

System diversity, inequality, curriculum and (possibly) hope

Professor Sue Clegg

I have chosen to talk about system diversity, inequality, curriculum and (possibly) hope because I want to draw attention to the significance of system level changes for who gets access and to what

I also want to challenge assumptions about quality that equates the best with those areas of higher education which are accessed and dominated by the elite

Curriculum is a crucial term here because what is at stake is not just social access but also epistemic access

So the talk will fall into four main parts:

First - the move to mass higher education and ensuing system diversity

Secondly - inequality and the need to understand inequalities in relation to system diversification – and also to consider inequality as a complex question that involves the intersection between different aspects of historical disadvantage and oppression

Thirdly - curriculum and in particular the significance of epistemic access and drawing on the idea of hermeneutic injustice

And finally the possibility of hope - because as Andrew Sayer has pointed out our human concerns are normative - for social science to make a difference we must ultimately engage what the things that matter to people – so my concerns with system diversity, inequality and curriculum are fundamentally normative as well as theoretical

System diversity

I start with the shift from elite to mass higher education as this has propelled system diversity and stratification

There has been a truly remarkable change in higher education from elite to mass systems

The United States was the first to achieve mass participation - with 40% age participation rates as early as the 1960s

This was followed by expansion in Western Europe and Japan in 1980s and then by growth in developed countries in East Asia and Latin America

And now both India and China have rapidly expanding HE sectors and huge aspirations into the future - in China for example the percentage of enrolments in 2006 was three and a half times that in 1997 - and with an increase from 3.4% in 1990 to 22% in 2006 – the rate of change is quite staggering

Globally - tertiary education has grown from 19% participation in 2000 to 26% in 2007 - but this masks huge disparities

Gross enrolment rates which is the figure UNESCO uses for comparisons shows that low income countries had 7% enrolments compared to 67% for high income countries - with Sub Saharan Africa at 6% the US at 70%

According to a 2009 UNESCO Report (and some of you will remember that one of the authors Philip Altbach's gave our key note address last year)

'The 'logic' of massification is inevitable and includes greater social mobility for a growing segment of the population, new patterns of funding of higher education, increasingly diversified higher education systems in most countries, and an overall lowering of academic standards'

Now the key question of the 'logic' of massification' is for whom

And 'new patterns of funding' means in practice a shifting of costs from the state to students and their families

While 'increasingly diversified higher education systems' involves more private provision and for profit international providers

And the 'overall lowering of academic standards' is an argument that as we shall see is often a code for defending the elite parts of the system

Higher education is increasingly stratified – with elite universities attracting much better funding – and most of the world's research resources

Times Higher Education World University Ranking - powered not un-coincidentally by Thomson Reuters a major multination media and information company based in New York - looms large in the corporate imagination of university managers

Getting universities into the top 100 (or 500) has become a key performance indicator in many national higher education systems with a distorting effect on priorities – questions that are being asked about curriculum reform in South Africa for example focus on local concerns and look backwards to redress - but the research focus is on global influence into the future

The expansion of tertiary higher education has not meant more of the same and there is an increased diversity among institutions – including the rapid expansion of private provision and also partnerships – so in some instances it is difficult to judge whether an institution is public or private

Stephen Ball for example in Education plc has mapped the flows of resources and personnel and argued we must see privatisation as a multi-layered phenomenon involving many privatisations not just one

This is particularly true in newly expanding higher education systems – work done by Milton Obamba on the Kenyan higher education system for example – shows that public and private institutions face the same pressures and that private provision is expanding in all institutions

And Louise Morley has highlighted both the growth of private provision in Ghana and Tanzania, and also that more women enrolled at these institutions than in State ones

So when we talk about access to higher education - students are accessing different things in more or less well funded settings

And increasingly students are having to pay for that access

One of the conclusions that has flowed from flawed social mobility arguments is that higher education is a private good - and that therefore as individuals benefit then individuals should bear a large part of the cost

In England what we have seen are dramatic increases in fee levels making English higher education some of the most expensive in the world - fee levels in some American Universities are higher but so is the level of student support

Now it is true that graduate earnings are higher than non-graduate but that is because those in the bottom deciles have done so badly and this explains why, despite high debts and with no guarantee of highly paid jobs, student demand is holding up

