

UCL Innovative Widening Participation Group Recommendations to OFS How to accurately target and measure participation among disadvantaged students.

Executive Summary

The Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students (OfS) has asked UCL to set an additional target for socioeconomic disadvantage in our Access and Participation Plan (APP). Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) is a required measure by OfS. A number of pieces of analysis, including our own, have shown that while this metric captures underrepresentation in higher education, it is a weak measure of socioeconomic disadvantage.

Based on existing research and two new pieces of analysis using both UCL UK undergraduate records, and longitudinal cohort data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), we find that:

- 1.

Correlations between permanent poverty and various metrics of disadvantage



Accordingly, we recommend that:

- i. the Department for Education (DfE) facilitates timely access to FSM6 data from administrative records so that universities can report on this individual-level indicator
- ii. The OfS uses its leverage to ensure this access to FSM6 is facilitated, to support effective monitoring and accountability in widening participation practice
- iii. The OfS moves to application of FSM6 as a key – we would suggest primary – WP measure.
- iv. While the above are being achieved, UCL should use ACORN as a best interim indicator of its relative progress in inclusive access for socio-economically disadvantaged students.

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How to accurately target and measure participation among disadvantaged students.**

The Issue

How can we best measure

The analysis found that both POLAR and TUNDRA had high rates of false positives (students who were from advantaged backgrounds identified as POLAR1 or TUNDRA1), and were relatively poor at identifying *true positives*; those students who were financially disadvantaged who were classified as POLAR1 or TUNDRA1. Figure 1 shows that just 29% of students in TUNDRA1 and 33% of students in POLAR1 areas were from low income households. Contrast this to 49% of students in ACORN and IMD1 target groups who had family incomes below £16,000 – a 16 percentage point difference. Using logistic regression analysis, the UCL Widening Participation team also found that students from the lowest POLAR quintiles were less than twice as likely to be in the lowest income band compared to their peers

Alternative Measures

Free School Meals

Given the issue with area-level measures and ecological fallacy, Boliver et al. (2019) emphasise the need to use *individual-level* measures of disadvantage to identify

Figure 2: Correlations between permanent poverty and various metrics of disadvantage

There are two main issues arising from using ACORN as a metric of socioeconomic disadvantage for the APP¹. The first is that it is a commercial indicator, and therefore not as transparent as the other measures. For example, students themselves would not be able to check whether they were in the ACORN target groups, and providing a look-up tool for students to assess whether their postcode was in a target group would contravene our agreement with the provider CACI. The second is that there is no clear definition of disadvantage when using the classification. Jerrim (2020) uses Acorn

Recommendations:

Our preferred measure of deprivation would be FSM, which is consistently shown to be the most accurate indicator in the research we have examined. This is not currently available to institutions. To use this measure we would require access to the FSM status of our applicants on time for reporting. If this cannot be provided, our analysis shows that ACORN should be adopted as the next best measure for targeting students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Next Steps for UCL: