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‘It’s a RAP’? Retention, attainment and progression: Raising tariff on entry and the impact upon widening participation for work based students.

[Author details (Name, Organisation, Email)]

Dr Helen Bovill.. Senior Lecturer. Faculty of Arts, Creative Industries and Education (ACE).

University of the West of England. Frenchay Campus. Coldharbour Lane. Bristol. BS16 1QY.

Room: 2S411. Telephone: 0117 32 84152.

[Abstract]

Browne (2010) renewed debate regarding minimum tariff registration to higher education (HE). This was proposed to be linked to HE finance and was a way of imposing number controls. The White Paper: ‘Students at the Heart of the System’ (Department for Business Innovation and Skills (DBIS), 2011) has not fully implemented this but nevertheless placed a renewed focus upon higher academic qualifications and re-positioned students with alternative and lower entry criteria as marginal to much HE provision. This paper seeks to demonstrate that work based students (WBS) who often enter HE on lower and vocational tariff may offer a ‘good deal’ or ‘safe bet’ to universities. As part of Access Agreements universities charging maximum fees of £9,000 must demonstrate they are working to attract under-represented students; WBS tend to contribute well to widening participation (WP) statistics. Universities are also reviewing their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), to determine competitiveness in the market place, such as percentage of students who achieve ‘good honours’. WBS generally contribute as well as their ‘traditional’ counterparts to overall figures of retention, attainment and progression (RAP). This paper argues that university Access Agreements would be well served to maintain

academic freedom upon tariff for some programmes of study and to prioritise financial support for these groups.

[Heading 1]

Introduction.

This paper is based in an action research project conducted with a group of work based students (WBS) upon a foundation degree in education support within a post-92 university. Most students do not have traditional entry criteria and entered on lower tariffs. Many students entered with Higher Level Teaching Assistant Status (HLTA) which is recognised on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) as a level 4 qualification, currently, it is not part of the UCAS tariff system. Universities presently maintain academic freedom to allow entry to programmes of study outside of the tariff system; this paper argues to maintain this freedom for particular programmes of study and specifically addresses the following two questions:

1. Is the relationship between higher registration tariff and retention, attainment and progression (RAP) over-stated, particularly in the case of work based students (WBS)?
2. What is the future of higher education (HE) participation for WBS in a marketised environment emphasising higher and more traditional registration tariff? Can widening participation put these 'students at the heart of the system'?

The Browne Review (2010) set out a proposal to link access to HE to student financing. University places and the funding for this was proposed to be allocated to those students who meet yearly designated minimum entry requirements. Under this proposal students would have been required to have the minimum recognised qualifications through the UCAS tariff system (currently under revision) (UCAS, 2010). The impact of this upon 'second chance' students was considered:

...some student places will need to be allocated directly to institutions rather than through the tariff point entry system and Government will assess the balance between the two allocation methods each year (Browne, 2010: 34).

Coleman and Bekhrandia (2010: 7-8) note a recent trend for applications to university from those who do not possess the minimum tariff and state that:

It is one of the strengths of the UK's higher education system – and a feature that sets it apart from most others in Europe – that such second chance higher education is possible.

Tariff linked to finance proposals of the Browne review are not to be fully implemented, however the discourse from this has raised a range of worrying issues in terms of 'second chance' education for WBS. More students are likely to be denied places in university in the coming years as a result of proposed changes to HE.

Research already tells us that under-represented groups who seek to gain access to HE through vocational pathways have more constraints placed upon them than those with traditional qualifications (Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) 2007).

The recent White Paper for England 'Students at the Heart of the System' (DBIS, 2011) places a renewed focus upon academic qualifications and high achievers and re-positions learners with alternative and lower entry criteria as marginal to HE. The

paper proposes a 'core and margin' solution to free up number controls (DBIS, 2011: 49-50). Students with AAB grades at A level will be exempt from university core numbers and '...a flexible margin of about 20,000 places in 2012/13...' will be created for those providers '...whose average charge...is at or below £7,500' (DBIS, 2011: 50). This is likely to encompass providers whom the paper identifies as 'non-prescribed' (DBIS, 2011: 46) and has the potential to further contribute to an already two-tier system of HE provision or a 'race to the bottom' (Labour's Gareth Thomas in Coughlan, 2011). The section in the White Paper on social mobility focuses heavily upon the young student, further marginalising WBS who are in the main mature. Throughout the report the focus is upon high academic achievers with only minimal attention paid to those who do: '...not follow the traditional and well-established route of A-Levels followed by a full-time, residential, three-year degree' (DBIS, 2011: 46).

