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The discourse of widening participation and its critics: an institutional case study

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This paper takes as its focus the contradictory discourse of widening participation (WP). We argue that given the conflicting accounts of WP it is highly unlikely that higher education staff will be able articulate a coherent definition of WP practice. We illustrate our thesis with an institutional case study which analysed policy documents and was based on in-depth interviews with staff. We found that not only did staff have contradictory definitions of WP, but that those who saw themselves as committed questioned the commitment of others. Thus despite institutional rhetoric our participants fell back on personal values when implementing WP activity.

Keywords: widening participation; higher education; policy; values

Introduction

This paper takes as its focus the contradictory discourse of widening participation (WP) and shows how definitions of WP are contested in public policy, by social theorists, and by practitioners, resulting in a discourse which is a contradictory and unstable amalgam of economic rationality and social justice arguments (Archer 2007). As recent debates in this journal have made clear, there are conflicting philosophies (Sheeran, Brown, and Baker 2007) and a lack of interaction between the 'sociological' and the 'empowerment' literature (Baker, Brown, and Fazey 2006). In proposing a new way forward Walker (2008) has suggested a new focus on widening *capability*. In the light of these debates it would seem surprising, therefore, if staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) held anything other than contradictory views, or that institutions, in attempting to position themselves, send out contradictory messages. However, while there is research into the diverse experiences of students, little research has looked beyond the discursive framing of WP to how staff in institutions make sense of WP. This paper therefore reports on an institutional case study exploring how staff make sense of their practice in the light of the multiple discourses within the field. The paper first reviews the literature and shows how WP has become a site of contestation in both the dominant discourse and among its critics. The paper then outlines the methodology underlying the institutional case study. Finally, data from the case study are reported, revealing both a complex picture and an area of practice dominated by the assertion of personal values rather than those discourses exhibited in the policy literature. We conclude that as long as the policy context and the philosophical rationale for WP remain unclear, WP practice is likely to remain the preserve of committed individuals, and, at the local level, will be largely incapable of having a sustained impact on broader institutional cultures and discourse.

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Widening participation: a confusion of tongues

The background to debates about widening participation lies in the expansion or 'massification' of UK higher education (Langa Rosado and David 2006), underpinned by demographic pressure to increase capacity and a growing desire for equality in education (Ross 2001a). Responding to concerns that higher education remained an elite system, the Robbins Report (Robbins 1963) acted as the driver for the building of a range of new universities whilst the rapid growth of the polytechnics in the 1960s and 1970s saw the further expansion of higher education with significant increases in the numbers of women, ethnic minority and mature students, often through part-time provision (Pratt 1997; Ross 2001b). With the election of a Conservative government in 1979, the drive to increase participation as an act of social justice was overtaken by a policy discourse which saw mass higher learning as fundamental to the future prosperity and competitive advantage of the UK (DfES 1987). The removal of the distinction between universities and polytechnics under the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) resulted in continued rapid expansion of higher education with the number of university entrants increasing sixfold from the 1960s to 1997 (HESA 1999). Despite these increases the Dearing Committee (1996), charged with making recommendations as to how the structure and funding of this enlarged higher education system should evolve to meet the needs of the UK, found that participation in higher education was still unequal, with those from the lowest social classes remaining underrepresented (NCIHE 1997). The failure of both government and institutional policy to include sections of the populace in post-compulsory education was confirmed by the findings of the Kennedy Report (1997) which charted the failure of the further education sector to recruit educationally disadvantaged adults. The Dearing and Kennedy reports between them established the central importance of widening, and not just expanding, educational provision and the concept of 'widening participation' became entrenched in policy.

With the rise to power of New Labour in 1997 widening participation became a national concern, driven by the belief that 'In a knowledge-economy, higher education becomes a potentially powerful instrument of social justice, since it serves not only as a driver of wealth creation, but as a critical determinant of life chances' (Blunkett 2000, para. 66).

The language has not changed significantly over the subsequent decade: the DfES observation that 'we need everyone who has the ability to participate if we are to expand to meet our future economic needs without sacrificing quality' (2003b, 24) is mirrored, for example, by the HEFCE statement three years later that 'low rates of participation in HE among the lowest socio-economic groups represent entrenched inequality and in economic terms a waste of human capital' (2006, 122). These comments, amongst others, are indicative of how, for more than a decade, both economic prosperity and social inclusion have been cited as key goals of higher education policies (Callender 2002).

