AIMS project: towards a new understanding of widening participation

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SRHE/UALL seminar: 6th July 2015

University of the West of England
BRISTOL

SRHE — Society for Research into Higher Education

Historical context

- History of access to higher education in the UK being strongly stratified by social class / disadvantage
- Significant policy interest from 2000 onwards in 'widening participation' (WP)
- National *Aimhigher* programme (2004 to 2011) – around £1 billion invested
- Significant financial investment from universities from 2006 onwards – now around £100 million per year
- Wide range of initiatives and interventions

However…

HE youth participation rate, by eligibility for free school meals
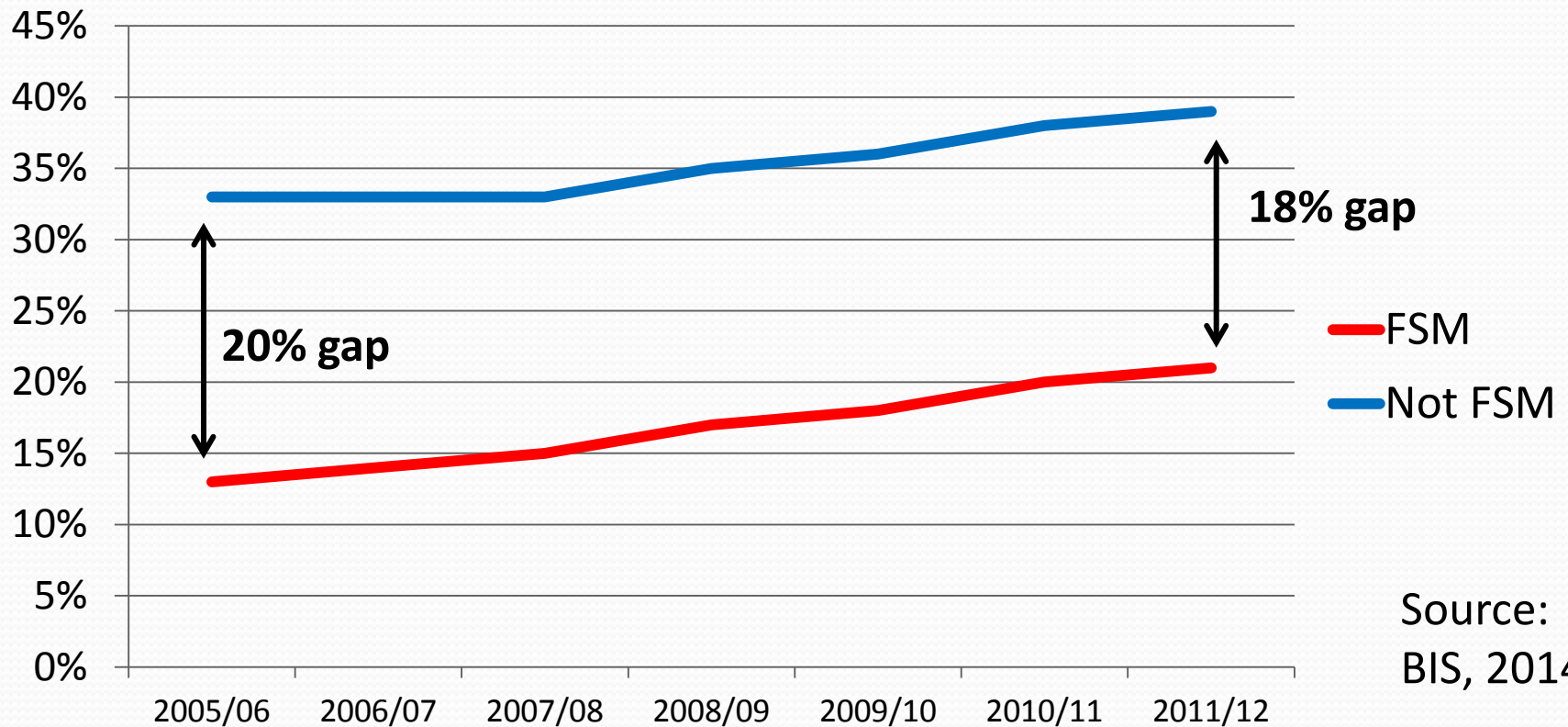
Source: BIS, 2014

Why no wider?

- Some improvement in terms of *participation rates* for disadvantaged groups, but little narrowing of the gap

- Progress in WP heavily focused on lower status universities/colleges (e.g. Harrison 2011)

- Little or no change in social mix of elite universities, despite lucrative incentives (Raffe and Croxford in press; Boliver 2013)

- Why have two decades of WP policy and practice not made more difference in terms of social justice?

It's the attainment, stupid…

- Development of linked national datasets have shone a new light on the issue (Chowdry et al 2008; Crawford 2014)

- Vast majority of inequality in HE participation is defined early in the educational process

- For example, Crawford (2014) calculates that over 95% of the participation gap is accounted for by differences in Level 2 qualifications

- Level 3 qualifications primarily have a sorting function

Minding the gap

- In other words, at a given level of qualification, young people participate at roughly the same rate

- For example, 80-85% of young people with two A Levels progress to HE, regardless of social class – this appears stable over time (Robertson and Hillman 1997; Bekhradnia 2003; Coleman and Bekhradnia 2011)

- Meanwhile, studies of HE aspirations among teenagers have tended to find limited links between aspiration and social class (see Whitty et al 2015)