There are areas of the paper which throw some positive light on the future of HE provision for WBS. For example grants will remain available for those with incomes of £25,000 or less. Part-time students will for the first time be entitled to up front loans. A National Scholarship Programme commences from 2012 and universities will have some freedom in the ways in which they wish to use this support to improve access to HE. The future of HE participation for WBS is therefore very much in the balance and might depend heavily upon HE interpretation of new reforms and institutional value systems regarding which students they envision 'at the heart of (their) system'. This paper seeks to explore the relationship between higher registration tariff and RAP with the intention of displaying that WBS who enter with lower non-traditional qualifications but high levels of occupational capital may

represent a 'good deal' or 'safe bet' for universities. These students often perform in terms of RAP as well as any other student once participating and with adequate support structures in place. To charge £9,000 and attract students who will pay this, universities need to be able to do two things well:

1. They need to satisfy the independent Director of Fair Access that they are fulfilling the remit of their Access Agreements and working: '...to attract students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups (DBIS, 2011: 60). WBS, in the main, contribute widely to WP statistics.
2. They need to have Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which are attractive to all students so as to remain competitive and in business. 'Good honours' is one such KPI, along with levels of retention, overall attainment and progression. WBS generally contribute to these KPIs as well as, and often in excess of, more 'traditional' students.

Links between registration tariff and RAP? What research tells us.

Consensus over what should be used to measure or determine those most likely to benefit from HE study remains problematic. This paper does not take the stance that anyone who wishes to do so should have access to HE. Allowing potential applicants not yet ready for the demands of HE to participate regardless is not a socially just, equitable or ethical form of participation. Equally there is no simple answer to determining preparedness for participation. However, setting an increasingly higher minimum tariff on entry or offering 'off quota' entry to AAB students thus prioritising high achievers and 'traditional' entry criteria, is exclusionary practice which is likely to shut down and halt gains made toward WP.

Previous studies are divided on whether level and type of qualification are predictors of RAP. Watt and Peterson (2000) state that traditional entry qualifications are a better predictor of academic performance in HE and Aston (2004) state that vocational qualifications do not prepare potential students for HE study. Thomas (2001) however explores that preparation and support once participating in HE are more likely to contribute toward performance and that entry qualifications are not necessarily a good prediction tool. The White Paper (DBIS, 2011: 62) on HE supports this stating that:

Once participating in higher education, attainment by access students stands fair comparison with others and, after graduation, most former access students get graduate jobs.

Some research highlights that access courses and vocational qualifications may not adequately prepare students for HE study (Hayes and King, 1997; Connelly and Chakrabarti, 1999; and Reddy, 2004). Further research tells us that students from such routes have had less preparation for the culture of HE and their disposition toward a knowledge of how to 'play the game' hinders their performance rather than their prior entry qualifications (Hatt and Baxter, 2003). Levy and Murray's (2005: 49) research would back this up indicating:

...that when students are provided with an appropriately supportive transitional programme they achieve retention rates and academic performance comparable to the mainstream student body.

Moran (2008) has explored entry to teacher training and advocates taking into account work related experience alongside prior education.

University responses to a focus on registration tariff.

Currently many universities are reviewing provision in a bid to remain competitive and in business and to adopt 'efficiencies' and 'accountability to stakeholders'. A process of comparisons within and between universities is intensifying as benchmarking procedures are adopted and National Performance Indicators (NPIs) prioritised for scrutiny (HESA, 2010). A key measure which helps to place universities higher within league tables is that of the potential for a university to result in students attaining a 'good' honours degree (HESA, n.d.). This is a measure of the percentage of students who leave university with a 2:1 or above degree classification. Tariff on entry is being identified by many universities as a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) in relation to this. For many institutions this is being viewed as key to survival in a marketised system characterised by principles of governance as they face the call to: 'take the robust action needed to increase efficiency and reduce cost over the medium term' (HESA, 2010: 6).

