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6. HOW CAN WE WIDEN PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION? THE PROMISE OF CONTEXTUALISED ADMISSIONS

INTRODUCTION

Widening participation in higher education has been on the UK policy agenda for more than fifty years. Yet, despite some progress across the UK higher education sector overall (DfE, 2016), students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds remain severely under-represented among entrants to the UK's most academically selective universities. In 2014/2015, those from state schools, lower social class backgrounds, and low HE participation neighbourhoods, made up just 78%, 23% and 7.6% of entrants to Russell Group universities, compared to 93%, 37% and around 20% of all young people nationally (Boliver, 2015). Similarly, those eligible for free school meals at age 15 made up just 4.6% of entrants to the UK's top-third most selective universities in 2012/2013 compared to their wider population proportion of 13% (DBIS, 2015). The figures are particularly poor at universities which routinely place in the top ten of university league tables, including Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol and Durham. The Russell Group of universities has claimed that "real progress has been made over the last few years" in relation to widening participation at its 24 member institutions (Russell Group, 2015, p. 5). However, the statistical reality is that little has changed in the last ten years (Boliver, 2015, Crawford et al., 2016). Widening access to higher education, and in particular to the UK's most selective institutions, remains a persistent problem.

For decades, one of two main strategies for widening participation in higher education has involved efforts within the secondary and further education sectors to improve the pre-university academic attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. This work is important because the evidence is clear that disparities in levels of pre-university academic achievement mean that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are substantially under-represented in the pool of young people eligible for admission to university by age 18 (Chowdry et al., 2013). The second main strategy has involved outreach work by higher education providers to encourage young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to aspire to university, to choose upper secondary education pathways that are most likely to make them competitive applicants for admission, and ultimately to apply for admission when the time comes. The evidence in relation to this second set of barriers to widening

R. Deem & H. Eggins (Eds.), The University as a Critical Institution?, 95–109.

participation is less clear cut than the first. Research has shown that many young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, express a desire to go to university (Kintrea, St Clair, & Houston, 2011), indicating that limited aspirations play only a small role in the uneven social composition of university entrants (Bowes et al., 2015). Indeed, after taking differences in school achievement into account, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are roughly just as likely as their more privileged counterparts to apply to university, including highly selective institutions. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds *are* less likely than their advantaged peers to study A-levels – considered the 'gold standard' for university entry – and to choose the most highly regarded A-level subjects – labelled 'facilitating subjects' by the Russell Group (Russell Group, 2016). However, it is not obvious why highly selective universities favour A-levels over other qualification routes, nor why some A-level subjects are deemed 'better' than others given that the vast majority of degree courses have few or no formal A-level subject prerequisites (Dilnot & Boliver, forthcoming).

What is notable about the part highly selective universities have seen fit to play in widening participation is that the focus has overwhelmingly been on efforts to raise aspirations that are in fact already high (Anders & Micklewright, 2015). There has been little if any reflection on the part of highly selective universities as to whether A-level qualifications generally and in 'facilitating subjects' in particular should be regarded as unequivocally the best forms of preparation for study at degree level. Moreover, persistent social disparities in pre-university achievement levels have been bracketed off by highly selective universities, at least to some extent, as something that is not their problem to deal with (Russell Group, 2015). And yet, highly selective universities could address both of these real barriers to widening participation by radically reconsidering their admissions policies. Indeed, of all the things which influence widening participation that are within the direct control of highly selective universities, their own admissions policies occupy the top spot.

This paper focuses on how highly selective universities could – and for reasons of social justice should – fundamentally alter their approach to admissions in order to make a major contribution to widening access. We argue that highly selective universities can and should set academic entry requirements with due regard to the fact that social group differences in pre-university achievement levels are wide, seemingly intractable, and a reflection of social inequalities that impact on learning opportunities and outcomes rather than necessarily a reflection of innate ability or true potential. We suggest that universities could substantially lower entry requirements for disadvantaged students without fear of setting students up to fail, especially if ambitious contextualised admissions policies are accompanied by equally ambitious programmes of academic support for students throughout their higher education careers.

