
Falling Between the Gaps: Appraising the Past and Future of Widening Participation at Liverpool John Moores University

Chris Mason

Abstract

Of the many challenges facing Higher Education in the United Kingdom, widening participation is one of the most critical. Despite the support for enhancing access to Higher Education for excluded groups, such as ethnic minorities, forthcoming cuts in funding mean it will be harder for many institutions to meet their commitments to Widening Participation. This paper reviews the history of Widening Participation in higher education in the United Kingdom, focussing on the potential impact of current policy initiatives and the economic environment on Widening Participation at Liverpool John Moores University. The paper recognises the macro-level impact of increasing marketization of Higher Education on Widening Participation initiatives. It also explores micro-level issues, such as staff awareness and commitment to widening participation policy.

Introduction

Widening Participation has been heralded by Higher Education practitioners and academics as both the key opportunity and challenge facing Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom. On the side of opportunity, the Widening Participation agenda enables access to higher education by previously disadvantaged groups. The causes of such disadvantage include social and/or financial deprivation, as well as institutional factors such as selection policies inimical to 'meritocracy'. Challenges to the Widening Participation agenda cover a range of issues, such as local implementation of the national policy, unreliable measures and metrics of 'success', and the problems associated with defining concrete outcomes from Widening Participation. In this paper, a brief history of the development of the Widening Participation agenda in the UK will be followed by an overview and critique of the rationale underpinning it. The paper will then explore the challenges the movement faces within higher education institutions, and consider the implications for a widening participation

employability agenda, given the volatility of world markets and a destabilised national economy. Implications for Liverpool John Moores University are considered as a final, reflective contextualisation.

Background to the Widening Participation agenda

Widening Participation refers to "increasing access to further and higher education [and] widening participation to non-traditional groups of potential students" (Thomas 2000 p96). In tandem with the centrist political movements in the past 12 years in the UK, key public sector services have embraced the spirit of 'reform' championed by Gordon Brown, and especially his predecessor Tony Blair (Sampson 2005). Widening Participation symbolises this change in focus – encouraging equity in the application and selection process for prospective students entering Higher Education. Rather like the 'classless' society promoted by New Labour (among other political parties), public sector organisations have pursued the same mantra of

fairness of opportunity, as well as playing a key role in an enabling society, support economic and social regeneration (Callender 2002). Such high ideals have ignited on-going debate, independent scrutiny and a deal of controversy: issues that shall be discussed in greater depth in subsequent sections. The modern origins of Widening Participation policy in the United Kingdom date from key reviews of the higher education sector by key figures, most notably the Kennedy and Dearing Reports, published in 1997 (Tight 1998). These reports, though influential and central to subsequent White Paper and policy development, were preceded by notable contributions from Robbins (1963), who advocated expansion in higher education to combat social exclusion, in certain socio-economic groupings, and the actions of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government, whose legacy pervades the higher education sector to this day via the Dearing Report (entitled *Higher Education in a Learning Society* (Callender 2002)). The influence of Dearing cannot be overstated: steered by cross-party support, the report dealt with key issues including financial support for higher education institutions and funding by students, as well as the need to raise aspirations of students in poorer socio-economic groupings (Robertson & Hillman 1997). However, some Widening Participation issues (such as those related to disabilities investigated by Robertson and Hillman in their 1997 report) went largely untouched by the report (Greenbank 2006). The patchy coverage of the Dearing Report was reinforced by the Kennedy Report, which was published in the same year. This report, entitled *Learning Works*, focussed on Further Education, but was still concerned with widening of access to tertiary levels of education for students in key socio-economic groupings (Jary & Jones 2004). To a degree, the findings and recommendations of the Kennedy and Dearing Reports dovetailed nicely, indicating a progressive (structural) change required for further education and higher

education in combination, together with the targeting and 'marketization' of both sectors (Gibbs 2001; Jary & Jones 2004). Following both reports, the New Labour Government sought to embed a set of policies and practices to bring about the type and severity of change required of the higher education sector. As Jary and Jones, note at length, these included:

- Performance indicators.
- Post-code premiums.
- Widening participation strategies.
- Collaborative and partnered initiatives.
- Partnerships for progression.