The study.

This paper emanates from a small-scale action research project with a group of education support assistants in a new university. I have accessed the voices of a range of students studying at year one and two of a FD and year three of a top up to BA (Hons) Professional Practice (BAh PP) in the same university. Overwhelmingly the majority of students are aged over 25 and are of white British ethnicity (though a minority are from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups). Most students did not self define as disabled and many were from lower income households. The majority

of students entered on lower tariffs and/or vocational entry criteria such as HLTA or level two or three teaching assistant qualifications. Some entered without these prior qualifications but with existing prior work experience or a commitment to the education sector designated through gaining voluntary work of at least two days per week and mentor support from this source.

Various methods have been used to help increase validity, enabling 'proposition' of findings for discussion in a situated, interpretivist sense rather than more positivist claims to 'truth' (Bridges, 1999). All 22 students in year one agreed to participate in a 'hopes and fears' activity. All 19 students from year two – plus all year one students - completed a questionnaire with both closed and open questions. A smaller number of students (four from year one and four from year two) were purposively sampled (Denscombe, 1998). Two students from year one and two took part in a semi-structured interview based on themes emerging from questionnaires; and two from year one and two kept a reflective diary from September 2010 to February 2011. Statistics regarding tariff registration on entry and performance in relation to RAP and particularly potential to achieve 'good honours' have been accessed from the university in question and nationally.

University ethical principals (BERA, 2004) have been adhered to however I remain aware of the problematic nature of gaining and interpreting data from students with whom I work closely as Programme Leader. Throughout the process of exploring the issue of tariff registration on entry I have come to question my own judgement over decisions to consent to some students having a place on the programme when possibly a delay in their entry might have been beneficial. Some students without the HLTA or

level three qualification, and who entered with voluntary work, struggle more on the course both academically and psychologically. However some of these students, though they initially struggled, have made massive improvements toward the end of their first or second year. Therefore, with the benefit of hindsight, disallowing this group to have access to the programme would have been detrimental for some but perhaps more 'justly' beneficial for others.

Some students have reported great difficulty in advancing professionally. Other students have discussed significant psychological distress, or relationship strain or breakdown as a result of their participation, this has been well documented in similar student groups previously (Waller, *et.al.* 2011). In response to this knowledge of potential negative impact of study that some students less prepared for study in HE might experience, students are encouraged to engage with the life changing nature of HE participation before the programme begins. This is facilitated through specifically tailored open days for the programme, study skills days run prior to induction and then induction itself which focuses on change and transition. However, this research has clarified that the complexity of university participation to the lives of individuals is not fully (or even partially understood) by many students at the point of entry; often only experience of the process can bring these issues to the fore.

Analysis of data collected is an ongoing process. This analysis remains most closely aligned with 'interpretative analysis' (Smith and Osborn, 2008 and Rapley, 2011) in the sense that findings do not claim to be representative or generalisable. I have utilised some forms of quantitative analysis here in terms of statistics on tariff and

RAP but this forms only a small part of the understandings developed here which more clearly draws upon the qualitative responses from participants.

The study in question and the relationship between registration tariff and RAP.

Entry on to this programme of study is primarily determined by: having acquired an appropriate level 3 qualification; previous work experience; personal statement; and commitment from current employers to give support. These criteria have been negotiable and academic freedom and discretion used where, for example, qualification level has not been met but applicants seem otherwise suitable or likely to benefit from the rewards of HE. Students have been invited to attend open days, study skills days and induction days where emphasis has been placed upon the difficulties they may face in adapting to HE study; particularly in the light of their lower entrance criteria and potential preparedness to study at HE level. Some students with less preparedness have struggled upon the programme. Equally some of these students have at first struggled but then made good progress and passed, many with merit or even distinction. Most, though not all, students have commented upon the development of social and cultural capital from their studies and this mirrors other research upon WBS (Woolhouse, *et.al.*, 2009).