CONTEXTUALISED ADMISSIONS

A contextualised approach to university admissions rests on acceptance of the principle articulated in the Schwartz Report that "equal examination grades do not necessarily

represent equal potential" (Schwartz, 2004, pp. 5, 6) and that "it is fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors as well as formal educational achievement, given the variation in learners' opportunities and circumstances" (see also Universities UK, 2003). It involves taking into account information about the socioeconomic and/or educational circumstances of applicants when deciding whom to admit, in recognition of the fact that "the school attainment of disadvantaged learners often does not reflect their full potential" (CoWA, 2016, p. 10). A contextualised approach to university admissions challenges the assumptions of the prevailing 'meritocratic' approach in which pre-university attainment is treated as an objective indicator of academic ability, and the focus is on ensuring 'formal equality of opportunity' by requiring all to meet the same criteria for admission. A problem here is that some analyses of university admissions data suggest that highly selective universities fall short of achieving 'formal equality of opportunity'. Applicants to highly selective universities are less likely to be offered places if they are from state schools (Boliver, 2013; Noden, Shiner, & Modood, 2014), lower social class backgrounds (Zimdars, Sullivan, & Heath, 2009; Boliver, 2013; Noden, Shiner, & Modood, 2014) or areas with low rates of participation in higher education (Boliver, 2015; UCAS, 2016), even when they have the same grades at A-level as their more advantaged peers.

Contextualised admissions, in contrast to formal equality of opportunity for equal prior attainment, emphasise the need to consider pre-university achievement in light of the socioeconomic and/or educational context of the applicant in order to identify academic *potential*. This represents a shift from a concern with 'formal equality of opportunity' to a concern with 'fair equality of opportunity' (Rawls, 1999 [1971]). As the Scottish Government's Commission on Widening Access puts it, currently "the applicant pool is being unnecessarily, and unfairly, limited by an over reliance on school attainment as the primary measure of academic ability" (CoWA, 2016, p. 36).

Contextualised admissions was pioneered by Scottish universities, most notably the University of Edinburgh, in the 1990s, and has been advocated widely in recent years (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009; DBIS, 2011, 2014; Cabinet Office, 2011; Social Mobility Commission, 2012, 2013, 2014; SPA, 2014; CoWA, 2016; Universities Scotland, 2016). Currently more than half of all UK universities use contextual data to inform admissions decisions in some way (SPA, 2015). Most often contextual data is used to inform which applicants to shortlist, invite to interview, prioritise for admission conditional on meeting standard academic entry requirements, or accept at confirmation in cases where standard entry requirements have not quite been met (Moore, Mountford-Zimdars, & Wiggans, 2013). In contrast, a variant of contextualised admissions which involves reducing academic entry requirements for disadvantaged students is rarely used. A very small number universities reduce academic entry requirements by one or two grades for specified applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. Bristol University) and fewer still reduce academic entry requirements by as much as four grades (e.g. Edinburgh and Glasgow universities). However, given the large and persistent socioeconomic gap in school achievement levels, it is precisely this rarely-used variant of contextualised

admissions that may be needed to substantially widen participation. This also means considering a wider set of indicators for HE admissions rather than just selecting students based on their school attainment records.

An important criticism of such contextualised admissions policies which involve reducing academic entry requirements for disadvantaged students is that they could set students up to fail. However, this critique assumes that current university entry requirements have been set with a clear appraisal of what is needed to succeed at degree level, an assumption which is at odds with the substantial increase in university entry requirements during the past decade. Between 2006 and 2015 the UCAS point score of the average university entrant rose from 320 to 360, equivalent to a shift from ABB to AAA (Figure 6.1). Although these UCAS point scores relate to the sum total of entrants' academic qualifications, not just those included in entry requirements, they evidence indirectly the extent to which universities have been asking more and more of prospective entrants over time. It is not the case that these rising UCAS point scores are (solely) due to A-level grade inflation. During the same period, average A-level performance improved by just 10 UCAS points (equivalent to an increase of one half of one grade in a single A-level). This small increase was caused entirely by the introduction of the A* grade in 2010; about half of all grades awarded that would have been an A are now A*, which attracts an extra 20 UCAS points (Wikipedia, 2015).

