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Widening participation and higher education. Students, systems and other paradoxes

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This paper has developed from research that the author initiated. The data were derived from an outreach project that aimed to increase awareness of and participation in higher education amongst Muslim women within a major English city. The paper elevates some of the author's findings into a general discussion on the role of higher education (HE) and the paradoxes that are revealed when considering how concepts of widening participation and lifelong learning fit within the HE system. Readers are invited to think of different approaches to widening participation, for example through civic and community engagement, and consider sustained research that relates access to wider debates within the study of HE, such as lifelong learning and civic responsibility.

Keywords: widening participation; lifelong learning; higher education; access; civic engagement

Widening participation for Muslim women

In 1999 two universities began to collaborate on a project to increase access to higher education (HE) for Muslim women, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The project revealed a wealth of interesting data at a practitioner and strategic level. This fed back into the project and to HEFCE via appropriate reports (Rabiee and Thompson 2000). In subsequent years the author expanded the research in a bid to articulate practice, policy and theory. The research began by utilising a grounded (Glaser and Strauss 1967) approach in developing an understanding of the issues that emerged when engaged in this type of activity. This was both in terms of student participation and the community organisations involved. Data were drawn from semi-structured group interviews, questionnaires, diaries, reports and other materials. The conclusions were then compared to an analysis of over 30 other reports from widening participation projects across the United Kingdom that focussed on other under-represented or 'non-traditional' students. This revealed a series of generic conclusions born out of a diverse set of experiences and institutions. This comparison provided the mechanism for elevating the data into wider policy debate and theoretical constructs (Thompson 2007). The generic issues included flexibility of courses, financial pressures, student confidence, the amount of administrative support to sustain projects, resources and childcare, advice and guidance for students, location, building cooperative partnerships and coping with institutional procedures.

Identifying paradoxes

Differences between policy and practice is an issue that has been raised on a regular basis from widening participation researchers such as Preece (1999a, 1999b), Bowl (2003), Thomas

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(2000, 2001a, 2001b) and Thomas and Jones (2003). A common thread has surfaced regularly, expressed through the idea that widening participation presents a series of 'paradoxes' or 'dilemmas' for HE. Bowl (2003), for example, following her research into the experiences of non-traditional students entering university, concludes with the identification of a series of paradoxes that need to be addressed if performance in this area is to be improved. She comments upon the 'uneven playing field in education' and cites paradoxes such as: widening participation/worsening finances; higher qualifications/lower value; access without accessibility; increasing support needs/decreasing support; changing knowledge/fixed curriculum (Bowl 2003, chap. 10).

Some of these paradoxes were experienced throughout this author's research into the 'Muslim Women Project', a widening participation intervention involving a major element of community outreach. One in particular was finances, another was flexibility; or as Bowl (2003) puts it, access and accessibility.

Brown (2003a), in a review of New Labour and its relationship with HE, and in his investigation into government policy (2003b), observed that there are a raft of 'dilemmas and paradoxes' that must be faced. These include the desire to expand matched against the costs involved, the dilemma between institutional diversity and the existing hierarchy, between attitudes to high and low fees, between more and less bureaucracy, and between exclusionism and accessibility. Jary and Parker (1998), in their discussion on the directions for HE, also observe the 'issues and dilemmas in the transition from elite to mass higher education' (1998, 333).

Commentators on the general development of HE have also referred to the role of widening participation policy and the efforts to reduce social exclusion. For example Taylor, Barr, and Steele's (2002) work discusses a radical agenda for HE, while others highlight the need to consider both the social and economic contexts with respect to HE (Duke 2005). In addition, there is Reay, David, and Ball's discussion of class, race and gender in higher education (2005). There are also references to responsibilities towards regional agendas and community outreach (Carey, Chambers, and Carey 2002, for example) and Robertson (in Coffield and Williamson 1997) considers the need for universities to strike 'new bargains' in a commitment to tackle social justice and engage more widely with the society and communities they serve. This is echoed by Checkoway's (2001) call for the renewal of the 'civic mission' for American research universities, which could comfortably be transposed to the UK.

Locating widening participation within a wider context

Whilst widening participation does not always take high priority when discussing higher education, there are parallels within related debates. For example researchers such as Coffield and Williamson (1997), Williamson (1998) and Wright (1990) discuss the future of HE by critiquing policy with respect to adult education, lifelong learning, work-based and vocational learning, flexible learning, and knowledge ownership, all of which have implications for widening participation. Another topic debated is that of community outreach, particularly with respect to civic engagement in local and regional communities and businesses.