Many graduates are in effect in jobs which a generation ago would not have counted as graduate professions – and even graduate jobs are subject to the competitive logic of accumulation which breaks jobs down and routinizes them

As Philip Brown and Hugué Lauder and David Ashton have been documenting in their research - this is happening to knowledge jobs in much the same way as we previously saw in relation to manual work

The profitability of knowledge companies depends on asserting property rights and managing the knowledge inside workers heads - in other words transforming tacit personal knowledge into codified knowledge - a process Brown and his co-authors describe as digital Taylorism

There are numerous examples - in banking for example where algorithms now replace the lending decisions of what used to be autonomous branch managers

But also it is also happening in high tech industries - in one software firm, that Brown and his colleagues researched, an increasingly small number of people did the development work but profitability depended on what they call 'routine analytics' done by graduates in Bulgaria and India where graduates can be hired at a third of the cost of British ones

For the **majority** of graduates therefore the knowledge and autonomy and control in so called 'knowledge rich jobs' becomes less and less

There are also major implications for global flows of jobs and growth - automatic assumptions about national prosperity and an educated workforce are also being called into question

The dominant model had been of a post-colonial division of hand and brain where the developed West would continue to do the R & D in head offices ensuring high quality, high paid jobs stayed at the centre while the grunt work of manufacturing was done elsewhere

But what Brown and his colleagues show is that this is changing quite rapidly – R & D is also being offshored and in some areas for example nanotechnology China is already ahead of the America

What this research shows is that in the US for example what we are seeing is the emergence of a high-skill low wage workforce – where graduates are increasingly doing more routine jobs and where pay and security are no longer guaranteed

Mass higher education systems are delivering more graduates which outstrip the supply of the sorts of jobs which underpinned middle class life styles and aspirations

The link between education – skills - and income has been broken and in many Countries levels of social mobility are static or falling

Instead we are seeing increases in income inequality - with the top 1% accruing ever more wealth - and with this the formation of an immensely rich global elite

Companies increasingly target only graduates of elite universities - a handful globally

And Jane Kenway and her colleagues have shown how this competition starts early with elite independent schools preparing the offspring of the rich for entry into the most prestigious universities

This global elite looks to the top few universities in the world and has less commitment to the nation state as such

So at a system level greater diversity has gone hand in hand with entrenched social divisions and the expansion of higher education in many parts of the world has not created new well paid knowledge rich jobs - rather competition for even routine jobs has intensified

Inequality

So to turn in more detail to inequalities in access to higher education - I have already argued that the most privileged socio-economic groups have retained their relative advantage

In England first generation students, including those from some minority ethnic groups go to less prestigious and less well-funded universities

While 70% of students from manual families go to new universities (that is ex-polytechnics prior to 1992) only 13% go to Russell Group institutions - that is the most prestigious Universities

The figures for Black African and Caribbean are 77% and 6% respectively - although other ethnic groups do better - Chinese students for example do better than every other ethnic group including white

Fair access to elite universities is as far from ever in being achieved

The University of Cambridge enrolled only 25 poor students in the academic years 2010-11 and 2012-13 where poor students were defined as having been in receipt of free school meals and the University of Oxford managed just 15 in those two years

Students from our public schools (that is expensive fee paying schools) continue to dominate access to elite universities

There have been some radical shifts however - in the UK for example women now outnumber men at undergraduate level

But this is not the case across all systems - in parts of Africa women's participation is low and when combined with data on class is infinitesimally small

Louise Morley's work developing equity scorecards in Ghana and Tanzania showed that most programmes enrolled very few (or no) low socio-economic status students, and that low SES students tended to be on programmes with low exchange rates in the labour market despite performing as well as (sometimes better than) other groups, and that women, especially low SES and mature women, remained under-represented on science programmes

So the picture is complicated and class, race, and gender intersect in complex ways

One of the problems is with our statistics as they often only look at one dimension at once Louise Morley's project, for example, had to painstakingly construct equity scorecards with data from multiple sources

When we look at how historic legacies of disadvantage intersect very complicated patterns of access to higher education emerge

In South Africa for example David Cooper has looked in detail at enrolments and found some surprising patterns