In order to addresses the large discrepancies in the participation in higher education of different groups, New Labour committed to achieving 50% participation among 18- to 30-year-olds by 2010 (HEFCE 2003)[1] and has engaged heavily with WP strategy and practice (see DfES 2003a, b). The dual WP discourse of economic rationality and social inclusion has, however, caused tensions and contradictions within the government's own policy (Archer 2007), highlighted in recent debates in the academic literature.

First, alongside initiatives that seek to address social inequalities in access to higher education (such as the government funded Aimhigher programmes, see HEFCE 2006) changes to university funding systems have been implemented which militate against the access of those from lower socio-economic groups: whilst the financial cost of attending higher education has been repeatedly cited as preventing young people from lower socio-economic groups from accessing higher education (Connor 2001; Callender and Jackson 2008), the abolition of

maintenance grants under the Higher Education Act 2004, and the extension of loans to finance tuition and top-up fees, has shifted financial responsibility for paying for higher education onto individual students. In addition, despite the language of equity and social justice, New Labour policy continues to be underpinned by a discourse which position 'all those who can benefit' (HEFCE 2009a) as 'consumers' of a free market of higher education, with non-participation understood in terms of deficit or lack (Burke 2009). This places the emphasis on individual students to overcome weaknesses and difficulties whilst simultaneously sanctioning the idea that the culture of HEIs can remain unchanged (Christie, Munro, and Wager 2005). At the same time New Labour has increasingly blamed HEIs for their failure to attract working-class students and for being unwilling to adapt to meet the needs of a more diverse student population (Greenbank 2006a). The issue of blame is not only disputed between HEIs and politicians but is also an area of contestation in the academic literature. For example, Baker, Brown, and Fazey (2006, 170) have raised concerns that authors of 'empowerment literature' which 'problematizes the higher education system itself' overly focuses on the injustices non-traditional students see as inherent in their experiences and in so doing depend on the 'veracity of student participants' comments [which] represents a solipsistic retreat into a state of analysis where things are the case because people say they are' (175). The blame for inequality is, therefore, placed on HEIs and individual staff who have little influence over the policies that result in such inequalities (such as fee levels). This rhetoric is subsequently used by politicians, for example Mandelson (Grimston 2009), to blame institutions for their failures 'as if a tribe of crusty, hidebound academics are conspiring to keep non-traditional students out of higher education' (Baker, Brown, and Fazey 2006, 179).

Second, there is continuing ambiguity as to which groups comprise 'widening participation' students. Policy and associated funding has increasingly focussed on widening access to higher education along social class lines (see, for example, DfES 2003b) with young people from state schools, low participation neighbourhoods and the lowest socio-economic groups, as well as mature learners and disabled students the key target groups (HESA 2009). However, whilst women make up around 55% of students and students from ethnic minority backgrounds are, in general, over-represented (HESA 2009), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE web-site pages) states that: 'we are concerned with ensuring equality of opportunity for disabled students, mature students, women and men, and all ethnic groups' (HEFCE 2009b).

Third, the contrasting governmental discourses have not only led to different policy imperatives but to different 'paradigmatic models' of how WP is organised within HEIs. The causes of under-participation are regarded, and approached, differently based on academic, utilitarian and transformative models (Jones and Thomas 2005). The academic discourse is underpinned by a deficit model emphasising attitudinal factors such lack of expectations or 'low aspirations' of those from low socio-economic groups, with institutional aspiration-raising activities having 'little or no impact on institutional structure and culture' (Jones and Thomas 2005, 617). The utilitarian discourse regards under-participation as a consequence of 'low aspirations' combined with a lack of academic qualifications the 'double deficit' model, with WP initiatives such as student support modules 'bolted on' to core work (Jones and Thomas 2005). Finally, the little utilised transformative discourse stresses the idea that there needs to be far-reaching change in HEIs to meet the needs of under-represented groups (Jones and Thomas 2005). On a local level these contradictory discourses have led to inconsistencies in institutional practice, with WP operating around contradictory claims, leading to disjointed WP activity, variably valorised and differently played out across the institution (Jones and Thomas 2005).