Integrating wider themes that include lifelong learning, civic commitment and citizenship for example could develop opportunities for widening participation and social inclusion to become an integral part of a university's commitment to a wider social purpose that feeds into regional economies, infrastructure and needs. This may provide a different approach to widening participation and possibly reduce the impact of paradoxes in policy and practice. Researchers of HE who theorise on 'repositioning' (Coffield and Williamson 1997) the sector and comment on 'future directions' (Jary and Parker 1998) regularly refer to the universities' responsibilities

with respect to society in general and local and regional communities specifically. Barnett sets out a principle for developing HE where knowledge is difficult to pin down in a modern world (some would say post-modern) that is increasingly 'unknowable': 'In short we have to abandon the conception of both HE in society and a HE of society, and develop, instead a HE for Society' (Barnett in Coffield and Williamson 1997, 43). A HE that engages with society and local communities is liable to be one that wins the support of the public as both attempt to meet future challenges.

McNair, in emphasising the civic tradition of HE, reflects Duke's (2005) argument in some ways as well as striking a chord for practitioners on the Muslim Women Project, who became increasingly involved with community endeavours:

> Responsive to its local communities, which comes from the foundation of the great civic universities, and was carried forward by the polytechnics. In this model higher education feeds both into and on its local and regional communities, gathering and developing ideas and helping those communities to use them. (McNair in Coffield and Williamson 1997, 106)

Developing community relationships as part of widening participation

Do red-brick universities, for example, need to reclaim this civic duty? One report suggests that in fact during the 1990s the UK university sector 'rediscovered a commitment to locality' which stimulated a 'renaissance of the regional and civic mission of higher education' (Universities UK and Higher Education Funding Council for England 2001, 5). The same report however, despite recognising the numerous ways in which universities participate in regional agendas, also confessed the need for a more integrated and embedded approach and the frailty of short-term funding. The report concluded that 'the most pressing need is to identify current activities and good practice and make them both permanent and more central to the mainstream mission … There remains uncertainty' (Universities UK and Higher Education Funding Council for England 2001, 9).

Regional or local outreach, however, is not about setting up a display, stockpiling prospectuses at local recruitment fairs in schools and colleges, or for that matter guided walks around the campus on open days (community-based professionals on the Muslim Women Project wanted to develop more significant partnerships). It concerns becoming part of the fabric of life in the city, community or county the university quite often draws its name from. This means, for example, formal and proactive representation on local school and college boards, lifelong learning networks, community education groups and council action programmes. It also means representation on committees and at events that are not necessarily education related, for example awards ceremonies, regional development associations, celebrations of local achievements, cultural and religious occasions, sporting events, music and arts festivals; the list is almost endless. This does happen now of course, but does it need to be more structured and obvious?

During the Muslim Women Project outreach activities, practitioners began to enter into this form of commitment. These types of activities could be complemented and reinforced by student participation, for example through work experience within the community. By doing so the university moves towards the centre stage in the perceptions of the local community, instead of all too often being on the periphery intellectually, culturally, socially and geographically. Such activity would help to provide a concrete bridgehead that raises the profile of the institution locally, but can then be used to reduce social exclusion regionally through outreach, awareness, aspiration raising, and increased and flexible progression routes.

Checkoway (2001) has given detailed consideration to the theme of the civic mission of the American research university. He observed that:

> it is hard to find top administrators with consistent commitment to this mission, few faculty members consider it central to their role, and the community groups that approach the university for assistance often find it difficult to get what they need. (Checkoway 2001, 125)

This applies to the UK. Checkoway's argument is that the institution can provide many services that are of value to communities: for example a consultative aspect or technical expertise, through training programmes, promote better understanding of societal issues, promote collaborative research, outsource staff and expertise, make knowledge more accessible to the public, and engage students with local communities through study, research and work experience.

With respect to the Muslim Women Project, a much more sustained and visible community presence from the institutions began to instil confidence in community professionals at the mosques and community education centres. Confidence that this new project was not merely a transient initiative for people who felt that all too often they were being used for research purposes (as one community leader lamented), with little demonstrable advantages or benefits. During the course of the project these communities welcomed representation at local events such as education and jobs fairs, award ceremonies, school events, and support in micro-research initiatives. More civic participation could help 'establish durable linkages with a university whose intellectual and institutional resources can make genuine contributions to improving the quality of life' (Checkoway 2001, 139). But there are structural and cultural issues to tackle. The reward structure within research or 'elite' institutions that concentrates upon research output, internal rank and academic status does not sit comfortably with civic and community commitments. 'Faculty perceptions are shaped by academic culture that runs contrary to the idea of playing public roles' and faculties 'are conditioned to believe that the civic competencies of students and the problems of society are not central to their roles in the university' (Checkoway 2001,135–7).

Brown (2005) notes that the lack of (public) sympathy to the plight of HE is partly due to the failure of institutions to create an effective and comprehensive representative body. The result is little in the way of 'underlying vision' which people feel they can buy into. Indeed, initial research on the Muslim Women Project highlighted a depressing lack of local knowledge about the universities on the doorstep of the prospective students (Rabiee and Thompson 2000). Brown concludes that this dearth of vision for HE is 'a signal failure given the fact that we now have nearly half of the 18–30 population in some form of higher education' (Brown 2005, 26). Watson noted that:

> there is a genuine issue of hearts and minds. Trapped in its own developmental problems, the sector and its leaders in the UK have paid too little attention to questions of public or political confidence in what they are attempting to achieve. (Watson 2002, 153)

Robertson takes a positive stance and notes some of the benefits of engagement in the public arena:

> If, as I believe, universities are capable of reinventing themselves, then we face the prospect of securing higher education a place at the apex of public affairs, anchored in the lives and affections of citizens and uncontestably connected to national economic success. (Robertson in Coffield and Williamson 1997, 83)

In addition Taylor, Barr, and Steele's radical vision for HE sees the theme of a 'reconnection' between universities and the wider community running through their argument. To them, it is essential to the 'pursuit of democratisation'.

> Universities, however, are about the public good as well as about individual advancement. Those with a genuine commitment to educational values should reassert, as part of democratisation, the need to connect with whole communities. (Taylor, Barr, and Steele 2002, 152)

Watson also points to evidence such as 'The Regional Mission', which 'clearly demonstrates the ways in which institutions contribute to regional competitiveness' including cultural and social well-being, health and lifelong learning (Watson 2002, 146).

Structures and systems

However it is reasonable to assume that such collaborations impinge on university structures and systems, as well as ideologies. Systems and structures have a significant influence on widening participation and emerged in the author's review of other projects (Thompson 2007, chap. five). Flexibility, the requirement for more resources, institutional support at senior level, and organisational innovation all highlight systemic and structural concerns and expose or compound these issues. Scott's representation of the evolutionary processes of HE systems suggests that we are now at the stage of a 'unified' system and that the next phase of development would be a 'stratified' system. This latter category is explained as 'in which a common system maintained by the missions of individual institutions becomes differentiated (this differentiation may come about as a result of political action or through the operation of the market)' (Scott 1995, 37).

This differentiation through market action has already begun, partly through the introduction of variable fees to the sector. We are also witnessing suggestions that institutions need to concentrate on 'what they do best'. For example the then Chief Executive of the HEFCE commented in 2003 that 'institutions must seek out their comparative advantage and build upon their strengths rather than trying to do everything' (Newby 2003, 14). This could mean dividing teaching and research strengths, but these types of policies 'are bound to lead to a sharply tiered system' (Brown 2005, 7). Indeed, in the Muslim Women Project the two universities involved had very different approaches to the project that reflected their histories. University 'A' was a typical red-brick, international, research-led, Russell Group institution, whilst University 'B' was a former polytechnic with much more of a local, teaching-led, agenda.

What Scott suggested in 1995, appears to ring true in 2008. The response to widening participation policy is likely to be different within each one of Brown's simplified taxonomy of research, teaching, and elite institutions (Brown 2005, 7). This is compounded by the view that HE is more a collection of independent institutions with no sense of their collective responsibilities, the result being a 'vacuum' in HE policy making (Brown 2005). Such a system will not disappear despite best efforts to widen access into the 'elite' universities. Perhaps, then, one should ask the question whether it is worth trying to aggregate institutional responses to access into a unified approach to widening participation across HE. What remains is a hierarchical and stratified institutional policy approach to widening participation, even though initiatives such as 'Aimhigher' do permeate and provide an element of uniformity.

There is a paradox between diversity, including responsibilities to widen access across the sector, and an institution's right to determine their own destiny. How this is balanced is unclear. However, Brown (1999) suggests diversity is 'critically important' and goes to some lengths to identify its values to society: 'Institutional diversity serves social mobility' and there is a 'mutually reinforcing link between diversity and innovation' (Brown 1999, 4–5). However, flexibility, including the flexible approach applied in the Muslim Women Project, remains at the edge of institutional activity. Cloonan argues that HE in the United Kingdom 'can be characterised as having an inflexible core which limits flexibility to more peripheral areas' and, 'many HE practices remain resolutely inflexible' (Cloonan 2004, 176, 191); with the 'more elite' institutions being particularly culpable. Wagner agrees, suggesting, 'in fact, virtually all the innovations which have occurred in the internal life of higher education have been led by the Open University and the polytechnics' (Wagner in Schuller 1995, 19). This

statement was certainly reflected in the approach of University 'B' to aspects of the Muslim Women Project.

Mediating between flexibility and structure

Whilst the Muslim Women Project attempted to be flexible both in the way it delivered its programmes of study and the venues it utilised, there was a caveat. People who had little knowledge of how HE progression is structured found too much fluidity or not enough sequential direction difficult to put into perspective. For example within the project our students needed clear and accurate information reinforced on a regular basis in order to make decisions and plan their studies carefully. For these reasons Edwards' (1997) proposal of 'open moorlands' (as opposed to the traditional closed boundaries or distinct fields) of learning is not always appropriate. Moorlands is perhaps an unfortunate metaphor as this brings to mind a harsh, nondescript and bleak landscape where all too easily one can become disorientated and lost. At the very least one needs a good sense of direction, an accurate map and some signposts in order to negotiate this type of terrain. Edwards suggests that the 'bounded field of adult education' (1997, 106) is giving way to the 'greater permeability' of the new landscape. However, with respect to widening participation, it should be the responsibility of the institution to advise and guide their charges without them getting bogged down in bewildering choices and potential pitfalls of too much flexibility, something practitioners were constantly striving to do on the Muslim Women Project. In other words the flexibility needs to come from the institution but it also has a duty to inform and support.

Watt and Paterson's study of what was of 'greatest concern' to widening participation practitioners revealed that lack of commitment was a recurring issue. 'Institutions are not committed to wider access because the policies of institutions themselves are not inclusive … there was a lack of will to put in place student support systems because of the "take it or leave it" attitude' and for some students 'underrepresented groups perceive HE as having no relevance to their everyday world' (Watt and Paterson 2000, 112). Increased tuition fees and a general indifference from their local institution can only compound this lack of relevance:

> The reason why some people are poor and remain outside the dominant groups is not their lack of education but the fact that they are being 'excluded' by the elites, by the oppression of the systems (including formal education) through which the dominant groups exert power. What is needed is to change the systems as well as provide learning opportunities for the excluded. (Rogers 2006, 130)

The Muslim Women Project was, therefore, in many ways even more difficult to establish. Not only did it involve non-traditional students, but it also attempted to find new ways of providing part-time flexible provision that met the needs of the participants in the first instance, rather than adhere to the structure of the institution as its primary concern. The practitioners were, therefore, constantly attempting to mediate (or oscillate might be a better description) between the students and the system. In this particular case the students could not envisage campus-based or distance learning provision, which was in any case counter-intuitive to the project's ethos, but providing flexible provision was also sometimes challenging from an institutional viewpoint. From the Muslim Women Project and the review of over 30 other project reports (Thompson 2007), we now realise that this type of activity takes a long time to embed and requires far more time, money and effort than was originally envisaged.

Above all, the need for institutional flexibility remains, so that courses can be delivered at a pace, level, format and venue required by the community-based students, in local study centres, preferably backed by the development of resources that provide a rich learning experience. With this kind of provision institutions need to be more flexible, dynamic and innovative in their approach, with the caveat that such activities are a drain on resources and can increase

administrative and teaching burdens (certainly the case with the Muslim Women Project). Such an approach to delivery is consistent with both widening participation and lifelong learning debates.

Policy and society

We see directives (the dominant discourse from policy makers) all too often aimed at students, as opposed to any shortcomings in the system, and policy that does not appreciate the complexity of the field of widening participation action or theory. The far more difficult issues are left behind or ignored. Issues include structural barriers, progression, cultural capital, hierarchy, and accessibility to name but a few. Beyond education policy interventions, however, one enters into realms that are far more immense than anything even the universities or the sector can influence directly. Social exclusion is a far bigger societal problem than solutions such as accessible HE can provide. What is needed are fundamental policies that tackle a hierarchical society based upon privilege and an uneven distribution of wealth, and therefore life chances in terms of jobs, education, healthcare, services and facilities. Essentially, as Lloyd and Payne (2003) noted, a much bigger societal project is required and it is highly unlikely that this will occur in today's post-industrial, neoliberal climate. The Government is therefore faced with formidable barriers that, at best, it can re-shape to a limited degree. In terms of the HE paradoxes so consistently aired by commentators and referenced in this paper, we witness little in the way of correcting these or coming to some kind of compromise.

The emphases by many observers on the paradoxes that need to be resolved succinctly suggest that the sector is at a crossroads and difficult decisions need to be made. Watson's review of a number of reports concludes that they have:

> Placed UK higher education at a fork in the road. Either the sector will contribute to further social polarisation, or it will make a major contribution to overcoming it. In other words, higher education is deeply implicated in the solutions to the wider problems of a society. (Watson 2002, 146)

It is possible that this is overstating the case a little, but it does render HE as an important agent in the transformation of aspects of society and critical in helping to meet its needs. So it is not just about more students participating at university, it is about institutions engaging more in society. A corollary of greater reliance on HE, however, is that it emphasises the need for well-planned monitoring and research. This should include academic research into widening participation that is acknowledged by peers. As Tight observed, a range of disciplines can contribute to HE research including economics, education, history, law, management, philosophy, politics, psychology and sociology (Tight 2004, 2). We should use these disciplines to inform and interpret widening participation debate and research in the context of future engagement.

Widening engagement?

Perhaps, then, a coherent widening participation policy should include more of a sense of social engagement in the wider community that involves elements of access, reaching out, and reaching into local communities. A more obvious and active interest in the local environs and interaction with local communities would help go a long way towards winning over the support of local and national government, as well as communities. This is less widening participation, more widening *engagement*, but the results could provide equally positive outcomes as opposed to merely target-driven participation rates. It is an area of theory and policy that, unfortunately, rarely filters into the widening participation debate.

It is possible to encourage social responsibility through a greater civic mission remit, especially in the case of research-intensive or elite universities. This could be through local and

regional development for example; assisted in part by the provision of vocational programmes of study, flexible learning, students working in the community, consultancy work and professional development. This might have a greater effect, in terms of public support for HE as a significant contributor with respect to increasing the benefits to society. Such activities could be tailored according to each institution's own specialisms, interest areas and research capabilities, but it also demands a strong ideological commitment from institutions. They have to be supported by a government intent on genuine participation of universities in the life of communities; widening or deepening *engagement* as a form of widening participation. The current UK Government is fond of asking prospective students to 'Aimhigher'; should it also be asking institutions to engage further as well?

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide a deeper perspective, compared to purely practitioners' accounts, of aspects of individual widening participation interventions. Tight's (2004) review of research in this field concludes that there is an increasing number of instances of research papers and journals relating to HE. There is now a significant amount to select from; nevertheless, 'higher education remains a relatively under-researched area' (Tight 2004, 11) and 'higher education researchers regularly bemoan the lack of articulation between research findings, policy and practice' (Tight 2004, 2). In addition Brown feels that HE does not produce a consistent evidence base that would enable it to challenge or critique government policies to any great effect (Brown 2005).

Research into HE, then, remains a somewhat peripheral activity. More specifically, widening participation research must be considered even more perimetric and incidental. How does one therefore help bring this towards the core? Partly, at least, by ensuring that the subject is considered worthy of academic debate in its own right, and that the research has a standing and is rewarded within the present structure one has to work with. In recent times the Higher Education Academy (an organisation promoting professional development within the sector) and Action on Access (the National co-ordination team for widening participation) have begun to initiate research-led activities with respect to widening participation; so has Staffordshire University, forming the Institute for Access Studies. This will provide a showcase for research in this field, but I would call for articulation with philosophical and theoretical debates that locate the subject matter in other fields as well.

There is still much evidence to be pursued and tackled with respect to access research, let alone lifelong learning and higher education in general. This requires these fields of research to be maintained and extended to ensure that a continuous stream of consistent and reliable data is developed and refined. The accumulation of evidence provides policy makers and senior professionals within education with a rich vein of contemporary information. One of the main cornerstones for future research will need to be investigations that either illuminate or reconcile the extensive list of paradoxes raised by so many contributors; particularly between access and accessibility, between higher education and lower value, between exclusion and inclusion, flexibility and structure, and between excellence and equity, to name but a few. Many of these tensions emerged in other widening participation reports elsewhere (Thompson 2007). In this paper I would suggest an additional paradox, between regional and civic tradition (including community outreach) and growing internationalisation. Whilst these paradoxes and dilemmas remain, there will be a need to consider ways in which they can be resolved, or at least arranged in such a conjunction that allows them to sit together more comfortably. Research can help enable this.

If widening participation activity is to be sustained and reinforced, policy makers should not be able to ignore the increasing weight of evidence brought to bear by both practitioners and

researchers across diverse fields, another important reason for taking inter-disciplinary research forward. Ultimately, such a canon of work should feed into a wider range of issues at many different levels; it is up to educationalists, both practitioners and theorisers, to help ensure this. For example there are distinct relationships between lifelong learning and widening participation, especially in providing flexible provision outside of normative programmes. Also in work-based learning programmes, alternative modes of delivery, and accommodating different learning styles. A related issue, however, is that there are still concerns about the flexibility of structures, systems, and the ways in which non-traditional students are embraced. Research in this area is important for both government and institutional policy relating to access because it lies at the core of what widening participation is attempting to do. A recent widening participation report stated:

> Higher education institutions are introducing more structural changes to make their provision more accessible to students who wish to combine study with other commitments … But there is still further scope for substantial structural change to increase the flexibility of higher education to meet the needs of diverse learning groups. (Universities UK 2005, 11)

This view reflects the research into the Muslim Women Project and with Schuetze and Slowey, who conclude that many non-traditional learners:

> are frequently unable to participate in traditional forms of higher education characterised by campus-based provision … The existence of modes of study that accommodate the special needs of non-traditional learners is therefore as important a factor as the admission procedures for their actual participation. (Schuetze and Slowey 2002, 316)

The themes highlighted in this paper make a contribution to revealing problems and developing solutions to structural barriers and encouraging systemic revision. Research into widening participation is too important for it to be ring-fenced or peripheral. It has critical implications corresponding with research, teaching and learning, and knowledge production. It has implications for recognising achievement, inclusion and institutional diversity. It is relevant to the needs of society culturally, socially and economically. It therefore needs to be drawn into a core dialogue concerning the raison d'être of universities in the twenty-first century, and universities' contribution to society, and also drawn into wider research into HE, of which there is still an important need. Tight (2004) concludes:

> I would, therefore, like to register a plea for continuing and more critical, challenging and theoretical research into higher education. Such research, by establishing and developing the overall framework of our understanding of higher education, feeds over time into both higher education practice and the more immediate and common forms of higher education research. We need it for the sake of our minds and souls. (Tight 2004, 12)

There is still a long way to go before much more open flexible structures are conceived that encourage non-traditional students into HE and sustain them through their studies, backed by an ideological commitment to such a process. Greenbank reflects that 'it may not necessarily be the students that need to change, but the institution' (Greenbank 2006, 153). Yet it is maintained that education plays a crucial role in explaining social outcomes and is especially important in accounting for long-distance social mobility (Performance and Innovation Unit 2001, item 41). However, what is clear from the research in the Muslim Women Project, in common with other research into widening participation, is that the whole area of access is far more complicated than is often given credit. Added to this are rafts of institutional and systemic issues that refuse to go away and are highlighted in many widening participation project reports (Thompson 2007). Providing more linkages between practice, research and policy, and enabling a discourse on education theory to grow within this field, will bring issues into focus and develop a closer relationship between higher education, widening participation, lifelong learning and future directions

for institutions and government. What will also help is government funding that will encourage long-term institutional flexibility, lifelong learning, innovation and the delivery of civic engagement tied to the widening participation agenda. However, this needs to be backed by a more convincing ideological commitment by some institutions than has previously materialised.

Notes on contributor

David Thompson's primary fields are in adult learning, social inclusion, the history of education, education studies and lifelong learning at the School of Education, University of Wolverhampton. A further dimension of interest to the author is the articulation between practice, policy and theory. His experiences as a mature student through Access, first degree and PhD inform his practice and research areas.

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