AIMS project

- "Assessing Impact and Measuring Success"
- Seeks to re-examine the epistemology underpinning WP activities:
  - Capturing ideas about 'what works' from past and present managers / practitioners
  - Problematising how institutions can collect credible evaluative evidence
  - Contextualising this within the wider literature
  - Making some recommendations for future practice

Methodology: Strand 1

- Telephone interviews with all nine former regional directors of Aimhigher and one former national director

- Interviews lasted 40 to 80 minutes

- Undertaken September 2014 to January 2015

- Most have since retired, but most have maintained contact with the WP sector – some have continue to work within it

Methodology: Strand 2

- Online questionnaire of current institutional WP managers in England, derived from list provided by OFFA and web search

- Undertaken September to December 2014

- 57 responses – 38% response rate

Category	Invited	Responded	Response rate
Pre-1992 universities	43	19	44%
Post-1992 universities	60	22	37%
Colleges	48	16	33%

Four main themes

- Thematic analysis undertaken within and across the two strands and datasets

- Four strong themes emerge:
  1. Partnerships vs. competition
  2. Aspirations vs. attainment
  3. Targeting, deadweight and leakage
  4. Monitoring, evaluation and proof

- Session will focus on these, with some concluding speculation about the way forwards
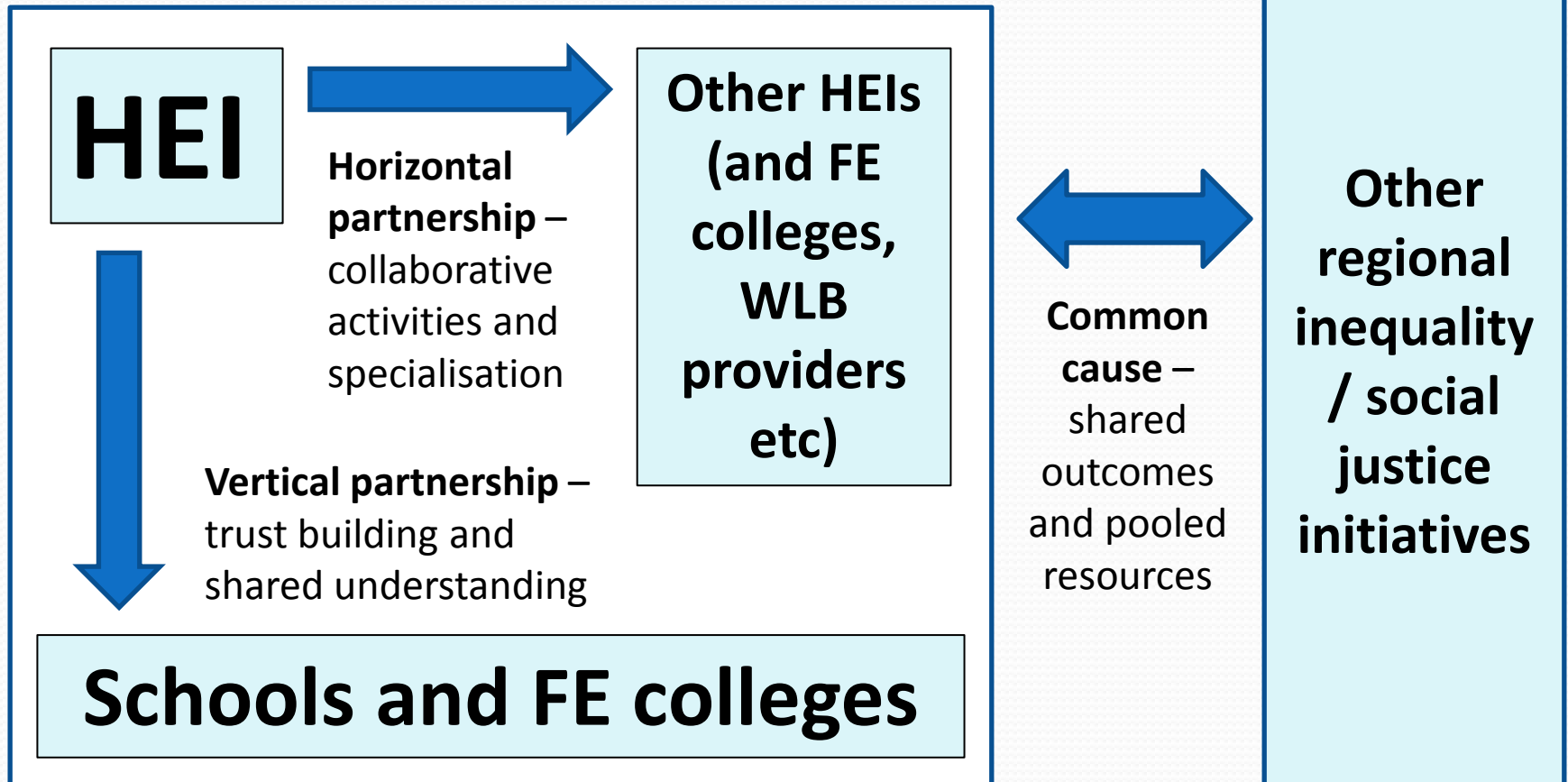
THEME 1: Partnerships vs. competition

The growth of WP partnership

- Aimhigher provided context for growing new partnerships:
  - *"The whole thing was about learning […] learning about other institutions, and learning about how institutions could work together across and to cross boundaries."* (Strand 1)
  - *"Aimhigher was able to professionalise the WP agenda and share expertise and raise the idea of collaboration in recruitment between HEIs and a coordinated approach to outreach."* (Strand 1)
- Explicitly stimulated by funding, with scope for creative experimentation