At UWC, for example, one of what are known as historically black institutions – and a historically not-privileged but non-African University - (due to its Cape location) 82% of students were coloured in 1988 by design under the apartheid regime - but by 1998 this had fallen to 36% while African enrolments rose from 13% to 58% as historically apartheid blocked black students mainly from working and lower middle class families accessed the university in a way unplanned and unanticipated by the university

But this has reversed post-2000 - by 2008 coloured students were again in the majority and Cooper suggests that this is a complex race–class phenomena as intra-race inequalities are increasing and poorer local black students can no longer afford access to higher education

So while in the system overall the number of African students has increased this is not true across all classes

And stark racial disparities in completion rates persist across the system with 42% of African students completing in 5 years compared to 61% of white students - the rates in engineering are even more shocking at 23% and 55% a ratio of 2.4

Highly complicated patterns also emerge in systems with a historical legacy of excluded indigenous peoples - in New Zealand and I quote:

'In 2009 the Asian ethnic group had the highest age-standardised rate of participation in bachelor's degree courses (5.0 percent), followed by Europeans (3.5 percent), Māori (3.1 percent), and Pacific peoples (3.0 percent). Pacific females (4.0 percent) and Māori females (3.9 percent) were more likely than European males (2.7 percent) to be enrolled in bachelor's degree courses.' <http://socialreport.msd.govt.nz/knowledge-skills/participation-tertiary-education.html>

The issue of fairer access, widening participation, redress, and increasing social equality (the terms vary) is therefore an issue for all higher education systems and has been taken up by government's using different language but based on a recognition that 'mass' does not equate with 'fair'

And Government logic is often at variance with those from inside higher education and beyond whose interests are in social equality and in addressing the root causes of these inequalities

Many of us have a vision of higher education as being more broadly about social equality and about gaining access to the broader goods of a university education

And there is research showing how students from less privileged backgrounds who make it into university are among the most intellectually able and resilient of all students – opening up opportunities is potentially transformative of lives, communities and indeed universities as social and intellectual spaces

But in order to consider these possibilities we need to ask questions of curriculum and access to what – so it is to these questions that I now turn

Access to what?

If we think more critically about access to higher education we need to consider the sort of knowledge, engagement and opportunities that are open to people

Elite systems were in many ways uncomplicated in that knowledge prepared mostly white middle and upper class men for their roles in the professions and as leaders and rulers -

In the twentieth century science came into prominence and with that an increased stress on the importance of research - but these developments went hand in hand with a continued recognition of the importance of a liberal arts curriculum in the education of an elite

And this is a pattern that we can still see in many elite institutions today – the cultivation of the mind and abstract critical thought is recognised as giving access to what Leesa Wheelahan and Michael Young among others have described as ‘powerful knowledge’

Powerful knowledge is knowledge which gives access to better more reliable explanations of the world and abstract ways of thinking which Michael Young argues ‘provides learners with a language for engaging in political, moral and other kinds of debates’

As Leesa Wheelahan put it ‘Powerful knowledge is powerful because of the access it provides to the natural and social worlds and to society’s conversation about what it should be like’

One of the critical questions in relation to widening participation therefore is whether access to this sort of powerful knowledge is also being widened or whether the curriculum is being developed in other ways

In other words epistemic access is as significant as questions about social access

There are at least two significant arguments with regard to knowledge

The first is a trend to what Leesa Wheelahan describes as ‘vocationalisation’ and the development generic knowledge that does not have the same characteristics as powerful knowledge

And the second is whether as newer groups enter higher education traditional certainties and knowledge are challenged

I want to suggest that these two arguments contain tensions – and that like issues of social access these questions are not easily resolved

First to vocationalisation – unsurprisingly given the policy emphasis on individual social mobility and contribution to the economy – much curriculum development has been driven by notions of employability and in a rather more enlightened mode by the idea of graduate attributes

The argument is that we are preparing our students for a future in which they will need the soft skills to negotiate job markets in which secure employment is no longer guaranteed

The relationship between employment and the achievement of a first degree is in many cases loose

And employers consistently assert their preference for good, generic skills - where the possession of a degree is assumed

Manz Yorke for example argues that we should see employability as complex phenomena:

... evidenced in the application of a mix of personal qualities ... understanding, skilful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experience.

And what we have seen are curriculum developments designed to support this - whether within the pattern of more traditional degree courses or increasingly in the expansion of courses which look outwards from the academy to the market

Many of these developments have taken place outside of elite institutions and are marketed and targeted in terms of achieving higher levels of participation

And what we have seen is the development of generic undergraduate courses like business studies - which in England for example now count for the majority of undergraduate enrolments

These courses differ from traditional professional courses like medicine where the knowledge is more defined and has an understood relationship to abstract disciplinary knowledge

In contrast many newer courses are more generic with an emphasis on the contextual and with a variable relationship to disciplinary knowledge

Rather than educational knowledge being understood as esoteric specialist knowledge – with its own codes and practices - many of these courses veer towards mundane everyday knowledge - and do not give students access to the specialist knowledge that form the bases for generalisation and critique

In the Australian context Leesa Wheelahan argues that a combination of state driven instrumentalism and constructivist curriculum theorists have combined to produce contextual problem orientated curricula

And Jenni Case in the South African context signals a caution over problem-based reforms of engineering curricula precisely because it makes epistemic access to complex disciplinary knowledge more difficult for the least advantaged students

Access to abstract disciplinary knowledge remains essential for student success
Some curricula deny students access to underlying principles and as Suellen Shay has shown this means that students who come into higher levels of tertiary education from what were previously technical universities in South Africa lack the underlying disciplinary principles to succeed

And of course in the South African context this is closely tied to the failure to redress historic disadvantage for the black majority

As Leesa Wheelahan concludes from her research
'This professional/ occupational hierarchy reflects the class structure in society more broadly. The professions are dominated by the social elites, while at the other end, lower VET qualifications in new fields are dominated by students from low socio-economic backgrounds'

What I want to be clear about however is that this is not a lowering standards argument – these courses are designed to appeal to a wider audience but is the curriculum structure that denies students access to abstract powerful knowledge

The lower standards argument in its populist versions is broadly that more must mean worse and it is often propounded by those who are keen to defend elite provision and not uncoincidentally the social privilege this perpetuates

The argument for access to powerful knowledge is one that asserts that newer participants in higher education should have the same access to knowledge as their more privileged peers –

Whereas quality arguments tend to be circular - elite equates to quality

What is cheering in terms of the quality arguments are findings from research that is now being undertaken looking at courses in different institutional settings

One such study is by Monica Mclean, Paul Ashwin and Andrea Abbas of sociology courses in higher education

They found that curriculum and pedagogy could not be read off from the ranking of universities

Staff in less prestigious sites had maintained a curriculum that challenged their students in the same sorts of ways as in more elite spaces – and the differences they found were not reducible to institutional site

We clearly need more studies which look at the relationships between newer curricula, powerful knowledge and what students at less prestigious institutions are being offered if we are to make epistemic access a reality

And Suellen Shay's work for example is being used in South Africa context as part of curriculum reform and the broader debates about epistemic access that are taking place there

So what are the arguments about newer students and change?

Well some of you at this point might be thinking that the argument so far looks like a conservative defence of dominant knowledge practices - but I want to argue that it is not

Powerful knowledge provides better ways of understanding the world – but this is not to deny that knowledge is shaped by vested interests and that there are important arguments in the sociology of knowledge

My position accepts epistemic relativism - all knowledge is produced by human beings – we have no unmediated access to worlds outside ourselves and we need to be reflexively aware of our position in relation to knowledge making

But knowledge is about something – so I reject judgemental relativism - in other words I do think we can make, always fallible judgements, about the validity of arguments

That is what the argument for powerful knowledge is about – the ability to make these judgements and contribute to society’s conversations about them

So what does happen when newer actors come into higher education?

I want to argue that they can and do challenge existing disciplinary knowledge and that they can and do propose better more valid arguments

I’ll illustrate this by looking at what happened when newer groups of actors came into the academy in numbers - namely women in the late 60s and 70s – and when that expansion also coincided with a broader radicalisation of students

What we saw was that as these newer actors came into higher education, new questions were posed and criticisms developed for example of masculinist, colonial and post-colonial biases in knowledge production

This is a complex story that cannot be rehearsed here but over the last decades we have seen the development of powerful critiques across the social sciences and humanities and to a lesser, but significant, extent in the sciences

Women, and other minorities historically on the margins of universities, were able to attack the knowledge claims of the privileged and show them to be lacking – in effect producing newer, better **knowledge** claims

Looking at new voices in higher education is important – and radical version of widening participation aspire to increase the number of people from different backgrounds and in Michael Apple’s terms who gets to ask and answer questions in a culture

However it is important not to dissolve knowledge questions solely into questions of voice – or to who is speaking - to do this we need to distinguish between different theories of ‘voice’.