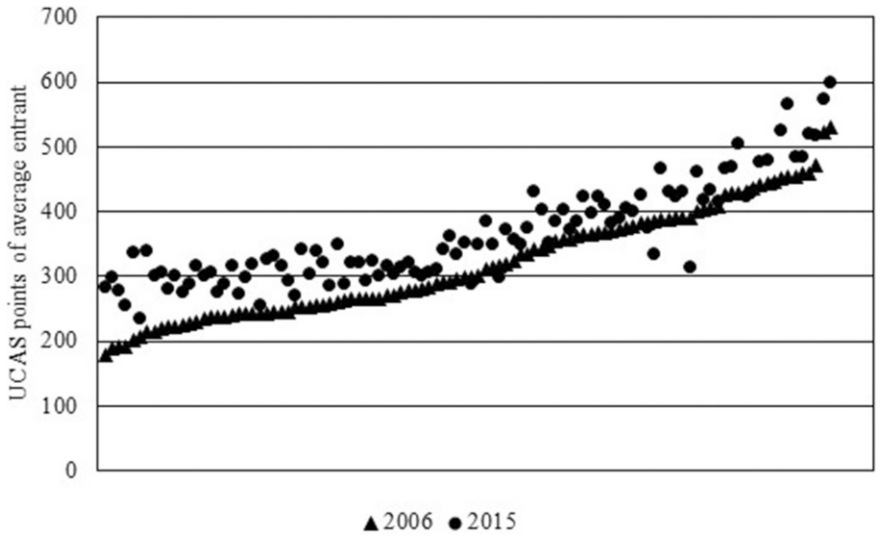

Figure 6.1. Average UCAS points of entrants to UK universities in 2006 and 2015. Source: Complete University Guide, N=104 HEIs

What has *not* been driving this increase is a concern that entry requirements needed to be higher to ensure that entrants are capable of studying at degree level. On the contrary, as CoWA notes, "in many cases, [university] entry requirements have risen

well beyond what is required to succeed in degree level study" (CoWA, 2016, p. 10). Rather, a key driver of this inflation of entry requirements has been the rise in the number of university applications in the context of a relatively fixed number of university places; highly selective universities have sought to bring applicant demand down to more manageable proportions by raising the bar for admission (CoWA, 2016). A further driver has been the fact that the average UCAS point scores of entrants is included in the calculations underpinning university league tables, providing prestige-chasing universities with an incentive to set academic entry requirements as high as possible (and an apparent disincentive to lower them for disadvantaged applicants). Universities are likely to be concerned that reducing entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants will adversely affect their league table ranking. However, as entry requirements typically contribute just 10% to league table calculations, in reality any shift in rankings is likely to be small. Moreover, if all universities reduced entry requirements to a similar degree, their relative standing in league tables would not change.

The case for lowering entry requirements for disadvantaged students is often supported by reference to evidence that such students can perform better at degree level than their more advantaged peers who entered with the same grades at A-level. Students from state schools have been found to outperform comparably qualified students from private schools at St Andrew's University (Lasselle, McDougall-Bagnall, & Smith, 2014), Oxford University (Ogg, Zimdars, & Heath, 2009; but cf. Sumnall, 2015 in relation to Cambridge), Bristol University (Hoare & Johnston, 2011) and in UK universities as a whole (HEFCE, 2014; Crawford, 2014a). Students whose own secondary educational achievements are higher than the average for their school have also been shown to outperform comparably qualified students once at university (HEFCE, 2014).

On the other hand, studies employing individual-level indicators of contextual disadvantage such as free school meal status, or neighbourhood-level indicators of contextual disadvantage such as local higher education participation rate or neighbourhood deprivation level, have found that contextually disadvantaged students perform less well at degree level than more advantaged students with the same levels of prior attainment (Crawford et al., 2016; Croxford et al., 2014; Crawford, 2014b; HEFCE, 2014). The findings of these studies indicate that, although disadvantaged students' pre-university achievement levels do not always do justice to their true potential, we cannot assume that their true potential will simply be unleashed once they enter university. Such students may well continue to perform at a level below their true potential at university if they continue to experience socioeconomic disadvantage, and/or if their academic knowledge and skills continue to lag behind those of their more advantaged peers. This has two important implications. First, it implies that lower entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged students cannot be deemed justified or unjustified simply on the basis of evidence regarding the degree level performances of such students relative to their comparably qualified but more advantaged peers. Secondly, it will be important that universities consider not only their admissions policies but also the kinds of support they provide to help students realise their potential once at university. For some, if not all, universities

this may require a radical change to existing pedagogical assumptions and practices, perhaps particularly in higher tariff institutions where students have traditionally been expected to do well at university as a matter of course.