Aimhigher and partnership

AIMHIGHER

HEI

Horizontal partnership – collaborative activities and specialisation

Vertical partnership – trust building and shared understanding

Other HEIs (and FE colleges, WLB providers etc)

Common cause – shared outcomes and pooled resources

Other regional inequality / social justice initiatives

Schools and FE colleges

Post-Aimhigher landscape (1)

- *"For me [Aimhigher] was getting all the institutions to come together and work together across what were very real boundaries. I think those ties have broken now since they have stopped the funding that glued them all together and I think the relationships are likely to break down further as time goes on and people move on and others aren't aware of how good they were or could be."* (Strand 1)

Post-Aimhigher landscape (2)

- HEIs have largely reverted to *"the 'path of least resistance' and where there are easy gains"* (Strand 1) in terms of WP recruitment

- Sense of retreat into 'safe' activities, with less coverage in rural/costal areas and in areas of deep urban deprivation

- Partnerships now expressed almost exclusively in terms of vertical relationships with schools, and then those *"that will work with us"* (Strand 2).

Post-Aimhigher landscape (3)

- No HEIs in the survey explicitly referred to collaborative relationships with other HEIs:
  - In particular, post-1992 universities often used terminology that blurred the lines between WP and recruitment – some stressing *"equality of access"* (Strand 2)
  - FE colleges generally described an 'introspective' approach to WP, stressing internal progression and noting difficult relationship with schools due to direct competition
  - Pre-1992 universities focused on school partnerships to identify potential disadvantaged applicants and build long-term relationships to discourage mobility

Partnerships to competition

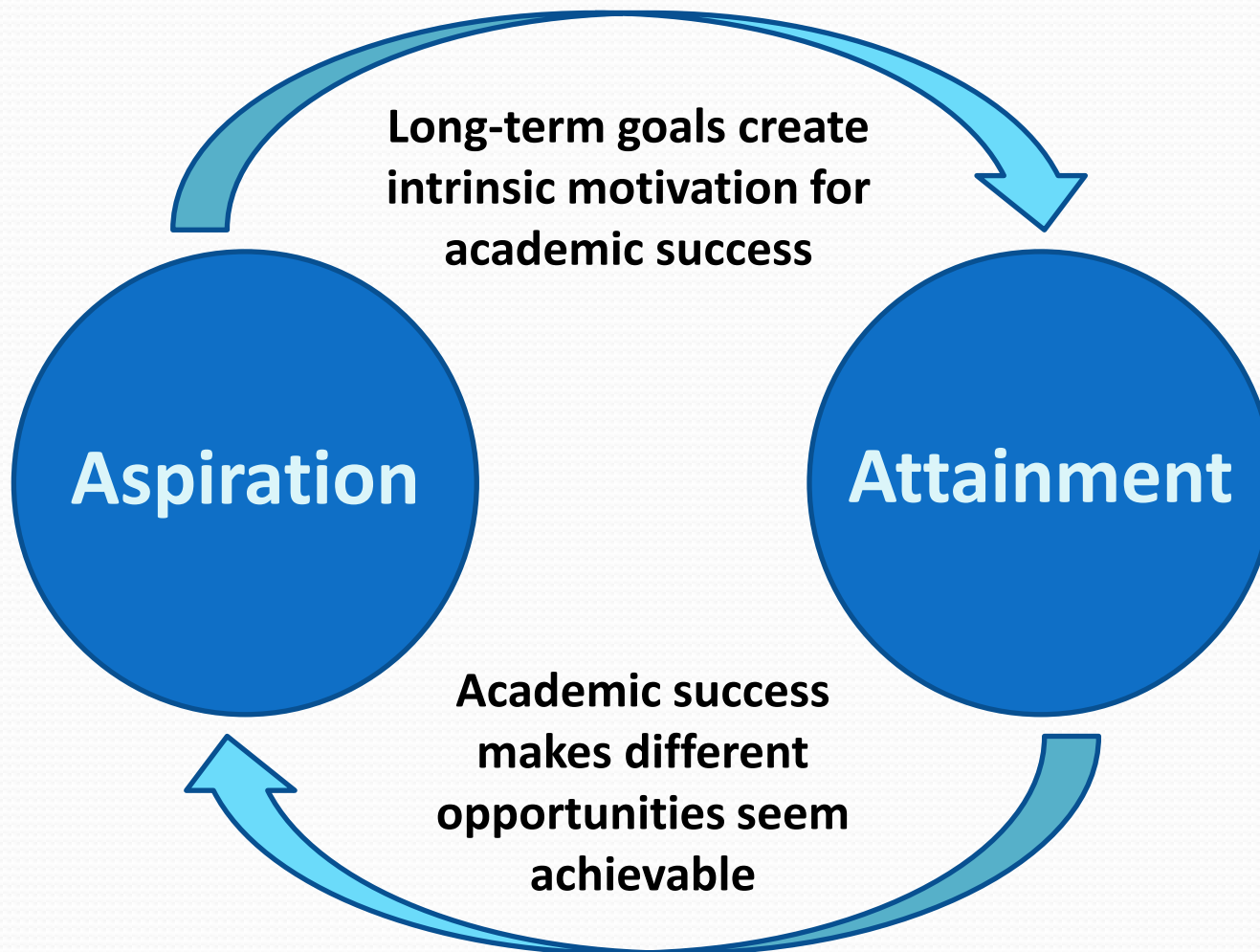| Aimhigher era	Post-Aimhigher era
HEIs in collaborative partnerships with (at least notionally) a shared social justice aim. Specialisation of activity to achieve geographical and disciplinary spread and joint activities to promote higher education in the round.	Colleges focusing on recruiting their own Level 3 students into degree programmes and resisting competition from post-1992 universities
	Post-1992 universities building strong school relationships to maximise intake from local disadvantaged areas in highly competitive market
	Pre-1992 universities competing with each other for largely stable pool of disadvantaged young people with high qualifications – discouraging mobility

