001 is significant, the variability within the distributions means that neither measure is a good predictor for the other, except at the extremes. In other words, neighbourhoods with concentrations of lower socio-economic households can be found in areas across the whole range of POLAR2 categories.

**Socio-economic classification vs. deprivation**

Similarly, there is a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.556$, $p < 0.001$) between the SEC2001 and IMD2007 measures, such that greater deprivation within Output Areas is generally associated with higher proportions of households from lower socio-economic groups. Once again, however, despite the statistical significance of the correlation between the two measures, there is only limited predictive power in the relationship.

---

**Table 3**

Mean proportion of households from NS-SEC groups 4 to 8 within Southwest Output Areas by POLAR2 categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLAR2 category</th>
<th>Mean proportion of NS-SEC 4 to 8 households %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (progression rate &lt; 16%)</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (progression rate 16 to 24%)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (progression rate 24 to 32%)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (progression rate 32 to 40%)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (progression rate &gt; 40%)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© 2009 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2009 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
There is significant variability at the lower end of the IMD2007 scale (Figure 2), with less deprived areas being occupied by a wide range of households. Conversely, Output Areas with higher levels of deprivation are more uniformly to be associated with the prevalence of lower socio-economic groups. In other words, a neighbourhood with few households from lower socio-economic groups is very likely to be found within an area of low deprivation. However, the picture is much less certain for areas with higher proportions of households from NS-SEC groups 4 to 8, which are found across the whole geographical gamut of deprivation. Specifically, it is relatively common for there to be concentrated enclaves of households from lower socio-economic groups in wider areas of affluence; the opposite is less common.

**Participation vs. deprivation**

Parallel to understanding how the two proxies locate households containing the ‘disadvantaged learners’ to be targeted, it is also important to consider how the two proxies themselves interact. In the Southwest
region, there is a strong relationship at the affluent end of the spectrum, such that areas of low deprivation are almost always associated with high youth progression rates into higher education. However, the association is much less strong at higher levels of deprivation.

There is a statistically significant correlation between POLAR2 categories and IMD2007 scores ($r=-0.515$, $p<0.001$). The mean IMD2007 scores fall rapidly as one moves from POLAR2 categories 1 to 5, indicating that higher youth progression rates are generally associated with areas of lower deprivation (Table 4).

In addition, the IMD2007 scores showed a marked difference between the variances in each of the POLAR2 categories (Figure 3). There was more variability in POLAR2 category 1 than in the other categories, suggesting that areas with a low youth progression rate could include neighbourhoods with a very wide range of deprivation levels. Conversely, Output Areas in the higher POLAR2 categories were uniformly affluent. This limits the power of multiple deprivation to predict progression rates, or vice versa, especially in areas with the lowest participation in higher education.

---

Figure 2 Scatterplot showing distribution of IMD 2007 scores against the proportion of households from NS-SEC groups 4 to 8 by Output Area.
Effect of rurality

Since its inception in 2000, there have been concerns about whether the statistical construction of the Index of Multiple Deprivation has led it to be biased towards or against rural areas (Deas et al., 2003; Tunstall & Lupton, 2003; Countryside Agency, 2004; Knowles, 2006; OCSI & JH Research, 2008). Similarly, previous studies tend to suggest that young

TABLE 4
IMD2007 within Southwest Output Areas by POLAR2 categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLAR2 category</th>
<th>Mean IMD2007 score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (progression rate &lt; 16%)</td>
<td>29.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (progression rate 16 to 24%)</td>
<td>21.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (progression rate 24 to 32%)</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (progression rate 32 to 40%)</td>
<td>12.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (progression rate &gt; 40%)</td>
<td>10.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3 Boxplot of POLAR2 distribution of IMD 2007 scores.

© 2009 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2009 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
people in urban areas might be advantaged in respect to demanding higher education due to, for example, better access to information (UCAS, 2002) and their ability to live at home while studying (Commission for Rural Communities, 2006).

Through the use of the four-part measure of rurality, it was found that households from the lower socio-economic groups were relatively evenly spread across different densities of population within the Southwest. However, deprivation was significantly higher in urban and the most remote areas, while low participation rates were overwhelmingly more likely to be found in urban areas.

There is a very clear and significant positive correlation between rurality and the POLAR2 categories (\( r = 0.341, p < 0.001 \)), with rural areas, in general, being associated with higher youth progression rates (Table 5). Thus, over 90% of low participation areas were to be found in urban localities, while areas of high participation were particularly over-represented in villages and hamlets.

Output Areas in urban areas and hamlets have a higher level of deprivation than towns and villages. However, the distribution of households from lower socio-economic groups is relatively evenly spread across the four rural/urban categories (Table 6).

In summary, while areas of low participation are nearly exclusively confined to urban areas, the neighbourhoods in the more remote rural areas have, on average, only slightly less deprivation but a higher proportion of households from NS-SEC groups 4 to 8. Looking at this from the opposite perspective, Output Areas in hamlets and villages that have similar deprivation and percentage of households from the lower socio-economic groups to those in cities will typically have higher youth participation rates.

© 2009 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2009 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

**TABLE 5**

Distribution of POLAR2 categories by rural/urban categories in the Southwest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLAR2 categories</th>
<th>Rural/urban categories (1 = urban)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (progression rate &lt; 16%)</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (progression rate 16 to 24%)</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (progression rate 24 to 32%)</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (progression rate 32 to 40%)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (progression rate &gt; 40%)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Which areas does the HEFCE definition effectively identify?

HEFCE (2007a) explains that ‘relative deprivation’ should be interpreted to mean the highest 13,000 IMD2007 scores, effectively describing the 40% most deprived super Output Areas. Although the document provides no definition of ‘low participation’, this has generally been interpreted to mean POLAR2 categories 1 and 2. Remembering that the POLAR2 categories are quintiles, this working definition therefore includes 40% of wards. The geographical proxy therefore targets areas that simultaneously are both in the top 40% for deprivation and bottom 40% for participation rates.

Looking at this from the perspective of the Southwest region, if the targeting guidelines (HEFCE 2007a) were rigorously applied, only 29% of Output Areas have IMD2007 scores that fall in the highest 40% nationally, while 36% fall within POLAR2 categories 1 or 2. The conjunction of these two measures identifies only 19% of the total Output Areas in the region, which are very heavily grouped within the region’s urban areas.

Summary of main findings

From the statistical analysis above, the following findings can be deduced:

1. There are statistically significant and positive correlations between the proportion of households in NS-SEC groups 4 to 8 and both (a) high levels of deprivation, and (b) low higher education participation rates.

© 2009 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2009 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
2. However, these relationships do not have a strong predictive value. In particular, areas of high deprivation and/or low participation contain highly variable proportions of households from the lower socio-economic groups.

3. Smaller areas with concentrations of households from NS-SEC groups 4 to 8 are often to be found in larger areas of relative affluence; the opposite is less common, but not unknown.

4. There is a strong urban bias both in areas of high deprivation and low progression rates but relatively little difference between locales in the proportions of households from the lower socio-economic groups.

5. Due to the relatively limited overlap between deprivation and participation, the HEFCE geographical proxy identifies just under 20% of areas in the Southwest as likely locations for concentrations of the target groups.

Is POLAR2 a good basis for targeting disadvantaged learners?

The implicit assumption in HEFCE (2007a) is that the areas that have low POLAR2 scores are those where the greatest gains in equity can be made, that is, where the most young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds can be encouraged to aspire to higher education through initiatives and activities such as those organised by Aimhigher or individual higher education providers. However, the findings of this paper cast doubt on that assumption.

First, there is not a strong correlation between progression rates and socio-economic groups when looking at the Output Area level of definition in the Southwest. POLAR2 categories 1 and 2 do contain 51% of Output Areas with above-mean proportions of households from the lower socio-economic groups but they, therefore, exclude 49%. They also capture 21% of Output Areas that predominantly contain households from NS-SEC groups 1 to 3. Areas with low youth progression rates do have a distinct flavour by socio-economic grouping but they are far from mono-cultural.

Because of the low geographical definition of the POLAR2 dataset, there is a smoothing effect. Where two contrasting communities live adjacently within the same ward, the overall progression rate is effectively averaged. One of the failings of the POLAR2 calculations is, therefore, that it lacks the geographical definition to identify small communities of lower socio-economic groups with low progression rates. This is likely to occur particularly in rural areas, where the physical area covered by a
ward is often very large and may include numerous settlements with contrasting demographic profiles.

Second, there is a strong bias towards low participation wards within the urban concentrations in the Southwest. In some ways this is counterintuitive, as one might imagine that proximity to higher education providers might work to boost aspirations through access to information, community activities and localism (UCAS, 2002; Reay, David & Ball, 2005). Output Areas with similar profiles by socio-economic mix and deprivation tended to fall into higher POLAR2 categories if they were in rural areas than if they were in urban areas. It is likely that this is, in part, related to the environment in rural secondary schools, which, due to their wider geographical catchment areas, are likely to draw in a more mixed demographic profile with positive influences through peer pressure, role modelling and teacher expectations (Harrison & Hatt, forthcoming).

What does the IMD2007 measure actually measure and how does this impact on targeting?