As the WP agenda faces severe threats from all corners of policy, politics and funding; strong arguments need to be presented to justify continued use of funds to support these students. It is not enough to claim that WP is a just principle in its own right. It is necessary to begin to collate the 'evidence' that continuing with such

programmes of study is a competitively viable option for universities as they fight for their own survival in the market place.

Attainment of good honours by whole university and by faculty.

The university in which this research study has taken place has produced a draft analysis of good honours data for 2010 final year students. Findings for the whole university so far suggest that for those home students studying 120 credits in their final year, tariff registration on entry has a significant effect upon performance. Students who enter on a tariff of at least 200 UCAS points, are statistically more likely to attain a good honours degree. In a further preliminary analysis by the same university in 2010 it is stated that tariff has a strong relationship to pass rates for all levels of undergraduate study. These preliminary reports make a strong case for raising tariff, however, they do not analyse data in a manner which takes into account different programmes of study.

Currently the faculty from which this programme (and research) emanates is performing statistically well in comparison to some other faculties of the university with 79.2% of students gaining good honours in their final year (2010 analysis). This may be accountable due to the higher tariff registration that some of these students enter upon. There may be other factors to consider alongside this such as the high number of students who are interviewed for this faculty compared to others. Many students in this faculty also have a level of work experience which is needed to be demonstrated at interview. For the university as a whole In 2010 out of 3769 final year students 66.2% overall achieved a good honours pass. In relation to tariff

registration banding on entry the percentage of students achieving good honours for the university as a whole can be found in table 1.

Table 1: Percentage of final year students in 2010 receiving a good honours degree by registration tariff banding.

Registration tariff banding	% of students not receiving good honours.	% of students receiving good honours.
0-50	53.1%	46.9%
51-100	48.5%	51.5%
101-150	44.1%	55.9%
151-200	50.3%	49.7%
201-250	38.1%	61.9%
250 points and above	22%	78%

Attainment of good honours (or equivalent) by WBS in the study.

In 2010 the Foundation Degree Higher Level Teaching Assistant programme (now the Foundation Degree Educational Support) had 19 students registered and achieved a 58% equivalence to good honours with a 94.7% achievement of either merit or distinction award (i.e. 55%-69% merit and 70% or above distinction). There was also a 100% pass rate and a 100% progression rate through to full BAhPP for the 2010-2011 academic year. The BAhPP programme for 2010 had 33 students registered and eligible to be awarded the degree. A 61% achievement of good honours was attained. Four students were due to resubmit but have subsequently withdrawn thus completion rates for this year were lower at 87.9%.

The level of good honours (or equivalent) achievement for all eligible FD and BAhPP students in 2010 (at 58% and 61%) is lower than the faculty percentage overall of 79.2% and lower than the university percentage overall of 66.2%. However at 58% and 61% it is higher in all registration tariff bandings 0-200 and nearly equivalent to those registering up to 250 points (see table 1). This is despite the fact that the vast majority of these students enter on 80 registration tariff points or less and many on no UCAS recognised registration tariff entry points. There is a statistical difference if the 250 tariff points plus registration band is considered.

In comparison to the national picture of achieving good honours in 2010 both the FD (equivalence) and the BAhPP programme would have placed between 62 and 59 on the Good University Guide ranking tables out of 113 universities, based on the good honours percentage scale. This is despite these programmes of study having

significantly lower registration tariff on entry than the entry standards recorded for many universities in this banding.

This academic year (2010-2011) figures for performance upon both the FD and BAhPP programmes of the study have been steadily improving. Student achievement of the equivalent of good honours for the FD stands at 72% (though this group's figures were not final at the time of writing this paper). This is above the average for the university as a whole. All students are potentially set to pass the programme and most are currently on line to pass with merit or distinction. The vast majority of these students are progressing on to the BAhPP top up. At the time of writing this paper, only one student stated they will not progress and one student was still making a decision.