THEME 2: Aspirations vs. attainment

Shifting emphasis

- Aimhigher initially conceived to be 'aspiration raising' programme – perceived working class 'deficit'
  - *"When I first went into primary schools and you asked questions about higher education and who wanted to go to university I would estimate that about 30% would put their hands up. Towards the end I would go in and I would say it was about 70%"* (Strand 1)
- Shift in emphasis over time to refocus on attainment:
  - *"If they don't get the qualifications to get into university then it doesn't matter how much they want to get there, it's not going to happen"* (Strand 1)

A reinforcing relationship?

Aspiration

Attainment

Long-term goals create intrinsic motivation for academic success

Academic success makes different opportunities seem achievable

Implicit model, but to what extent are these effects evidenced and how are they integrated into WP thinking and activities? What attainment and aspirations for what?

Institutional WP successes (1)

% of institutions believing that their WP activities were 'very successful' in terms of various possible outcomes
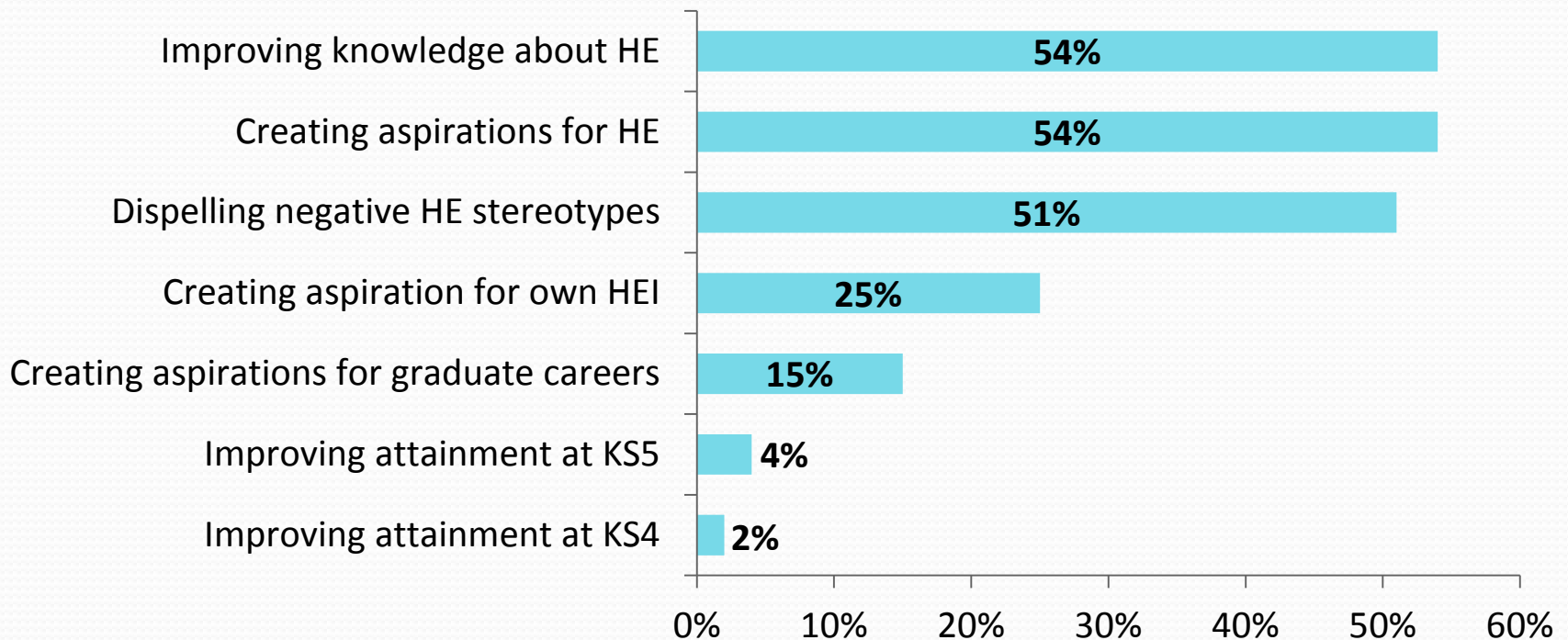
Institutional WP successes (2)

- 38% felt that their institution was not concerned with raising results at KS4 and 26% held the same view about KS5

- Activities thought successful at raising attainment were very distinct from those targeting aspiration:
  - Aspiration: summer schools / taster days / school visits
  - Attainment: master classes / mentoring / access schemes

- Very few institutions referenced careers-based or careers-led activities – unsuccessful or missing?

A return to aspirations?