An organisation so far unacknowledged in this paper for its role in the development of Widening Participation initiatives is the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). As Lewis (2002 p206) explains, HEFCE set up an advisory group in 1992 "...to look at issues surrounding access and participation.". Essentially the findings indicated that higher education institutions did not work to the benefit of disadvantaged groups in society. Hence, HEFCE worked with both institutions and the local community to ensure a fuller engagement between the two. This is embodied in schemes such as AimHigher that seeks to show potential students the reality of life as student in higher education and break down perceived (or real) barriers to entry. In the words of the AimHigher website: "*The AimHigher programme aims to ensure that everyone is aware of this - and of the range of course options that can help people study in a way that suits them*" (AimHigher 2009). Further initiatives, such as Foundation Degrees and out-reach initiatives (Murphy 2002), have proven to be more popular with some higher education institutions and in particular subject areas than others (e.g. there are successful Foundation Degrees in healthcare at LJMU, but none in business). In summary, HEFCE has played a crucial role in recognising

deficiencies in enabling Widening Participation in higher education institutions, and also embedding practices for encouraging better participation.

Having set the Widening Participation agenda, the next task for Government, and principally HEFCE, was to enable a climate of support, and ease of implementation for local implementation of policy. As Trowler (2001) discusses in some detail, the *institutional* influences on creating and supporting change are considerable. He discusses the idea of 'loose-coupling' to explain how policy manifests within the institutional fabric, and likens the university environment to 'organised anarchies', highlighting the difficulties these organisations face in reconciling the rationalisation of formal goals in an uncertain and fluid academic environment (Trowler 2001, p4). In highlighting the difficulties in transforming government policy into progressive change and inclusive practice in higher education institutions, Trowler, among others, pinpoint this as one of the main barriers to long terms success of Widening Participation (Thomas 2000; Watt & Paterson 2000). Further understanding of the implementation of policy considers the institutional basis for successful, if slow, change and acceptance of the policy. Of course, within this view of organisations (particularly higher education institutions) is the notion of resistance to change. Recognising this issue may illuminate how the process might be planned and assisted to reduce local barriers to change. Furthermore, how to encourage proactive engagement with the ideals set down by both Lord Dearing and the subsequently HEFCE, produces yet another ongoing challenge for higher education institutions (Lewis 2002).

In his review of the evolution of Widening Participation in the UK, Greenbank (2006) made clear the "disproportional" nature of access to higher education, affecting large numbers of potential students from less privileged social backgrounds. Jary and Jones (2004) outline some

of the key political and academic contributions at the foundations of Widening Participation, in addition to those discussed above. Jones and Thomas (2005) distinguish the following components of the Widening Participation strategy for higher education institutions:

- Academic.
- Utilitarian.
- Transformative participation.

The academic function is through the discourse of Widening Participation issues. This brings a critical angle to contemporary debate on the future of higher education. Importantly, students with 'low-aspirations' are to be encouraged to engage in higher education via schemes and classifications, for example 'gifted and talented'. Therefore, this academic perspective intends to illuminate how academic achievement and development is broadened (as well as deepened) by encouraging talented individuals to partake in higher education, irrespective of their socio-economic group (see Hatt, Baxter & Harrison 2003). Encouraging such intervention is a direct challenge to the past failings of poor participation in higher education, and seeks to enhance equity for lower socio-economic groups (Macdonald & Stratta 2001; Yorke & Thomas 2003). One criticism is the ability for higher education institutions to maintain standards of quality in the face of external pressures to increase capacity (Naidoo 2000).

In the utilitarian group, authors refer to the asserted link between higher education and the economy. The notion here is that widening access to higher education and increasing the participation of more gifted and talented individuals, should produce a greater number of well-skilled employees to enhance the economy. The emphasis here is on higher education as a repository for producing more well-skilled and trained individuals than before – especially from

disadvantaged socio-economic groupings. It remains unclear whether higher education institutions have produced an effect on the UK economy as a result of Widening Participation. Anecdotal experience suggests that other initiatives are used in addition (perhaps complementary) to enhance employability and economic utility. The World of Work scheme is currently being implemented across Liverpool John Moores University, which is affecting every aspect of teaching undertaken by academic staff. Naturally, Widening Participation is considered in LJMU's WoW for internal staff:

"Employers are looking for graduates with something extra that makes them stand out from the crowd. And, with competition for jobs increasing, academic qualifications are just the first tick in the box." (LJMU 2008)

The utilitarian strand of Widening Participation is a useful lens for understanding one of the more easily measured outcomes, namely that of graduate destinations following their higher education experience, and related economic measures from employment. In this light, LJMU's WoW scheme links nicely into the broader Widening Participation policy movement. Indeed students studying at LJMU have access to targeted learning activities to provide the skills required to compete against peers at 'elitist' universities.