In addition there is a lack of focus and of conflicting WP philosophies amongst educational 'experts' (Sheeran, Brown, and Baker 2007) including over how WP practice should evolve. For example, Thompson (2008) has argued that a more coherent WP policy should include a strong ideological commitment from HEIs, a greater 'civic mission remit', underpinned by a government

commitment to 'deepening engagement' not just widening participation. This would involve greater interaction with local communities through the provision of flexible, community-based learning and consultancy work with community organisations. In contrast, more recent work by Walker has argued for widening participation to be reconceptualised as widening capability, enabling students to become 'strong evaluators', 'able to make reflexive and informed choices about what makes a good life for each of them' (2008, 267). The ambiguities and contradictions are not just contested political and practice discourses, therefore, but are also contested academic theory and research. This has ensured that 'the debate and the practice of widening participation have become congested and thus little real progress is likely' (Sheeran, Brown, and Baker 2007, 259).

Policy to practice: the research setting

Our research was motivated by the desire to interrogate how these public debates and policies are realised in practice, and what interpretative work is engaged in by those who see themselves as WP advocates and practitioners. We know that policy to practice mediation is complex and subject to shifts of meaning, with policy, on occasion, ignored or 'theorized out of the picture' (Ball 2006, 16). Paul Trowler (2002), for example, in his examination of higher education policy and institutional change, is highly critical of rational–purposive models of policy, and argues instead that there is a 'loose coupling' between policy initiatives and outcomes at the local level:

> Instead the process of 'encoding' policy is a complex one in which policy texts are developed as a process of negotiation, compromise and the exercise of power. As a result these policy texts are usually laden with multiple agendas, attitudes, values and sets of meaning. (Trowler 2002, 12)

It is this loose coupling that we were keen to explore through an institutional case study.

Given that the debates around WP are characterised by competing discourses and contradictory policy, and critiqued by an academic community whose members also hold diverse opinions regarding the future of WP, it would seem unsurprising if staff in HEIs held anything other than confused views, or that institutions, in attempting to position themselves, send out contradictory messages. Our institutional case study was, therefore, designed to investigate how staff were making sense of their WP practice in the light of the multiple discourses within the field including: staff commitment to WP and the discourses underpinning this, staff definitions of WP and the underlying values behind these, the types of WP activities being undertaken and the rationale for such activity.

The research was conducted at a post-1992 metropolitan HEI with a diverse student body: 94% of young, full-time, first degree entrants are from state schools (well above the overall UK average of 88%), 32% from the lowest social classes (compared to a UK average of 29.5%) and 13% from low participation neighbourhoods (compared to 9.7%), 15% are mature full-time students with no previous experience of HE (compared to 11.6%) and 15% are young part-time students (compared to 12.4%) (HESA 2009).

The university's public commitment to WP is enshrined in key policy documents such as the learning, teaching and assessment strategy, the bursaries provided by the university, and wide-ranging cross-university WP activity.

The case study

Data were collected using multiple methods: documentary analysis; a web-based questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews as part of an internally commissioned audit of practice. Following ethical approval, key university policy and strategy documents were analysed to identify how the university publicly positions itself with regard to WP. An online questionnaire

was then sent to all staff in three faculties designed to identify individual definitions of WP, exemplars of university activities which respondents thought had an impact on WP, actual and perceived responsibilities for WP, and what improvements respondents felt could be made to further widen participation. In all 94 members of staff completed the questionnaire. This is just over 13% of the total number of staff across the three faculties.[2] Of those surveyed 30 (32%) of respondents were support staff, 57 (60%) academic, 2 (2.5%) 'other' and 5 (5.5%) unknown; 53 were women (56%), men 32 (34%), and nine preferred not to say (10%).

Semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted with 29 members of staff. Of those interviewed seven were senior staff and/or members of the governing body, 22 were representative staff from across the three faculties audited (which also included senior staff), 15 were men and 14 women. These staff were deliberately selected from academic and support staff to give a spread picture of perceptions of WP across the faculties, including staff who were not directly involved with WP activities. The interviews were based on similar questions to the questionnaire but designed to elicit more in-depth data. Tape recordings and notes from the interviews were used to produce individual vignettes which highlighted core values, personal definitions of WP, whether WP practice was deemed to be successful, any differences between own and the university's stated beliefs and values and what, if anything, the interviewee felt should be done to further widen participation.

Whilst this is a multi method institutional case study, in reporting the findings we have focused particularly on data from the interviews. These closely match results from the initial survey but provide richer data. The interpretation of the interview data was informed by the context of the case study and, as the work was carried out by a team, there were multiple opportunities for comparison of interpretation. In an institutional case study such as this we regarded the insider status of the researchers as a resource rather than a threat to validity since, as recognised by others (Merriam et al. 2001), it allows for the interrogation of data by knowledgeable insiders coming from different perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds.

Defining widening participation

The documentary analysis revealed that the university no longer has a widening participation policy as such, rather a range of related terms (e.g., student diversity, inclusion, equality) are used in institutional policy documents such as the teaching and learning strategy. It is therefore unsurprising that a strong theme running through the interviews was whether 'widening participation' still existed as a distinct term at the institution or whether it had been subsumed under other more generic activity such as student support. For example Peter, an academic who had been at the university for six years, stated that 'I've never read anything which could be said to be a definition, or even described the practice or objectives of widening participation'. The confusion expressed by the respondent mirrors the available language of the texts we analysed. There was also a belief amongst some respondents that specific WP activity no longer existed, or needed to exist, across the university as it has been 'mainstreamed'.

All staff were able to give a definition of WP when prompted, however, and despite the apparent lack of institutional clarity, it was clear that staff had absorbed multiple messages about WP and their definitions were based on the conflicting messages they had received. These ranged from the extremely broad – 'all individuals who have the potential to benefit, physically, mentally, academically, socially, psychologically, from a university' (Julie, academic) and specific definitions – 'BMEs, people with disabilities, asylum seekers and refuges, people in prisons, ex-offenders, young people, carers with young children, mature learners, FE students… men in nursing or women in the construction industry' (Gill, senior manager); to the ambiguous – 'all those who need our support' (Paul, support staff).

Whilst some staff were definitive in their answers others, however, were much more tentative and uncertain, with some staff using the interview as an opportunity to explore the concept of WP with the researchers: 'I'd like to know what the definition of a widening participation student is' (Bill, academic). It is clear that these staff had inherently unstable views of WP and their definitions were contradictory or shifted during the course of an interview, resulting in ambivalence about the status and opportunities offered to students and, in this instance, a critique of singling out particular groups on the basis of racialised identities:

> … it's all about if you've got the points, you can come in. It's not right to say that 'if you are Asian you can come in with less points'... I have always had the attitude 'let them all in'. Some are not capable but if you give them the option it's up to them whether they seize the opportunity. (Philip, senior academic)

The rationale for widening participation

A strong theme from the interviews was the heavily values-based orientation towards WP held by staff. The majority of those interviewed spoke readily, and unprompted, about WP as an act of social justice, referring to equity of access, fairness and transparency in admissions, shared (though not necessarily equal) responsibility for WP; clear accountability for WP money, and honesty about how well the institution was doing with regard to widening participation. For example, one member of staff commented that if the university wanted WP students to be there in the first place, it was then 'unethical to then give them a second class citizen experience' (Julie, academic), and another that 'it's about being honest, what we can offer them and what they will get back in return' (Diana, senior manager). Very few staff interviewed referred to the economic case for widening participation.

However, because these staff had developed their own definition of WP, WP activity was being played out differently across the institution. Examples of activity given by staff predominantly related to aspiration raising and access to the university and were clearly situated in a public policy (e.g., the Aimhigher framework). However they also included a multiplicity of different policy agendas relating to teaching, learning and assessment practices, retention activities, employability initiatives and staff development. In some areas of the university almost all students who were not white, male or middle-class were regarded as WP students and thus those support mechanisms available to all students (academic skills support; financial services, etc) were regarded as WP support services, regardless of whether WP students were accessing them or not. In other areas white, middle-class students were regarded as receiving interventions originally designed for WP students: for example, one member of staff working in student support stated that she spent the majority of her time 'supporting traditional students with no financial problems' (Izzy, student support worker); whilst in a few instances there had even been an overall decline in WP related activity, partly because staff were no longer clear where they should focus their efforts.

