

“Standards will drop” - and other fears about widening participation.

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Introduction

- Widening participation is one aspect of the debate about quality, relevance and impact in higher education
- Widening participation = Increasing the ratio of participation of certain societal groups under-represented in higher education
- (Widening participation ≠ Increasing participation)
- Standard arguments in favour of widening participation:
 - Social justice
 - Redress
 - Optimise the development of national potential
- But what do those people think who, actively or passively, are against efforts at widening participation?



1. “Standards will drop”

- Typically, groups who are under-represented in HE do not meet normal entry requirements to the same extent as standard cohorts – hence the fear that admitting them (under Special Admissions Programmes) will cause standards to drop
- Question: What should concern us: input standards, or output standards?
- Output standards can be maintained provided value-added measures are instituted for those who enter under special-admissions programmes
- Examples: Cape Town, Newcastle, Kings College



2. "Our reputation will suffer"

- Argument: "Other people will think that our standards are dropping, so our reputation will suffer, so we will not get the best students and staff, so our standards will drop"
- Example: League table influence at Newcastle
- Example: Getting more black students to Stellenbosch



3. "It's not our problem"

- This is the fear that universities may get sucked into a societal problem which is not of their making, and to which they cannot provide a solution – typically expressed by saying "The problem lies in the schools"
- Example: Class differences in the UK
- Example: The role of a civic university



4. "It's unfair"

- This is the claim that special admissions programs are unfair, because they admit students with lower entry standards to the exclusion of some with the requisite standards. I.e. that they are discriminatory
- Example: Medical Schools
- Question: Is there such a thing as 'fair discrimination'?



5. "It's a waste of time"

- Weak formulation: "The costs outweigh the benefits"
- Strong formulation: "It's inherently impossible, because widening participation and maintaining standards are inherently contradictory concepts". (I.e. "Excellence and Equality are mutually exclusive")
- Quite subtle arguments here about the nature of a meritocracy
- Example: the discourse of social class, IQ and merit in the UK.



Thank you


