

# Transatlantic Lessons on Higher Education Access and Completion Policy

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England and the United States offer many similarities, but also instructive dissimilarities, with respect to their policies for higher education access and completion. This article describes these similarities and dissimilarities with an eye to what each country can learn from the other with regard to reducing social class and racial/ethnic differences in higher education access and completion. We focus on England since higher educational policy varies greatly across the United Kingdom and England is the most populous constituent nation in the United Kingdom.

The English and US higher education systems are quite different in any number of regards. Most obviously, the US system is far larger in number of institutions and enrollment, and the United States spends considerably more on tertiary education: 2.8 percent of the GDP versus 1.8 percent for the United Kingdom. Moreover, virtually all English institutions are “public,” whereas three-fifths of US institutions are private.

Despite these differences, both England and the United States have set similar goals for higher education. Both countries have committed to a sharp rise in the higher educational levels of their populations and a widening of participation by working class and minority youth. Underlying this common commitment to expanding and widening participation in higher education is a shared belief that it is key to fostering economic growth and reducing socioeconomic inequality. This normative fusion of economic functionality and social equalization is characteristic of centrist neo-

liberal educational policymaking in both England and the United States.

## CURRENT POLICIES IN SEVEN AREAS

We focus on seven policy strands affecting higher education access and completion: student information provision; outreach from higher education institutions; student financial aid; affirmative action or contextualization in higher education admissions; higher education efforts to improve retention and completion; performance funding; and degree of reliance on subbaccalaureate institutions.

Information, advice, and guidance (IAG) provision:

- England: Poor government support for IAG in primary and early secondary schooling. Extensive government support for IAG in late secondary school, particularly when applying for university.
- United States: Poor government support for IAG in primary and early secondary school. More extensive but still inadequate government support for IAG in late secondary schooling, particularly regarding higher education options.

Outreach efforts by higher education institutions:

- England: “Access Agreements” between higher education institutions and government specifying what tuition will be charged, institutional financial aid provided, and outreach to secondary-school students made.
- United States: No access agreements. Outreach is at institutional discretion.

Student finance:

- England: Tuition is capped by government. Heavy reliance on government funded income-contingent loans. Much smaller reliance on grant aid (from government or institutions).
- United States: Public tuition (but not private tuition) is typically capped by state governments. Continued major role of grant aid (federal, state, and institutional). There are fewer income-contingent loans, and the repayment system is more onerous.

Affirmative action/contextualized admissions:

- England: Contextualized admissions with focus on social class and on benefits to society of greater social mobility for disadvantaged students. Uneven use across institutions.
- United States: Affirmative action with focus on

race/ethnicity (rather than social class) and on benefits both of social mobility for disadvantaged students and of reshaping the attitudes of advantaged students through interaction with diverse populations.

Higher education efforts to improve retention and completion:

- England: Rising governmental and institutional interest in the last 10–20 years.
- United States: Rising governmental interest in the last 10–20 years. However, longstanding interest among less selective institutions.

Performance funding:

- England: Shifting toward extensive use of financial rewards to institutions for student completion, employment, earnings of graduates, and teaching performance.
- United States: Extensive reward system, particularly at state level, offering benefits to institutions for student retention, progression, and completion.

Degree of reliance on subbaccalaureate institutions:

- England: Focus on universities and much less interest in further education colleges. Rising interest in for-profit colleges.
- United States: Focus on universities, but big increase in attention to community colleges. Declining interest (until recently) in for-profit colleges.

#### LESSONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Drawing on the English experience, the United States might wish to seriously consider adopting Access Agreements, making more use of income-contingent loans, and expanding the range of information provided to college prospects.

The requirement to have Access Agreements offers the promise of institutions becoming more transparent, thoughtful, and determined in their pursuit of wider access at a time of rising concern about the high degree of racial/ethnic and class inequality in access to higher education generally and to selective institutions particularly. Moreover, in committing to certain practices and outcomes, institutions could be more easily evaluated on their success and their use of practices that are rooted in sound evidence. In principle, the US government has the power to require Access Agreements due to the heavy dependence of virtually all US higher education institutions on federal, state, and local government funding of institutional operations, research and development, and (through student aid) student tuition.