The local and personal values staff were drawing on to define WP also influenced how responsibility for WP was regarded. Whilst the majority felt that responsibility lay equally with all staff, regardless of their role, they also felt that 'others' did not feel the same way 'and that can create problems for ourselves because people think "Oh X's team is responsible for WP" and they don't need to do it' (David, senior manager). There was also some confusion, although not as strongly held across the interviews, as to whether staff needed to be proactive in supporting WP or whether WP students needed to initiate support for themselves:

> Students themselves need to highlight any areas where they require support, for example if they have a social disadvantage which is not obvious to the tutor, such as no quiet place to study at home, no food in the cupboards so they are hungry, or younger siblings to look after which prevents them from studying and attending classes. (Anne, senior manager)

Commitment to widening participation

Despite the lack of definitive textual sources, several of those working at the most senior levels believed that the university still had a strong institutional commitment to WP: 'I don't think anyone would blink now about the ideas of widening participation. There's more commitment and will to do it in the institution. That could just be me but I think the people I talk to understand it' (Gill, senior manager) but that this commitment was not necessarily 'filtering down' to those working at other levels. These managers felt that despite their own willingness to enhance WP 'others' were blocking their efforts to embed WP across the institution: 'does an individual lecturer really understand the challenges faced by the students on their courses?' (John, senior manager). These comments echo Greenbank's (2006b) research which found that a culture of WP was often not embedded and that 'widening participation policy formulated at the senior management level is likely to be reinterpreted, revised – and in many cases even undermined or ignored – as it migrates down the organisational hierarchy' (209).

Several of these managers also believed that some staff held very negative views about WP to the extent that 'people talk about it but some of our big popular courses are almost anti-widening participation' (John, senior manager) and that 'other' staff believe that it is 'dumbing down and allowing people into the university who shouldn't be there' (Jane, senior manager). A further concern was that 'other people' were uninterested in exploring either the reality of WP or doing anything to affect change, preferring to 'bury their heads in the sand' (Andrew, senior manager), or as David, another senior manager, stated:

> … one of my problems with widening participation is that people talk about it in broad terms but what do they do to make it happen? A lot of people would probably say BMEs and women but might not ever go to the level of granularity. They are uninformed or uninterested in drilling down.

This apparent negativity meant that these staff, and other staff who were presumed to share their preferred discourse of WP, were having to constantly challenge poor practice and beliefs, 'bang the drum and question why things are like they are' (Jane, senior manager) to get support for an unarticulated WP policy.

Staff working at other levels were less convinced of an institutional commitment to WP: 'there is no central focus or lynch pin. The University is lucky to have a lot of willing and dedicated staff and individual commitment to WP that really needs to be harnessed more effectively' (Daniel, academic). In addition, there was some concern that there was a lack of institutional scrutiny of the impact of WP practice since this would require action to affect change:

> … sometimes we get close to seeing the patterns and we get really scared that we are not doing as well as we think we are and perhaps our patterns are not those that scream 'WP' and I think we get disturbed by outcomes we should respond to…we feel guilty at the outcomes when we see the real results and then we're stumped. What do we do? (Andrew, academic)

In contrast these staff articulated a strong personal commitment to WP. Indeed a recurring theme amongst this group was also the 'struggle' to maintain this personal commitment to WP in the face of a lack of care or negativity from others. So, for example, Joanna (marketing officer) having expressed her strong commitment to WP commented that for 'many academic staff' it was 'more a question of we need to get bums on seats. How do we do it?' whilst Helen (student support worker) spent the first half of her interview describing the many practical ways in which she (almost single-handedly) attempted to support students from WP backgrounds in the face of 'other' staff who were uncaring or inconsiderate, commenting that 'it would do us all good to remember who pays our wages. The students do. If it weren't for the students we wouldn't have a job'.