Recently the Scottish Government Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) made an unprecedented call for universities be required to set substantially lower entry requirements for applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds:

> By 2019 all universities should set access thresholds for all degree programmes against which learners from the most deprived backgrounds should be assessed. These access thresholds should be separate to standard entrance requirements and set as ambitiously as possible, at a level which accurately reflects the minimum academic standard and subject knowledge necessary to successfully complete a degree programme. (CoWA, 2016, p. 15)

CoWA does not go into any detail as to how "access thresholds" should be determined. As such, there is work to be done to identify what counts as "the minimum academic standard and subject knowledge necessary to successfully complete a degree programme." Identification of a "minimum academic standard" requires looking at how different levels of achievement in different types of pre-university qualifications are associated with academic achievement at degree level. Similarly, identifying what constitutes necessary "subject knowledge" will require looking at how subjects studied prior to university entry as well as levels of achievement in those subjects relates to degree success in particular disciplines.

What it means to "successfully complete a degree programme" also needs to be thought through. At one pole, successful completion could be taken to mean making it through to the end of a degree programme and ultimately obtaining a degree qualification, regardless of what the final degree classification is, and perhaps also regardless of how long it takes. At the other pole, it might mean completing a degree programme (on time) and ultimately achieving what is sometimes termed a "good degree", that is a first or upper second class honours degree qualification. It will be important to examine both of these outcomes – completion and attainment – as part of the processes of deciding whether to focus concern on one or the other or both.

Whether "success" is defined in terms of completion or level of attainment, because of its categorical nature it is also necessary to determine what counts as a desirable (or at least an acceptable) probability of a successful outcome. This probability of success might be set at a conservatively high level – for example, an access threshold might be set at a level associated with a probability of success at least as good as that of the average student. However, if access thresholds are to be ambitiously set, it is likely that the probability of success will need to be significantly lower than the average, and could conceivably be as low as 50%. A case could be made for a probability of success that is lower still, but from an ethics point of view an even chance of success might be considered the minimum that is acceptable. It is not obvious what would constitute a desirable or acceptable minimum probability of success and detailed conceptual and empirical work is needed to guide this decision.

It will be important to consider the trade-off between the positive impact of lower entry requirements on widening access on the one hand and any negative effects on student completion and achievement rates on the other. Lowering entry requirements too much could lead to some of the widening access gains made at the point of admission being lost by the point of graduation, which would be not only partially self-defeating, but also personally damaging for those students who had been 'set up to fail', and damaging to the reputation of institutions. The empirical component of this paper explores which levels of pre-university attainment are associated with average and 'evens' (50%) rates of degree success, with a view to determining how low entry requirements for disadvantaged students could be set.

DATA, INDICATORS, AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The statistical analysis presented in this paper draws on individual-level longitudinal data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) on the attainment in higher education of those who completed full-time degree programmes in UK higher education institutions in 2011/2012. The HESA data includes information about university students' qualification type and grades on entry, and enables us to identify what final degree classification they achieved upon graduation. In addition, the HESA dataset contains several contextual variables, including individual-level measures relating to type of school previously attended, parental educational level, and social class background, as well as a neighbourhood-level measure of the young higher education participation rate associated with the student's home postcode (POLAR). Individual-level contextual indicators relate directly to the circumstances of individuals and their immediate families or households. Neighbourhood-level indicators, in contrast, relate only indirectly to the circumstances of individuals, but could be used to infer something about individual circumstances, or about the wider socioeconomic and educational context in which individuals are located. The suitability of these and other potential indicators of contextual disadvantage, in theory and in practice, have yet to be rigorously and systematically examined, but it is helpful to summarise here some of the key matters of concern in relation to validity, reliability, completeness and availability (for a fuller elaboration of the issues, see Gorard et al., 2017).