Finally, transformative participation "...must stress the idea that higher education should be changed to permit it to both gauge and meet the needs of under-represented groups" (Jones & Thomas 2005, p619). This aspect of the Widening Participation agenda refers then to the 'transformative' capacity of higher education institutions to adapt and change to be able to deliver on this emergent and politically charged area. This strand also links together the first two strands – developing academic capability, which in turn leverages an economic benefit as a direct

result of increased numbers of graduates competing for jobs.

Information sources, such as Action on Access, provide update on the current issues surrounding the Widening Participation agenda. Notably, they focus on emergent issues such as the availability of key skills, and the *New Opportunities White Paper* (2009). This is a direct response to the Leitch Report (2006), which focused on the role of co-funded course in higher education. The need for employer engagement is naturally a concern for those groups promoting Widening Participation, since sharing the burden of funding student access to higher education with employers creates new opportunities for adult learners (for example). This White Paper is broad ranging, and covers the spectrum of education (from Early Years to Adult Learners). It directly relates to Widening Participation because of the extra financial support it proposes for families whose lives are interrupted by a family member entering higher education. Moreover, it considers other potential outcomes of Widening Participation, such as easing the transition to work for graduates.

Gibbs (2001) asserts that the marketization of higher education is a critical problem facing the sector. As higher education institutions are encouraged to establish their profiles on a national and international scale, to attract students, the result is an increase in enterprise. The problem with this is that it encourages the process of education to develop along transactional lines, as opposed to the development of key, long-term relationships between educators and learners. Naturally, this raises philosophical (as well as pedagogical) concerns, because many educators are drawn towards higher education to enhance learning, rather than to 'grow' recruitment numbers. Furthermore, the general principle of growing student numbers at any given university should

be a result of academic reputation, especially quality of teaching, rather than effective advertising campaigns and branding. The changing nature of market forces in the higher education sector require a sharp focus on marketing and raising awareness of higher education, especially to socio-economic groupings previously disadvantaged in applying for higher education courses. Hence, there is a valid claim that the marketization of higher education enhances the Widening Participation agenda – heightening the notoriety of the breadth of quality higher education provision in the UK can and does aid Widening Participation, as Foskett (2002) made clear for Further Education.

Adnett & Slack (2007) make a persuasive and insightful argument for the deeper, root causes of exclusion on higher education. In a part rebuttal of the Widening Participation policy program in the UK, they claim that the lack of employment incentives provides a real disincentive to prospective students from poorer backgrounds. So, in tacit alignment with the utilitarian strand mentioned previously, we could see that despite the drive for Widening Participation as a means towards employability, there is clearly a supply-demand issue. The utilitarian argument dictates that better quality graduates from a range of socio-economic groupings will influence demand, while also satisfying supply concerns. Of course, this is a linear view of the nature of supply-demand cycles in job markets, especially given the recent tumult in global financial markets. Therefore, rather than Widening Participation emancipating individuals from certain socio-economic groupings previously excluded from higher education, Widening Participation may in fact place students at a disadvantage by over-supplying job markets. In particular, a glut of students with very similar experiences and degree classifications inhibits employment opportunities. This may create a vicious circle because it results in the very same surfeit in

employment opportunities that discouraged participation in the first place. In fact, recent news suggests that students entering higher education are facing tougher times than ever before, given the pressure of student financing and the declining opportunities for part and full-time employment in parts of the UK (BBC 2009). The payment of tuition fees in Higher Education, designed to enable people from minority socio-economic groups gain access to Higher Education, also pose a further problem to successful implementation of Widening Participation. These targeted students should receive grant funding to support them during their studies, yet the rising cost of participation in Higher Education means there is often a shortfall. Consequently students from targeted socio-economic groups still struggle with rising debt by the time they finish their studies.

The advent of the student loan heralded a new era for entrants into higher education. While disbanding the traditional student 'grant' for all, the system enhances Widening Participation by making more funds available for students on a means-tested basis: those from disadvantaged socio-economic groupings are enabled to join higher education, and not restricted because of an inability to pay for education (Barr 2004). The student loan issue has been very controversial, and the National Union of Students (NUS) continues to pursue an anti-student loans campaign. Especially, their focus is now on the move by many higher education institutions to remove the cap on student funding, claiming: *"We believe the education funding system is too complicated and isn't helping anyone. We're proposing a single, simple student finance support system: a central distribution mechanism for all finance questions and solutions..."* (NUS 2009)

The likelihood of a reversal of current policy on student funding is highly unlikely, given the recent

support for the removal of the student funding cap (Grimston 2008). Official government and quasi-governmental organisations make very little mention of the adverse impact student funding is having on Widening Participation.

In keeping with the contemporary notion of the knowledge economy, higher education is expected to embrace the variety of new learning technologies. These systems are numerous and complex – from interactive white boards to web 2.0 learning environments. Furthermore, the application of such technologies is seen as crucial to the successful deployment of the Widening Participation strategy in the higher education sector. As Gorard and Selwyn (1999) state, the proposed 'virtual college' environment is both the potential solution to, and further cause of, problems in enabling students from disadvantaged socio-economic groupings from attending higher education. Though technology essentially enables the development of solutions to exclusion from education (e.g. though access on-line learning for students unable to attend university due to physical disability or family/work commitments), the authors suggest that it is naïve to suggest that technology should be *central* to Widening Participation. Rather, they authors argue for much closer research to gauge the actual impact of technology as a solution to the social and economic causes of exclusion from higher education. Further research has highlighted the role of technology as having a reversal impact on Widening Participation. It is suggested that the expansion in technological solutions do little to enhance the quality of participation in higher education by adult learners (Gorard, Selwyn & Williams 2000; Selwyn & Gorard 2003). This presents a real dilemma for the Government, suggesting efforts expended on promoting technology, as an integral part of the Widening Participation agenda may be inimical to its progression. Rather, as is suggested later in this review, greater emphasis should be placed on

implementation and supporting higher education staff to create an more conducive Widening Participation environment.

The Future

The recent volatility in global markets is likely to influence recruitment and retention in higher education in the UK, though the full scale of a diminishing entrant base into higher education will be tested in time. Indeed, it is very difficult to ascertain the likely impact of the economic downturn on entry into higher education by students from disadvantaged socio-economic groupings. The principal reason for this is that there is no concrete evidence of how badly job markets will be affected in the ongoing economic (and political) upheaval, so higher education policy is likely to remain unchanged. Simply put, there is not a great deal 'wrong' with the rhetoric behind the Widening Participation agenda in the UK – it is quite reasonable to continue to believe in a policy that encourages access to higher education, based on merit and not on ability to pay (Callender 2002). Furthermore, with a general election forthcoming in 2010, the future for Widening Participation is unclear. Whilst it seems doubtful that any government would explicitly remove its support for participation schemes in Higher Education, especially given the drive by parents to see their children attain University degrees, the nature of this support is likely to change. This is set against the economic backdrop of recession and slow recovery, and funding cuts in Higher Education of £1 billion in the sector.

This paper does highlight some of the key contributors to the development of Widening Participation in the UK, as well as those academics with a keen critical eye for how well the project in being implemented. Of course, there remain many practical, implementation issues in Widening Participation that show no sign of abating. LJMU, with its WoW scheme, is

making an active attempt to encourage staff and students to recognise and deal with issues of employment. WoW does seem to cleverly bridge the gap between 'marketization' and positive application of government policy –

making a workable solution to policy is not the forte of public sector organisations – though details on its current performance is unclear (the scheme has only been formally running for about 12 months). However, key to its success will be how many students from socio-economic groupings are attracted to the University because of the employability factor, especially the match between academic and 'work' knowledge (Bowers-Brown 2006; Forrester-Jones & Hatzidimitriadou 2006). Also, central to the success of any Widening Participation is how well staff (as well as students) are encouraged to recognise the inability of existing higher education institutions to accommodate a Widening Participation movement, and play an active part in making higher education accessible for all.

■ **Chris Mason** is a lecturer in Marketing, Liverpool Business School

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