- Despite literature on importance of qualifications in defining HE trajectory, a third of institutions (of all types) felt they were out-of-scope for WP activities

- Very few institutions made explicit link with Pupil Premium – contrast with Aimhigher interviews which made strong link to attainment-raising initiatives

- 'Useful' overlap between aspiration-raising activities and institutional promotional activities – the new policy world of 'outreach'

THEME 3: Targeting, leakage and deadweight

Targeting dilemmas

- Effective targeting seen as one of the key challenges during the lifetime of Aimhigher
  - *"We were targeting too many people in too many [schools and colleges] many of whom we didn't need to – shouldn't have been – targeting anyway"* (Strand 1)
- Some agreement that POLAR had 'solved' this issue:
  - *"POLAR was developed with a clear philosophy in mind and they wanted something that would be reliable – though there are questions about validity, but as long as it is used carefully and not mechanically, it is effective"* (Strand 1)

Targeting through WP markers

% of institutions using particular WP markers to target their activities, by institution type
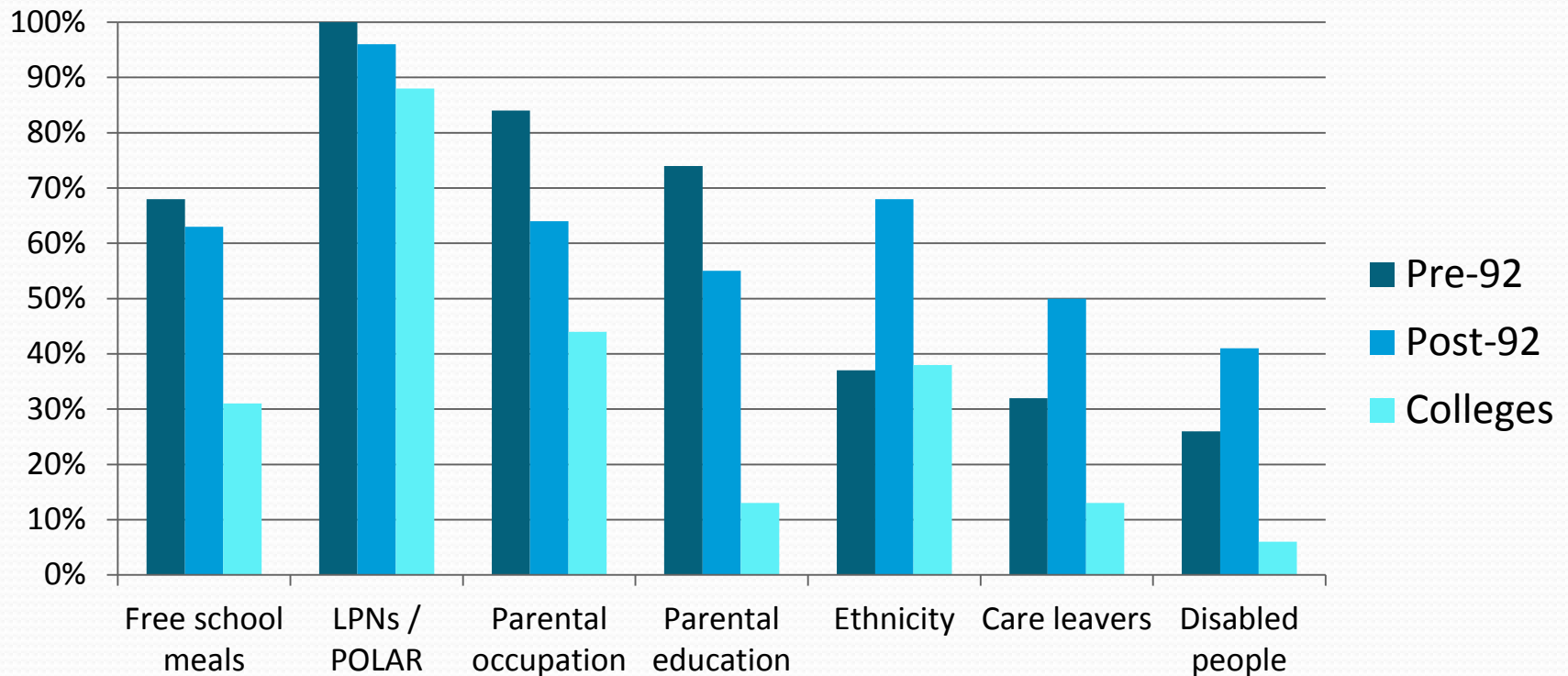
Quality of WP markers

% of institutions having concerns about the quality of WP markers in terms of availability, reliability, validity and precision
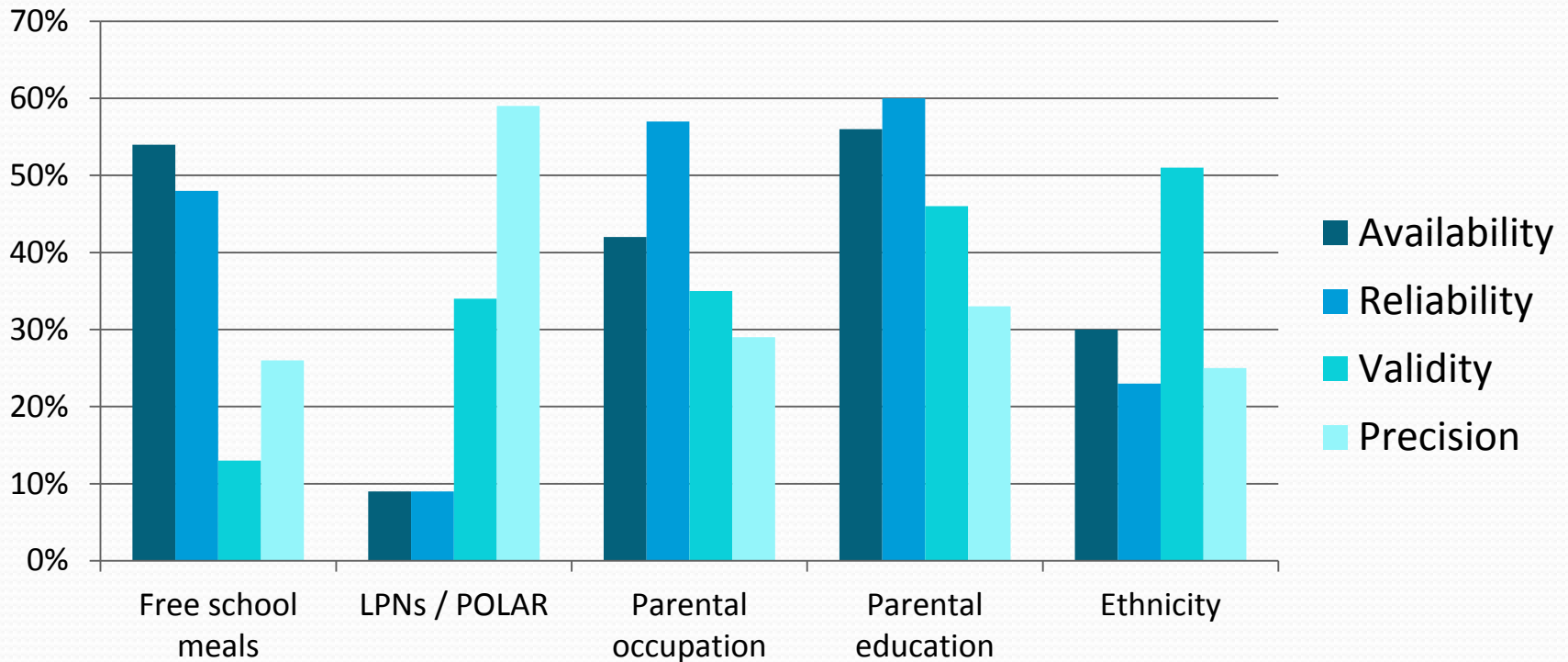
Perverse incentives?

- Ubiquitous LPNs/POLAR milestones seem to be driving unexpected behaviours / beliefs:
  - 60% of respondents felt that increasing applications from a disadvantaged area or school would be a success for their institution, regardless of the applicants' own financial or social situations
  - 53% believed recruiting an advantaged student from a disadvantaged area was equally (39%) or more important (14%) to their institution than a disadvantaged student from an advantaged area

The role of schools

- 32% of institutions were 'somewhat confident' or 'not confident' that the young people nominated by schools for WP activities are disadvantaged
  - *"Sometimes schools may have their own agendas as to who might benefit from interactions"*
  - Some teachers were seen to be *"unscrupulous"* in seeking to give extra support to 'gifted and talented' pupils or who will *"best represent the school externally"*
  - *"We have had instances where school coordinators have become angry when we have declined to offer an activity when they have refused to engage in targeting disadvantaged learners"* (all Strand 2)

Deadweight and leakage

- Solution to the targeting issue may have been over-stated and new dilemmas emerging
  - Extensive evidence for 'leakage' (aka *shouldn't have*) of WP activities to relatively advantaged young people, either through institution or school actions
  - Unresolved issue of 'deadweight' (aka *didn't need to*) – distinguishing those already destined for HE from those for whom intervention will change attitudes / behaviour
  - Conflict between social justice and recruitment outcomes: 48% prioritised applications to their own institution, compared to 7% prioritising HE in general

THEME 4: Evaluation, monitoring and proof

Evaluation and impact (1)

- Contrary to targeting, evaluation was seen as an unresolved issue from the Aimhigher period:
  - *"How do you measure that light bulb moment that ultimately led to that person going to university…?"*
  - *"Part of the issue was that they were practitioners, not evaluators, and they weren't trained in evaluation and didn't want to be doing that – they wanted to be practicing, so the evaluation side of things was messy"*
  - *"It takes a while for people to accept new initiatives and so like all of these, Aimhigher was just beginning to have an impact and being embedded in peoples' psyche when the funding was withdrawn"* (all Strand 1)

Evaluation and impact (2)

- For some Aimhigher managers, evaluation was even seen as potentially counter-productive:
  - *"[The pressure to evaluate] went on and on and the diversity of the types of activities went down and down as people just started trying to meet the targets or only do things that could easily be measured"*
  - *"There was a definite drop-off in attendance [from practitioners] as time and the tinkering went on and people realised there was not going to be so much it in for them"*
  - *"The more successful we were at integrating in school programmes [and] the harder it became to disaggregate the Aimhigher effect"* (all Strand 1)

What do institutions do?