First and foremost, it is important that any indicator of contextual disadvantage is valid; that it captures with a high degree of accuracy the concept it is intended to capture – in this case socioeconomic or educational disadvantage that is likely to have impacted negatively on achievement at school. The validity of an indicator is compromised if it yields a significant number of false positives; that is, if a significant number of individuals are identified as contextually disadvantaged when they are not. An example of a contextual indicator with low validity in this respect might be the use of a simple distinction between individuals educated in state and private schools, since many state educated pupils are not socioeconomically or educationally disadvantaged. Similarly, having parents who are not university graduates does not necessarily imply disadvantage, nor does living in an area of

low HE participation for individuals who are not themselves typical of others living in the same locale. The validity of an indicator is also compromised if it yields a significant number of false negatives; that is, if a significant number of individuals are identified as not contextually disadvantaged when they are. An example might be the use of low parental social class as an indicator of contextual disadvantage given that those with parents in social classes just above the cut-off point for classification as disadvantaged are likely to be experiencing very similar circumstances.

It is also crucial that any indicator of contextual disadvantage has high reliability; that it captures with a high degree of consistency the concept it is intended to capture. The reliability of an indicator is diminished if yields inconsistent results across different individuals or on different occasions for an individual whose circumstances have not changed. The reliability of an indicator may vary depending on the source of information – for example, self-reported information (such as parental education and parental social class) is likely to be less reliable than information that has been administratively verified, due to misreporting, whether intentional or unintentional.

The usefulness of contextual indicators may also be compromised by problems of missing data arising from non-response to requests for self-reported status; for example a university applicant may leave the 'parental higher education' field blank. Missing data may also compromise neighbourhood-level indicators of contextual disadvantage for the same reason although this may not be immediately apparent. For example, although all postcodes are assigned values on neighbourhood-level measures of disadvantage, the underlying individual-level data is likely to be subject to a degree of non-response.

Finally, potential indicators of contextual disadvantage can only be used to inform admissions decisions if they are available at the point of admissions decision-making. A range of contextual indicators are currently available to universities via UCAS, and UCAS is currently looking at improving its service to universities in this regard. Some universities supplement the contextual data provided by UCAS with administrative pupil and school data and with additional neighbourhood-level metrics available from government and commercial sources. There are, however, some potentially useful contextual indicators that are not currently available at the point of admissions decision-making. For example, universities do not have access to family income data for applicants, but this could be made available in theory by HMRC and/or the Student Loans Company.

To determine how well graduates from disadvantaged groups perform at degree level in both absolute and relative terms at given levels of pre-university attainment, we use a series of binary logistic regression models to estimate the probabilities of achieving a first or upper second class degree (a "good degree" for short), rather than a lower second class, third class or pass degree. We compare outcomes for graduates from advantaged and disadvantaged social groups with the same best three A-level grades on entry. We focus on students who graduated between 2008 and 2010 from Russell Group universities – 24 of the most academically selective and socially elite higher education institutions in the UK. We restrict our analysis to who entered university aged 21 or younger with 3 or more A-levels. All models control statistically for higher education institution attended and degree subject area studied,

so as to remove the effects of these influences on degree classifications. The analysis presented below provides a picture for Russell Group universities as a whole; in due course further analysis will explore possible variations in the overall pattern by individual institution and degree subject area where sub-sample sizes permit.

RESULTS

Figure 6.2 presents the predicted probabilities of achieving a "good degree" for private school entrants (more advantaged group) and those from state schools (less advantaged group) with A-level grades on entry ranging from a low of CCC to a high of AAA. Below CCC there are too few cases in the data to draw reliable conclusions. For the cohort in our data, AAA was, at the time, the highest possible achievement in three A-levels, as A* grades had yet to be introduced. Vertical lines have been added to the figure to indicate the achievement in three A-levels associated with Russell Group average success rates (85% in this data) and 'evens' success rates (i.e. 50% or above). In terms of relative degree performance, state school students were more likely to achieve a "good degree" than comparably qualified entrants from private schools high HE participation areas, except at the two extremes of the A-level grades distribution. Considering success rates in absolute terms, students from state schools could be admitted with grades somewhere between AAB and ABB or above at A-level and have a probability of success at least as good as the average Russell Group student. For an evens chance of success, entry requirements for such students could be set as low as CCC.