The second component of the HEFCE targeting proxy is that interventions should be focused on those living in the 40% of super Output Areas nationally with the highest levels of deprivation. While the very highest levels of deprivation are reliably related to low progression rates, areas with mid and low levels of deprivation can be found across the whole range of POLAR2 categories. There is a statistically significant link between deprivation and participation but its predictive power is not strong. Similarly, there is a significant correlation between the IMD2007 score and the SEC2001 percentage in a given Output Area but there is considerable variability, in areas with lower levels of deprivation.

Pulling these two findings together, the proxy value of the IMD2007 is rather compromised. Similarly to the POLAR2 categories, it is effectively blind to small pockets of lower socio-economically grouped households in otherwise less-deprived areas, while it is also not a good predictor for university progression where this is low.

It is useful to understand the Output Areas that are excluded from the HEFCE target definition. A third (34%) of Output Areas (1671 out of 4968) showing high levels of deprivation are excluded as they have relatively high youth progression rates, while 46% of Output Areas (2761 out of 6058) with low progression rates are excluded because they are not sufficiently deprived. Perhaps most significantly, the net result is that the HEFCE targeting statement effectively excludes two-thirds of
Output Areas in the Southwest with above-mean percentages of households from lower socio-economic groups.

A total of 3297 Output Areas in the Southwest meet both components of the HEFCE statement (Table 7). However, a further 4432 (2761 + 1671) meet one part but not the other. A companion paper to this one (Harrison & Hatt, forthcoming) investigates these areas in detail through the use of case studies. It is found that such areas appear, *prima facie*, to provide good opportunities for widening participation, with above average proportions of households from the lower socio-economic groups, schools that have levels of attainment that can support mainstreamed progress into higher education and economies that provide some opportunity for employment types that require higher levels of qualification.

**Is the bottom 19% the best place to increase participation from ‘disadvantaged learners’?**

The calculations above suggest that in the Southwest of England, 3297 Output Areas would be included in the HEFCE proxy to identify ‘disadvantaged learners’, comprising just 19% of the total. Based on the assumption that Output Areas are of broadly equivalent population, 65% of the households under this definition would be classified as being from lower socio-economic groups. The comparable figure for the areas falling outside the targeting statement would be 45%. At first glance, it would therefore appear that this bottom 19% is a relatively strong starting point for finding disadvantaged learners.

Progression to university is, in essence, the result of the interaction between the individual and the education sector. In order to demand higher education, the young person must both have the post-16 results that permit entry *and* the aspiration to do so. Both of these are related to the supply of post-16 education in the area. Similarly, the higher

---

**TABLE 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Output Areas in the Southwest</th>
<th>In top 13,000 English SOAs for IMD2007</th>
<th>In other SOAs</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POLAR2 categories 1 or 2</td>
<td>3297 (19%)</td>
<td>2761 (16%)</td>
<td>6058 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLAR2 categories 3 to 5</td>
<td>1671 (10%)</td>
<td>9285 (55%)</td>
<td>10956 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>4968 (29%)</td>
<td>12046 (71%)</td>
<td>17014 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© 2009 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2009 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
education sector itself controls supply through the availability of student numbers, their entry requirements and their geographical distribution.

Studies of the areas that meet the HEFCE targeting criteria have found that they often contain schools with poor educational outcomes (Raphael Reed et al., 2007; Raphael Reed, Gates & Last, 2007; Harrison & Hatt, forthcoming), to the point that progression to post-16 study is very much a minority pursuit and higher education is simply not a viable option for the vast majority. More generally, Warrington (2005) argues for the importance of ‘place’ in regard to educational opportunity and social exclusion, while Lupton (2005) found that the ‘quality’ of schools in heavily deprived urban areas was subject to a downward pressure from high staff turnover, administrative pressures, lack of parental support, low teacher expectations and inadequate resourcing, producing systemic fragility and severely limiting their ability to achieve better results.

In their HEFCE-sponsored study of south Bristol, Raphael Reed et al. (2007) found strong multi-generational and multi-faceted cultures working against educational engagement and university progression. Parents and communities had memories of how the school system had failed them, coupled with a sense of disempowerment for many (Gewirtz et al., 2005; Brine, 2006). It has been known for nearly fifty years (Jackson & Marsden, 1962) that ‘middle class links’ are important in framing educational aspirations for the working class. However, in their analysis of the four urban areas in England with the lowest higher education participation rates, Raphael Reed et al. (2007) found them to have very high levels of deprivation and to contain strong concentrations of households from the lower socio-economic groups, assembled into communities that had lower levels of the ‘linking’ and ‘bridging’ social capital (Woolcock, 2001), which would enable them to access middle-class pathways and without the relevant and credible information about higher education which would support participation (Archer et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2005). They found schools that were struggling to cope with the demands placed on them, similar to those described by Lupton (2005). This is not to infer a deficit on the part of the community (Mills & Gale, 2004; Gewirtz et al., 2005) but of the social, economic and educational system that predominates there and that often has done for some time. This is can be further aggravated by the ability of wealthier families to school their children outside the area.