**% of institutions using different evaluative approaches**
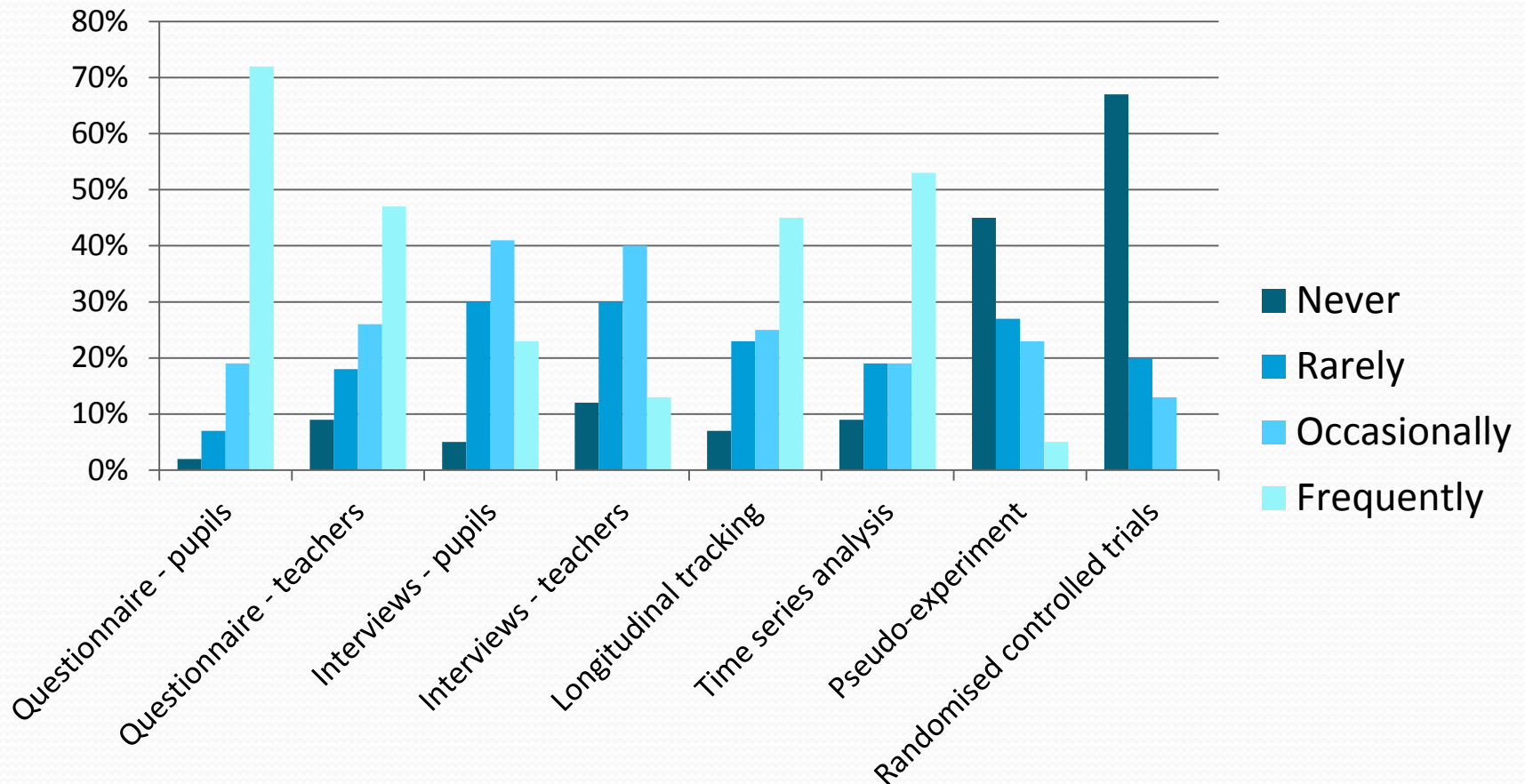
Does it work?

- Only 68% of institutions were confident in the evidence base underpinning their WP activities

- 91% wanted to improve their evaluative practice:

  - *"We need to develop research and evaluation strategies that encourage institutional change as well as supporting students through aspiration and attainment raising interventions"* (Strand 2)

  - *"longitudinal studies are excellent but so time-consuming as to [be] next to impractical for a university WP unit to do on a regular basis"* (Strand 2)