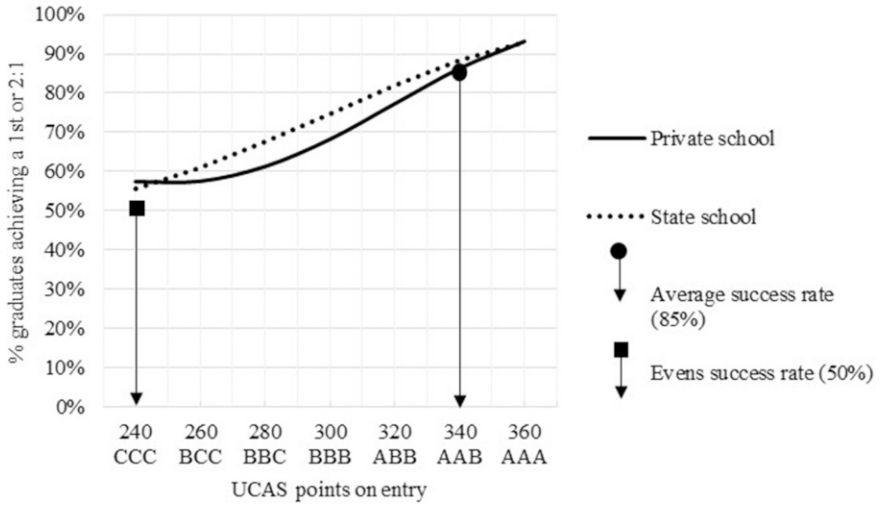

Figure 6.2. Predicted probabilities of achieving a "good degree" for graduates from private schools and state-maintained schools

Figure 6.3 presents the predicted probabilities of achieving a "good degree" for entrants with graduate parents (more advantaged group) and non-graduate parents (less advantaged group). In terms of relative degree performance, students whose parents were not higher education graduates were no more and no less likely to achieve a "good degree", with the exception of those entering with CCC at A-level where success rates were slightly lower for those with non-graduate parents. In terms of absolute success rates, students with non-graduate parents could be admitted with AAB or above at A-level and have a probability of success at least as good as the average Russell Group student. For an even chance of success, entry requirements for students with non-graduate parents could be set as low as CCC.

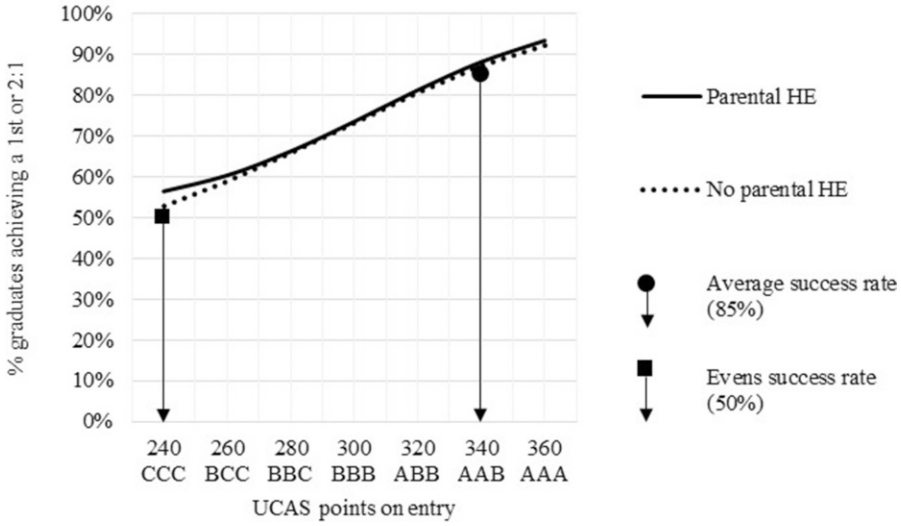

Figure 6.3. Predicted probabilities of achieving a "good degree" for graduates with and without graduate parents

Figure 6.4 presents the predicted probabilities of achieving a "good degree" for entrants with parents in social class I (more advantaged group) and social classes VI and VII (less advantaged groups). In relative terms, students from lower social class backgrounds were less likely to achieve a "good degree" than students from the highest social class, by around 5 percentage points across the A-level grades scale. In terms of absolute success rates, students from lower social class backgrounds could be admitted with grades midway between AAB and AAA or above at A-level and have a probability of success at least as good as the average Russell Group student. For an evens chance of success, entry requirements for students from lower social class backgrounds could be set at BCC.

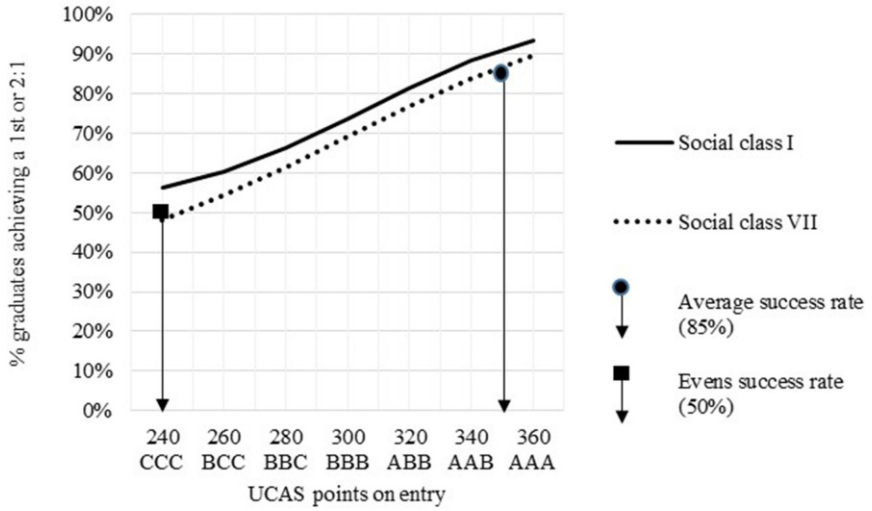

Figure 6.4. Predicted probabilities of achieving a "good degree" for graduates from social class I and social class VII backgrounds

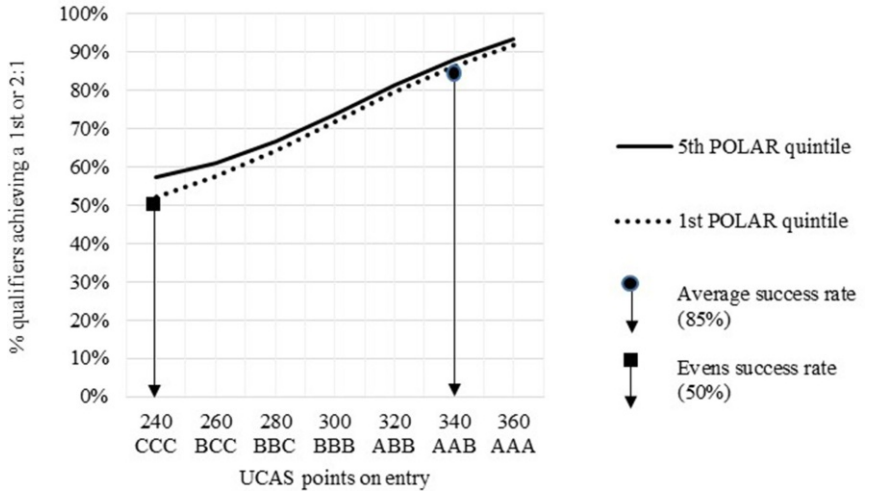

Figure 6.5. Predicted probabilities of achieving a "good degree" for graduates from the highest (5th) and lowest (1st) POLAR quintiles

Finally, Figure 6.5 presents the predicted probabilities of achieving a "good degree" for entrants from neighbourhoods in the 5th quintile when ranked according to the young HE participation rate (more advantaged group) and those

from neighbourhoods in the 1st and 2nd quintiles (less advantaged groups). In terms of relative degree performance, students from low HE participation neighbourhoods were no more and no less likely to achieve a "good degree" than those from high HE participation areas, provided they entered with BBB or above at A-level. However, a growing disparity emerges as A-level grades decline from BBB to CCC. Considering success rates in absolute terms, students from low HE participation neighbourhoods could be admitted with AAB or above at A-level and have a probability of success at least as good as the average Russell Group student. For an evens chance of success, entry requirements for such students could be set as low as CCC.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

What the findings presented above demonstrate is that highly selective universities could admit students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds with AAB or better at A-level without fear that they would, as a group, perform worse than the average student. Moreover, they could move to entry requirements of BBC or CCC for students from disadvantaged backgrounds safe in the knowledge that such students would be more likely to succeed than to fail. If an 'evens' success rate seems too risky – whether for the student or for the institution – then BBB at A-level could be chosen as the threshold instead. BBB at A-level is considerably lower than the advertised entry requirements of most courses at most Russell Group universities, but with associated rates of success in higher education of 70%, it is clearly good enough.