US graduates owe US\$1.3 trillion in student loans, and seven million borrowers are in default, with even more in arrears. England shows how government can address these problems, by providing more extensive income-contingent loans. By basing repayment on loan holders' income, a well-designed income-contingent loan program would provide a solution to the great concern in the United States about the many students who are saddled with loan debt. While the federal government does offer income-contingent loans, it can do much more and learn much from what England has done.

The United States could usefully emulate England in providing prospective students with nationally comparable information about the student experience, student satisfaction, and economic returns at the level of individual degree programs or majors. Program-specific information about income returns is particularly important because there is more variation in income returns by major than by institution. Besides income returns, the United States could also follow the lead of the United Kingdom in providing program-specific data on instructional conditions and student satisfaction.

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#### LESSONS FOR ENGLAND

England could benefit from emulating these aspects of US policy: greater focus on the role of further education colleges and very cautious consideration of greater use of for-profit higher education; greater use of grants in financial aid packages to students; more policy attention to informing student decisions in primary and early secondary school that affect preparation for higher education; greater use of contextualized admissions; and very careful consideration of the possible downsides of performance funding. For reasons of space, we only focus on some of these points.

Further education (FE) colleges do not play as big a role in England's higher education policymaking as community colleges do in US higher education. However, further education colleges account for one-twelfth of all higher education students. Hence, a strong argument can be made for more government policy attention to, and financial support of, further education colleges, as is the case with community colleges in the United States. The US experience also suggests careful attention to possible negative repercus-

sions from large-scale expansion of for-profit higher education. The United States has had to develop regulations to reconcile government provision of financial aid to students attending for-profit colleges and the dangers of poor quality provision by those institutions.

England should consider a more extensive program of government support for IAG in primary and early secondary school. Fateful student choices about higher education begin early as students, their parents, and their teachers make decisions about what fields they should prepare for in higher secondary school in order to be eligible for admission into selective universities. Also, students need to get high grades in the national examinations, usually taken at the age of 16 and again at 18, in order to qualify for entry into these most selective universities.

English universities do engage in contextualized admissions but they could do more. The limited success of the most selective UK universities in diversifying themselves by class and race/ethnicity is rooted in part in their emphasis on only accepting highly prepared students defined in terms of the dominant cultural categories. English universities therefore may benefit from a reconsideration of what constitutes merit in university admission. Are there other ways of measuring ability to benefit from higher education that would open up new opportunities for students coming from underrepresented backgrounds? These questions have been subject to extensive debate in the United States in the context of affirmative action, and selective universities have developed a variety of alternative measures of academic merit.

Finally, as England continues its use of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to reward institutions for instructional quality, it will be important to carefully track the intended and unintended impacts of the TEF. This monitoring effort could benefit from research on the obstacles encountered and negative side effects produced by performance funding in the United States. ■

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## Anarchy and Exploitation in Scientific Communication

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Technology, greed, a lack of clear rules and norms, hypercompetitiveness, and a certain amount of corruption have resulted in confusion and anarchy in the world of scientific communication. Not too long ago, scientific publication was largely in the hands of university publishers and nonprofit scientific societies, most of which were controlled by the academic community. Academic conferences were sponsored by universities or disciplinary organizations of academics and scientists. Most of this was done on a nonprofit basis and largely controlled by small groups of respected professors at the main research universities, largely in North America and Western Europe. It was all quite “gentlemanly” and controlled by a male-dominated scientific elite.

Then multiple tsunamis hit the groves of academe. Perhaps the most important was the massification of post-secondary education—the tremendous expansion of enrollments and numbers of universities worldwide. Now, with close to 200 million students in more than 22,000 universities globally, the higher education enterprise is huge. And while only a small proportion of these universities produce much research or aspire to the status of research universities, their numbers are growing as more institutions are lured by the rankings, which mainly measure research productivity, and by the natural desire to join the academic elite. Governments, accreditors, and quality assurance agencies are also stressing research and publications, in part because these are among the few metrics that can be accurately measured. At the same time, the global knowledge economy pushed top universities to link to academe internationally and to compete with institutions worldwide.

As a result of this increased competition and pressure on universities and individual academics to “publish or perish,” tremendous pressure was placed on the existing scientific communication system, which was eventually unable to cope with increasing demands. At the same time, the Internet created additional challenges to the system, as journals had to adapt to new ways of publishing articles, evaluating submissions, and other aspects of their work. What had been a cottage industry managed by scholars with little