This backdrop is unlikely to be challenged in the short-term by widening participation initiatives. The tension between the longer-term objective of raising attainment and educational outcomes for those in the lowest achieving communities and increasing higher education
participation has long been present in the Aimhigher programme and other initiatives. Although these objectives can be reconciled, particularly when low attainment is preventing young people from reaching their aspiration, there are many communities for whom one or other of the objectives predominates. For example, some young people have attained the higher education entry requirements but never used these to progress to higher education, either because of the lack of local provision or ‘pull factors’ from the labour market. For these young people, raising attainment is not an issue but higher education participation is. On the other hand, in schools where attainment is an issue, Aimhigher and other widening participation practitioners can work with the school to help those on the borderline at GCSE but, against a background of challenging circumstances in the school and widespread educational disengagement within the community, the impact of this work on progression will be limited in the short-term.

Conclusion

Rees et al. (2007) conclude from their analysis of evaluations across a range of recent area-based initiatives that the evidence for the successful achievement of the objectives is limited. Possible explanations include the intricacies of demographic distribution or the competitive-bidding process underpinning the allocation of resources. They find that the timescales employed are unrealistic to demonstrate meaningful success in challenging areas, with cultures of ‘short-termism’ and ‘initiative overload’ being commonplace. They suggest that initiatives ‘are underpinned by overly simplistic and under-theorised conceptions of inequality and geography, which fail to recognise the complexity of processes by which social disadvantage are generated’ (Rees et al., 2007, p. 267).

With respect to the guidance on targeting for higher education outreach (HEFCE 2007a), even the areas targeted by their proxies do not have particularly high densities of households from NS-SEC groups 4 to 8. This is partly due to the foibles of the geographical boundaries that are used and the level of definition that is available in the participation and deprivation datasets. In fact, a little over a third of the households in the targeted areas in the Southwest are actually from higher socio-economic groups. Previous researchers have expressed concern that these groups may be particularly successful in securing access to widening participation initiatives for which they are not the intended beneficiaries (Thomas, 2001; Universities UK, 2002; Hatt et al., 2005; Crozier et al., 2008b). If this remains the case, it could well undermine the drive
towards greater equity in university participation. The targeting guidance (HEFCE, 2007a) only expects that two-thirds of the young people that Aimhigher works with will actually come from lower socio-economic groups.

On the other hand, many young people from lower socio-economic groups will be missed by a rigorous application of the targeting guidance (HEFCE 2007a). Historical participation rates and deprivation scores are not very good proxies for finding young people from NS-SEC groups 4 to 8. There is a relatively strong correlation in affluent areas but the distribution becomes much more variable in more deprived areas. By limiting the proxy to ‘areas of relative deprivation where participation in Higher Education is low’ the focus becomes on the most deprived communities where progression to university is very uncommon. It is questionable whether these are the types of areas where the most significant advances in participation from lower socio-economic groups might be made in the short-term although there is a strong social justice case for intervention across a longer timescale. This raises an issue with respect to the monitoring horizon for Aimhigher. The Guidance for Partnerships (HEFCE, 2008, p7, para 29) outlines the funder’s expectation that ‘by 2011, Aimhigher partnerships will be able to demonstrate a distinct contribution to narrowing the social class gap in learner attainment and participation in higher education’. It is debatable whether this is achievable in those areas of extreme deprivation identified by the rigorous application of the targeting guidance.

Outside the proxy target areas, just under half of households are actually from the lower socio-economic groups. Young people from these households could be denied access to positive activities and initiatives, especially if their school is not one of those targeted. These young people are, almost by definition, living in areas where education assumes a higher profile. They are likely to have access to more ‘linking’ and ‘bridging’ social capital (Woolcock, 2001) and educational provision that is supportive of university entrance and, as such, are more likely in the short-term to have their motivation for higher education increased than their peers in the most educationally and socially deprived areas. Even if they live in more affluent areas, they remain members of precisely the groups that the government wishes to influence.