Mine is a sociology of knowledge position that does not automatically privilege particular voices

There are other positions which do – some versions of ‘standpoint’ theory, which in its strongest version in feminism claimed that women, by virtue of their distinctive experiences and through the development of a feminist stance, could have insights that others could not

Truth in this version is therefore (partially) relativised to social group

Issues of standpoint and voice are likely to come to the fore as more diverse students get to participate – the development of Southern Studies is another example of this

And in the African context there is an argument for the development of African-Centred knowledge as a productive space and here I quote ‘between the polarization of the bad place of Eurocentrism and the immovable rock of Afrocentricism’

So my argument is that we **must** attend to cultural diversity and recognition – and that recognition also entails important knowledge questions

We must be open to the ways in which newer and better (although always fallible) knowledge claims can emerge - voice does not foreclose the matter, it opens it up

It also fundamentally challenges us to think about hermeneutic injustice

Hermeneutic injustice according to Miranda Fricker is where there is a gap in the collective interpretative resources for making sense of social experiences and this is structural – prior to feminism for example there was no language to analyse and understand women’s experiences of sexual harassment

She argues that hermeneutical inequality affects dominated groups whose experiences have not been articulated and she argues that this can lead to a loss of epistemic confidence – ‘it can cause literal loss of knowledge that .. may prevent one from gaining new knowledge, and more generally, ...is likely to stop one gaining certain important epistemic virtues such as intellectual courage’

Not having a voice in a situation has epistemic consequences for the development of the knower and has profound significance for experiences of newer participants in higher education

And Penny Jane Burke arguing from a feminist and Freirian perspective has argued that misrecognition, identity, and knowledge formation are all tied together and that recognition is fundamental to both identity and epistemological struggles

These arguments are about genuinely expanding knowledge - and we must be wary of offering a truncated and limited curriculum to newer social groups while continuing to arm social elites with the best that higher education strives to offer

Possibly hope

So finally to think about hope

As we have seen there is much to be critical of

And in terms of access to knowledge there are good reasons for thinking that in some contexts less privileged social groups have less access to powerful knowledge

This is a major concern for radical educators who believe that participation is about social justice and that access to the goods of a university education is not just about private benefits

But we should be careful not to fall into the conservative trap of thinking that quality only exists in elite settings – there are dangers that the powerful knowledge is simply equated with

that of elites - which is why making epistemological arguments about better knowledge claims is so important

Hermeneutic injustice is challenged by extending the concepts and language we have for naming these injustices and we have seen how feminist scholarship and activism allowed the development of new language for naming multiple injuries - not just those associated with gender but also those entailed by the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality

We also need to defend the virtues that come from an engagement with higher education

Monica Mclean, Andrea Abbas and Paul Ashwin bring together ideas from Bernstein about pedagogic rights with those from Sen's capabilities approach in a summary of their findings and I quote:

'Sociology-based social science knowledge enlightened the students in our study about themselves and others (individual enhancement) it located them in a loose group of people who had specialised understanding about how individuals and society interact (social inclusion) and it will be of use in or out of employment – to improve the social world (political participation)'

There is no reason to think that their conclusions are unique and most encouragingly they found commonalities in both elite and non-elite settings

Expanded access to the goods of higher education remains a source of hope because at its best it expands our human capacities to wrestle with complex problems and challenges

And if Margaret Archer is right about the new situational logic of capitalism involving more change and less certainty in ways which deny the 'establishment of an unchanging modus vivendi' in our relations with the world - then we need more intellectual courage not less

We also need to signal the significance of what Margaret Archer calls corporate agency that is people coming together to articulate their concerns and with an ability to act to produce positive change

So my source of hope is in the intellectual courage I see in students - including (as Jenni Case has documented in the South African context) those coming from the most difficult of back grounds

From the work of colleagues, including those here at SRHE, and from all those who believe, as I do, that opening up universities to new social groups is something worth struggling for – and that we should continue struggle for both epistemic and social access in equal measure