The attainment of good honours from the BAhPP for 2010-2011 was 67.5%. This is again above the university average as a whole. This brings the figures for percentages of good honours for this programme in line with and in excess of university performance overall as recorded by the latest figures from the Good University Guide league tables. Statistically a picture of comparable performance is able to be presented overall through this analysis of achievement of good honours.

This paper has been pre-occupied with potential to achieve good honours, as its focus is upon the link between registration tariff and final year grade outcome. This has been to determine that, in terms of work based learning programmes of study, the link between registration tariff and final year grade outcome might be overstated and a 'blunt' tool of prediction.

The future of WP and HE participation for WBS.

So, what are the options for universities in terms of WP and rising tariffs for WBS?

‘Should we turn our backs on the commitment to widen participation and thus allow HE increasingly to become the privilege of the rich? Of course very few would actively or explicitly defend this position...’ (Burke and Hayton, 2011: 13).

Alternatively universities might use the current policy agenda and economic climate to challenge ideological shifts and position themselves to continue to contribute toward the slight sway toward more equitable participation between the social classes and other under-represented groups (HEFCE, 2010).

Burke and Hayton (2011) have explored the future of WP in the light of proposals of the Browne Review and financial cuts to the public sector. They ask if: ‘...it is still ethical to promote widening participation...’ (8) and whether the intended cuts may actually bring ‘...an end to WP. (9). They focus on an ideological shift from social equality to social mobility and explore the development of a discourse of: ‘...selection of the brightest’ underpinned by notions of innateness and ‘fixed intelligence’ (10).

Raising registration tariff on entry, linking this to access to funds, offering off-quota recruitment to AAB students, and potentially closing HE participation down so that less prestigious or ‘non prescribed’ (DBIS, 2011) providers become the most viable option for WBS is a ‘troubling’ agenda. This may point toward closing much HE participation down to all but the most academically able student who is negotiating a traditional pattern of participation. It also contributes to further entrenching an already existing two-tier system of HE which valorises academic achievement over

vocational. Many aspects of the White Paper signify that higher and more traditional entry qualifications are key to university participation and success. From the developing list of 'facilitating subjects' identified in the paper by the Russell Group (DBIS, 2011: 31) to the expectation for universities to publish: '...type and subjects of the actual qualifications held by previously successful applicants' (DBIS, 2011: 31) as part of Key Information Sets; high academic qualification is becoming constructed as the primary mechanism for entry to HE. This message of rising tariffs and academic focus is very likely to become loud and clear to many potential WBS and may potentially raise many anxieties and act as a barrier to participation.

This paper has begun to contribute to a debate which sets forth an argument that: with the right support many WBS do as well as their more 'traditional' counterparts in university, despite lower tariff on registration. There are complexities in this argument and further research is needed to establish the 'ethics' and value of participation for some students upon these pathways. Some evidence suggests that such students may struggle academically and psychologically through possession of less 'validated capital' (Burke and Hayton, 2011: 12) and further research from the study here finds some evidence of this. However this paper also finds some evidence – without claiming to generalise – of the possibility that WBS, with the right support mechanisms, are on average a comparably statistical 'good deal' or 'safe bet' in terms of potential to complete their studies and leave with good honours. The participants of this study have all been offered study skills days, induction days, programmes of graduate development focussing upon academic skills and social and cultural adaptation to the environment in which they find themselves. They have been placed, wherever possible, with lecturing staff who have both practical and research

experience of working with WBS and have good understandings of the 'liminal' and unexpected spaces that some WBS may find themselves in. More recently students have had intensive academic and pastoral support systems embedded into modules specifically designed to help them learn how to engage with unfamiliar environments. This support focuses upon academic, social, cultural and psychological transitions – to enable students to begin to 'learn to play the game' (Hatt and Baxter, 2003, Waller, *et.al.* 2011). This is the kind of support that students who enter with lower and less traditional qualifications will continue to need so they may continue to participate in HE and to contribute to successful RAP outcomes for themselves and the universities they attend.