In addition, the analysis has established that there is a strong bias towards urban areas inherent in the proxies, due to an over-representation of deprivation and low participation in higher education in these locales. A number of explanatory factors have been suggested, including the presence of low performing schools in urban areas and the
typically more mixed communities in rural areas. OCSI & JH Research (2008, p. 7) found that ‘rural areas are substantially more deprived based on the location of deprived people than based on the location of deprived areas’. In other words, it is not easy to use geo-demographic proxies to target by concentrations of deprived people as they are spread throughout rural areas. There is, therefore, a serious issue of equity here, especially given the particular economic challenges of many of these areas where traditional forms of employment (for example, farming, fishing and tourism) are faltering. Deas et al. (2003) argue that it may not be possible to construct a single measure of deprivation that is equally applicable to rural and urban areas.

In urban areas where deep-seated, multi-generational issues affect educational performance it is debatable whether initiatives with short-term funding can make a significant difference. The focus on the ‘most deprived’ communities might be misplaced for initiatives that need to show impact within relatively short funding periods. Short-term initiatives might best be focused on those from NS-SEC groups 4 to 8 in mixed communities where a supportive infrastructure is already in place. This would effectively result in a two-track widening participation policy, with one track focusing on attainment and severe deprivation whilst the other looks more generally to widening participation for those from lower socio-economic groups. The former is what the Education Action Zones, which focused additional resources on deprived areas, were intended to address, although Gewirtz et al. (2005) cast doubt over their efficacy. The new Extra Mile programme (DCSF, 2008), which aims to replicate practices from high-achieving schools in deprived areas, might be a more successful approach.

With the relatively recent publication of the HEFCE targeting guidance (2007a), it is too early to say whether it will be applied rigorously or pragmatically or to judge its success in focusing the widening participation resource. Indeed this paper is not about practice but about exploring the implications of the rigorous application of the HEFCE guidelines in the Southwest region. This study suggests that the targeting guidelines are not well designed for identifying lower socio-economic groups, especially those in rural areas. The paper argues, along a parallel line to Rees, et al. (2007, p. 271), who concluded that area-based initiatives ‘downplay the heterogeneity within areas and the frequent coincidence of extreme wealth and poverty [such that] they often miss more poor people than they include, as well as providing resources for those who do not need them’.

The argument in this paper is not against the use of area-based approaches to widen participation, per se, nor against the social justice of
addressing deprivation in its worst form, but that, in this instance, the
definition of the target group is not well-aligned with the targeting
methodology. Consequently, a rigorous application of the targeting guid-
ance may undermine the scope for success against the government’s
stated policy aim of narrowing the social-class gap by 2011.

Notes
1. This is sometimes rendered as groups 4 to 8. Group 8 comprises households that have
been long-term unemployed or that have never worked. More information about the use
of the NS-SEC classifications can be found on the Office of National Statistics website
(ONS, 2008c).
2. For an overview of UK statistical geography, see the Office of National Statistics website
(ONS, 2008d).
3. For readers unfamiliar with boxplots, the horizontal line marks the median, the box
marks the quartiles above and below the median (i.e. the middle 50% of the distribution
or ‘interquartile range’) and the vertical lines show the largest and smallest values,
excluding identified outliers.
4. For clarity, the scatterplot shown is based on a 25% random sample of Output Areas.

References
Falmer: London.
Brine, J. (2006) Tales of the 50-somethings: selective schooling, gender and social class,
Gender and Education, 18 (4), pp. 431–446.
Commission for Rural Communities (2006) Rural disadvantage: reviewing the evidence,
CRC: Cheltenham.
Cheltenham.
Experiences of Working Class Students in Higher Education, TRLP Research Briefing No
Crozier, G., Reay, D., James, D., Jamieson, F., Beedell, P., Hollingworth, S. & Williams, K.
(2008b) White middle-class parents, identities, educational choice and the urban
comprehensive school: dilemmas, ambivalence and moral ambiguity, British Journal of
ation: a critique of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, Environment and Planning C, 21,
pp. 883–903.
Denham, J. (2008) Unlocking the full potential of higher education: the Government’s approach,
speech to 2008 HEFCE Annual Conference, University of Warwick, 8th April 2008.
communities/neighbourhoodrenewal/deprivation/deprivation07, last accessed on 14th
July 2008.

© 2009 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2009 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.


Harrison, N. & Hatt, S. (forthcoming) ‘Targeting disadvantaged learners’: will we really narrow the social class gap in participation by targeting our most deprived communities first? paper accepted for publication in the *Journal of Access Policy & Practice*.


Office for National Statistics [ONS] (2008a) [www.nomisweb.co.uk](http://www.nomisweb.co.uk) website, last accessed on 14th July 2008.
UCAS (2002) Paving the Way project report: informing change in higher education and progression partnerships with the voice of the underrepresented, UCAS: Cheltenham.