This discourse of blame can be directly attributed to the contrasting or competing definitions of widening participation held by staff and referred to above. Because of the relative

incoherence in terms of WP definitions and practice people were drawing on local and personal values, and were likely to blame everyone else when other peoples' practice was contradictory to their own. These staff appeared to normalise their own understanding of WP and to use their tacit understanding as a basis for criticising imagined others. Indeed at times there was a sense of more than a little martyrdom from some of those who felt that they were having to carry the 'burden' of widening participation with little support from 'others'. Occasionally these others were close, named colleagues but more often they were a nebulous, undefined group who apparently lacked the same sense of justice and fairness and commitment to WP: 'you have to keep pushing, it can be an uphill struggle to affect change. You have to just keep going on and on, even when you have little support behind you. Because it's the right thing to do' (Diana, senior manager). Consequently, because of these tensions and inconsistencies in practice between staff, widening participation was considered by one member of staff to be a 'curate's egg' (Peter, academic), spoiled by the lack of consistency and commitment across the institution.

Conclusions

Clearly there are limits to drawing conclusions from the practice of a single institution and we recognise that the ways debates around widening participation are played out would be different in other institutions. Nevertheless we believe that our case study is important in illuminating the ways in which policy is translated into 'on the ground' practice.

Our study confirms the findings of other researchers (Jones and Thomas 2005; Greenbank 2006b) that widening participation is a contested area. It also reveals that, faced with inconsistencies at the local level and a lack of clear institutional policy, individuals fall back on their own repertoires of values and meaning making and, moreover, that this leads managers in particular to blame other individuals for a failure of commitment. Rather than positioning the problem as being created by ambiguity in government policy or in wider socio-structural constraints, the problem is located locally and with particular individuals. The local discourse, therefore, shares many of the features with the broader academic development discourse (Clegg 2009a, b) within which WP is located. While specialist teams are responsible for recruiting students, the onus once students are in place is on ordinary teaching staff, who are exhorted in general terms to commit to the idea of support for WP. As is clear from the above, however, it is not easy to decode what that commitment might involve, and whether all students or only some fall under the rubric of WP. The sense of frustration of WP advocates and practitioners in our study is evident. There is a strain between strong personal commitments and a sense that at the institutional level things do not come together. As a site of practice, therefore, WP is a difficult space because personal values are not scaffolded in any consistent way by the institution. Blaming the 'other' becomes a way of coping with both ambiguity and with personal frustration. These 'others' may or may not hold the views ascribed to them. However, it is clear from our research that blaming others has become an ingrained mechanism in some staff, allowing them to defend (often unevaluated) practice or deflect potential criticism on to others.

This blaming of individuals mirrors the individualism of the WP discourse itself which places the problem of participation at the door of students and their parents rather than with the institutional habitus and social structural constraints and enablements. It is clear from our research that although there were elements of a transformative discourse (Jones and Thomas 2005) within certain institutional policy documents, the institution had not fully developed a cross-university institutional *habitus* (Thomas 2002) supportive of consistent widening participation *practice*. The responsibility for supporting WP students once in higher education was variously regarded, with some staff feeling that that it was either not their responsibility or that they could leave students 'to it' once they were on their courses. However, as identified by Crozier et al.

(2008) the practice of 'leaving students to it' may result in continued inequalities since some students have learned dispositions to fit the university context while others, primarily working-class students, do not. In addition, the need to move widening participation away from the (real or perceived) responsibility of one department of the institution, and fully embed widening participation into mainstream practice is critical if a strategic, holistic and sustainable approach to widening participation is to be developed (Thomas 2002).

We conclude, therefore, that as long as the policy context and the philosophical rationale for WP remain unclear and contested, WP practice is likely to remain the preserve of committed individuals and WP practice at the local level will be largely incapable of having a sustained impact on broader institutional cultures and discourse.

Notes

1. The latest national statistics on Participation Rates in Higher Education produced by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DIUS, 2009) shows that the participation rate currently stands at 43%. This includes data from English domiciled first-time HE entrants to UK HE institutions and English, Welsh and Scottish FE colleges who remain in HE at least six months.
2. Figure excludes part-time hourly paid or temporary staff. These staff were not surveyed.

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