Looking to the future

% of institutions selecting approach as 'most reliable'
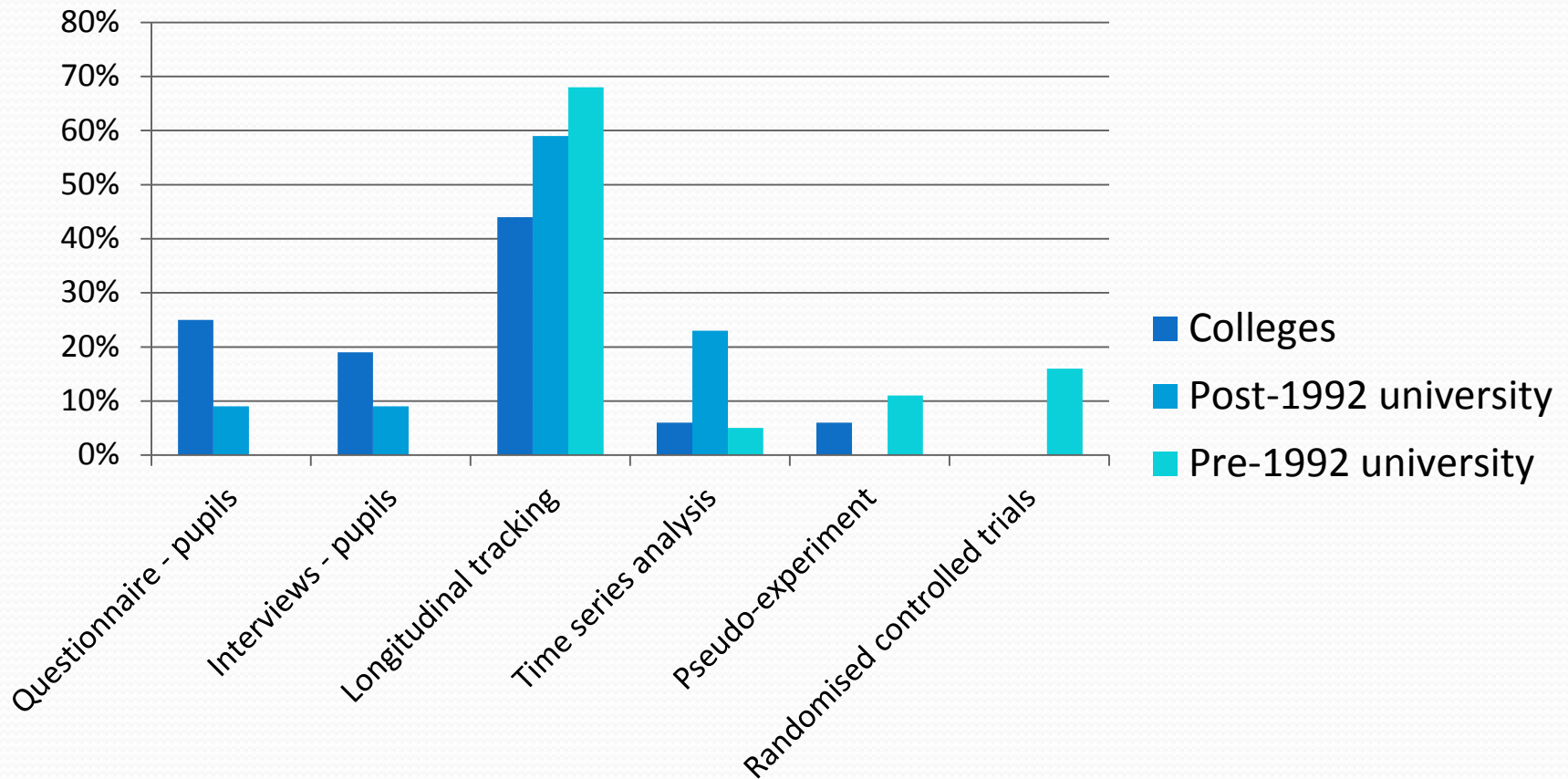
Evaluation and proof

- Longitudinal/tracking approaches seen as 'most reliable' across all institutional types
- Likely conflation of monitoring and evaluation
- Not obvious how longitudinal analysis will resolve 'deadweight' problem – absence of 'control'
- Considerable push-back:
  - *"We might too readily go on to the back foot when we are challenged on the evidence. Perhaps we have plenty of evidence but too little analysis of what it tells us and too little articulation between the various data sets we have"* (Strand 2)

'The UCAS problem'

- *"How do you measure that light bulb moment that ultimately led to that person going to university when you don't actually know who did decide to go on to university?"* (Strand 1)

- This was also referred to as *"the UCAS problem"* (Strand 2) – that data on which prospective students went where (if anywhere) is denied to practitioners

- Very difficult to evaluate impact of activities (or portfolio of activities) when final outcome data is missing

CONCLUSION: Towards a new understanding of widening participation

A quick summary

- 'Outreach' terminology blurring the lines between supply chain and social justice activity
- Institutions do not believe they are significantly influencing young people's attainment
- Potentially confused mission for aspiration activity - own institution, general HE or graduate career
- Targeting approaches can create perverse incentives
- Unresolved proof problems with deadweight, disentanglement and 'dodgy data'

Questions needing answers

- **Q1**: How do we identify those not flowing into 'the pool', but who could do with intervention?

- **Q2**: Why don't institutions prioritise attainment-raising and what could they be doing?

- **Q3**: How do we reduce or eliminate the targeting leakage within institutions and schools?

- **Q4**: Which and whose aspirations need raising?

- **Q5**: Even with perfect data, what is the likelihood of proving causal events in a young person's life?

Question 1: growing the pool

- Given that educational disadvantage is ingrained early, this requires a longer-term approach

- A few institutions talked glowingly about their engagement at KS2 and KS3, but too few

- More engagement needed with Pupil Premium and outcome predictors (e.g. Fischer Family Trust)

- A refocus away from the most talented disadvantaged young people towards the next layer to reduce deadweight

Question 2: attainment raising

- Aimhigher latterly appreciated the imperative of focusing on attainment – wisdom risks being lost

- Uncomfortable ground for institutions as supporting learning for children is not core business

- However, many have education departments and significant other expertise, facilities and resource

- Some examples of good practice already available

- Other means of influencing attainment – e.g. through qualification advice at 14

Question 3: reducing leakage

- Leakage is a 'double whammy' for WP activities – takes resource from disadvantaged and retrenches inequality by giving to already-advantaged

- POLAR data needs to be seen as a starting point for targeting, not an endpoint for 'milestoning'

- Ongoing work needed to build shared understandings with schools to avoid 'unscrupulous' practices

- Greater use of free school meals as a targeting mechanisms – not perfect, but individualised

Question 4: unpick aspirations

- Undoubtedly some relationship between aspirations and attainment, but not well-understood

- More research needed (or needs to be employed) on link between long-term life goals, planning horizons and the forms of motivation they create

- Refocus on graduate careers as a 'pull' – what they are, how to get there and how they change lives

- Revive a role for quality work experience at KS4

- Consider an increased focus on parental aspirations

Question 5: rethinking proof

- The most compelling epistemologies from institutional managers described linking evaluative approach to the individual activity
- Stronger theoretical grounding needed for activities, with clarity of purpose
- Evaluation then focuses on whether activity is successful within its own terms
- Maintain scepticism around arbitrary nature of inferential statistics

A final parting question…

…but should we be pushing young people even further into a credentialised system?

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