Many Universities are currently establishing higher registration on tariff. This is in response to a need to attract students whom they perceive as more likely to be retained, more likely to achieve highly and more likely to progress through to strong post-graduate outcomes. All of this is necessary to remain a competitive institution in a neo-liberal HE market place, and so cannot be ignored. As with Nelson and Wilkinson (2010) universities do not operate in a vacuum unencumbered by policy shifts or economic factors but they do have some choice left which is linked to their own ethos and value systems. Nelson and Wilkinson (2010) utilise the work of Gorard's (2007) 'access discourse' and Thomas and Quinn's (2007) theory which explores university stance upon WP. Whilst they surmise that universities are finding themselves compelled to adopt a more 'utilitarian' or 'instrumental' approach this might be combined with their defined categories of 'mission' and 'transformation'. Transformatory change can be value led and it can uphold principles of social justice which continue to challenge social structures.

There are opportunities to emerge from the White Paper (DBIS, 2011) which universities could use for transformatory change such as the following:

1. The paper states that:

The Director of Fair Access will continue to have a duty to protect academic freedom, including an institution's right to decide who to admit and on what basis. (DBIS, 2011: 7).

Programmes where RAP figures are buoyant could become targets for protected academic freedom upon registration tariff. Universities might state this as part of their mission to fulfil aims to protect education as a social good. Work based programmes might become designated courses subject to this academic freedom.

2. Universities remain able to designate some courses for student support. Work based programmes of learning could become part of this remit.
3. In setting out details of how students will be selected to receive National Scholarship awards, WBS with lower non-traditional tariff could be specified as amongst potential priority recipients.

The university in which this study took place, is continuing to adapt and organise its response to recent policy and within its developing Access Agreement. It has been quoted as offering one of the largest investments toward improving widening access by any university in the UK. Its mission statement continues to state its commitment to promotion of equality and to 'make a difference through civic responsibility and social action'. Therefore an ethos of valuing and taking action on WP in the past and

moving forward can be evidenced. The Access Agreement so far is seeking to utilise its significant widening access funds in a targeted strategy which prioritises those students whose household incomes are less than £25,000 and fulfil other criteria such as care leavers, disabled students, students from low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs), and Access students. Suggestions from this paper would be to consider extending prioritised categories for receipt of National Scholarship Awards within the Access Agreement to WBS. Therefore the category of Access student might also encompass WBS. It would also be beneficial to consider a statement of acknowledgement within Access Agreements that academic freedom regarding tariff on registration may be maintained on some programmes of study where there is evidence of impact upon WP and buoyancy in terms of RAP. If this was achieved it would be a good step towards the potential survival of work based programmes of study for 'second chance' WBS who are in the main from low-participation and/or disadvantaged groups.

A further and very necessary step would be for programme staff and Information and Guidance (IAG) staff to work very closely in considering how best to disseminate this message to students. Myths and mis-information are likely to result from recent changes, these will need to be challenged and potential students given good sources of information in targeted, skilful outreach programmes within colleges and places of employment. Training needs to be given to admissions tutors and university staff may need to engage far more widely with schools, colleges and employers to continue to disseminate this message. Support, training and finance needs to be made available for this.

Many WBS in this study and beyond can be demonstrated to be a ‘good deal’ or ‘safe bet’ for universities in terms of RAP. Therefore any dispensation on tariff is not based on a compensatory or deficit model but on one of recognition of their valued and valuable contribution to university figures related to KPI and WP statistics. This paper will close by posing the question that perhaps students need to assess the extent to which universities and university participation are a ‘good deal’ or ‘safe bet’ for them to undertake? If WP is to put WBS ‘at the heart of the system’ (DBIS, 2011) then these students need to be given the information to assess the capacity of institutions to meet their needs. Universities have a range of information that they are expected to put together within their Key Information Sets, amongst which could be an indication of value added potential of universities to support students who enter with lower or non-traditional qualifications to successfully complete programmes of study. Key Information sets are to include information and guidance (IAG) upon bursaries, scholarships and financial support. This is a welcome move but needs to be clear and accessible and open to comparison. Key Information Sets might also publish information on university outreach work. This may compel universities to resource innovative ways to disseminate this kind of information to the students who need it most and who may be less likely to access this information without encouragement and assistance.

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