It is important to stress, that the evidence used here to identify a lower entry requirement threshold for disadvantaged students has been gathered in a context where universities do little to support disadvantaged students to achieve their full potential. Often it is assumed that admitted students will do well as a matter of course, with those who struggle academically often deemed personally culpable. Such an approach is clearly at odds with an acknowledgement of the fact that socioeconomically disadvantaged students' pre-university attainments do not do justice to their true potential. If anything we should expect to see disadvantaged students outperform more advantaged peers with the same pre-university attainment once at university. The fact that we typically don't see this indicates that universities are failing to deliver fully, as educators, to support students to achieve their true potential. Clearly, contextualised admissions policies cannot be solely about entry requirements; what is also needed is a radical shift in the pedagogical practices of universities. We will know that this has been achieved when we begin to see disadvantaged students who have entered higher education with qualifications that do not do justice to their true potential do better at degree level than ostensibly comparably qualified entrants from more advantaged backgrounds.

In closing, it is useful to consider how much traction could be gained with regard to widening access to highly selective universities as a result of implementing

contextualised admissions policies which substantially reduce entry requirements for disadvantaged students. Figure 6.6 illustrates the distributions of 'best three A-level grades' on entry to university among 2010/2011 graduates from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds as measured by the indicators discussed earlier in this chapter: school type, parental education, social class background, and POLAR quintile. What becomes clear is that, if highly selective universities chose to restrict eligibility for admission to only those with AAB+ at A-level, some 53 percent of individuals from private schools would be eligible, as would 35 percent of those with graduate parents, 38 percent of those from social class I, and 37 percent of those from neighbourhoods with the highest rates of participation in higher education. In contrast, only 26 percent of individuals from state schools and just 22 percent of individuals with non-graduate parents would be eligible for admission, with eligibility rates much lower still for those from social class VII (7 percent) and neighbourhoods with the lowest HE participation rates (18 percent). Keeping entry requirements at AAB+ for advantaged applicants, but setting them at BBC+ for disadvantaged applicants, would go a long way towards evening things up.

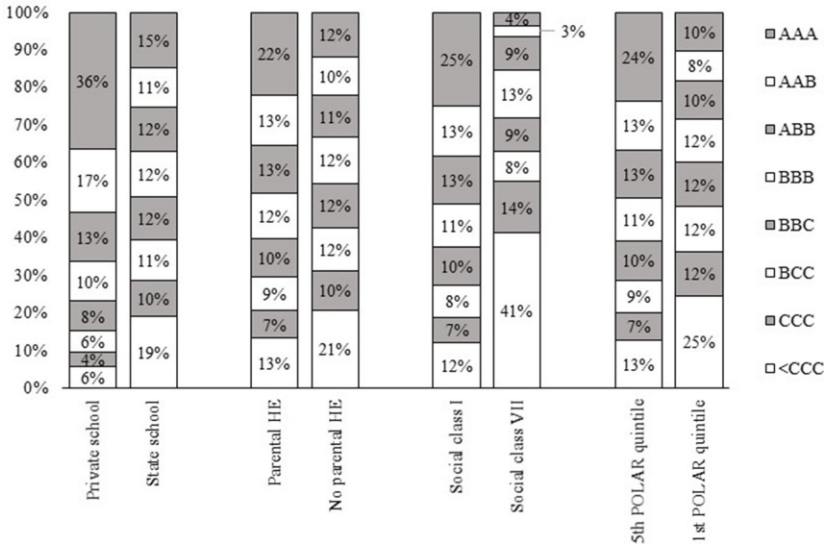

Figure 6.6. Best three A-levels obtained by students graduating with university degrees in 2010/2011, by social group

In sum, ambitious contextualised admissions policies which reduce entry requirements for disadvantaged students, and which support disadvantaged students to realise their full potential, represent the most promising means of significantly widening participation in higher education generally, and at highly selective universities in particular.

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