Tensions, Contradictions and Perpetual Loose Ends - 'Widening Participation' in HE Policy

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Overview

[...] it would be difficult to envisage a government policy position which (on paper at least) did not advocate that higher education should be available to as wide a section of the population as could benefit from it.

Marion Bowl (2019) Diversity and Differentiation, Equity and Equality in a Marketised Higher Education System (3)

Nobody said it was easy
No one ever said it would be this hard

Coldplay (2002) The Scientist*

* Quotation does not indicate musical endorsement

• Me:
  • Experience of HE / WP policy at organisational level
  • Academic interests – HE policy - evaluation of WP outreach

• Key focus – how HE policy trips up intended widening participation outcomes
  • Key tension between disadvantage and under-representation
Ongoing tension between HE funding and access

- Robbins Principle (1963) - university places “should be available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so”
- Dearing (1997) – expansion for diversity of students – compact between HE and society - ‘WP’ projects
- Move to a mass system (Trow 1973)
- Widening participation tend to come into policy prominence with funding changes (2006, 2012)
- Widening Participation vs Fair Access (stratified system) -
Widening Who?

2006 – OFFA = ‘under-representation’
2014 – National strategy = ‘disadvantage’
2019 – OfS = ‘under-representation’
Data Issues
Defining under-representation

• Danger of data determinism – concerned only with what we can measure
• OfS / HESA areas of concern
  • Age
  • Gender
  • Disability
  • Ethnicity
  • State school (very blunt)
  • Care-experience
  • *Socio-economic status (aka class)*
• Move towards multiple indicators of disadvantage  UCAS (MEM) / HESA experimental PI
The problem of class – NS-SEC

• Under-representation and / or disadvantage
  • Some causal theories (cultural capital / sense of fit...) – Reay 2004; Reay et al 2009; Jones 2015; Bathmaker et al 2016...

• Class analysis is dependent on proxy measures

• National Statistics – Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC)
  • Parental occupation – self-declared – UCAS interpret
  • Critique (Harrison and Hatt 2009)
  • HESA stopped reporting on NS-SEC from 2017
The problem of class - LPN

• Regulatory dependence on Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN / POLAR) –
  • By middle super output area (av pop 7200)
  • New measure TUNDRA (state school only) MSOA in England KS4 – proportion progressing to HE

• Ecological fallacy:
  • ‘there are more disadvantaged young people living outside of LPNs than within them’ (Harrison and McCaig 2015: 803)

• The ‘London POLAR problem’:
  • Q1 = 13/600 wards in London. Areas of low HE progression distributed across different wards. Hard to target and likely to miss disadvantaged students
The problem of class - alternatives

- Eligibility for Free School Meals in compulsory education more reliable measure of disadvantage – (Ille et al 2017; Taylor 2018; Gorard 2012...)
  - Indicates economic disadvantage
  - BUT misses some students

- 1st Generation – self-declared
  - Indicates disadvantage (cultural capital and IAG deficit)

- Household income
  - Indicates disadvantage
  - BUT clever middle class accounting
  - Misses multiple student families
  - Can vary across years
A data-driven tautology?

• Often the explanatory rational for the use of particular measures is speculative – less well worked than the detail in the datasets

• Reification in policy and strategy means that data markers of under-representation become the key definitions of ‘WP’ rather understood as proxies

• Fallacy summed up by Harrison and McCaig (2015) on POLAR:

  “The sector has inadvertently adopted an approach whereby people living in an LPN have themselves become the under-represented group, rather than LPNs being a proxy for more real forms of social, economic or cultural disadvantage in terms of progression to higher education” (812)

• = disadvantage and its impact / causal factors framed off
Homogeneity vs disaggregation

• OfS set high level sector KPIs – access, retention, success.

• Aggregate groups
  • Access – reduce gap Polar Q 1 and Q5
  • Retention - reduce gap Polar Q 1 and Q5
  • Attainment – reduce gap Black and White students
  • Attainment – reduce gap Disabled and non-Disabled students
Disaggregation = smaller populations

A Northern Redbrick

All English higher education providers

Attainment gap White vs all other ethnicities - Source: OfS APP dataset
A Northern Redbrick

Attainment gap White vs Black - Source: OfS APP dataset

Change in gap from 13-14 to 17-18: **-13.0** Is this change statistically significant? No
Change in gap from 16-17 to 17-18: **-9.0** Is this change statistically significant? No

Change in gap from 13-14 to 17-18: **-1.5** Is this change statistically significant? No
Change in gap from 16-17 to 17-18: **-0.7** Is this change statistically significant? No
Disability – homogeneity vs specific support needs

• Disability - heterogeneous group – 9 different disability types – physical / mobility issues – vs specific learning difficulties

• Convenience grouping doesn’t make sense when considering students’ specific support needs – even within subgroupings:
  • HESA Code – 50 - A specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D
  • Different adaptations required to support different sub-categories
  • Clear implication for efforts to shift aggregated metrics
Recruitment Issues
National targets... but at a local level

OfS key WP policy challenge

• National KPIs – close national access gaps

• But implement occurs at a local level – individual HEIs have specific targets to close access gaps within their institution
  • encourages a ‘bums on seats’ approach (Thomas 2000)
  • tension between local nature of outreach and student mobility
    • face to face outreach normally has to be conducted with students in locality – costs and time of staff travel or students travelling for campus based activities.

• Contradictory tension in outreach
  • ‘full student experience’ = move away

• Local / commuter students (Donelly and Gamsu 2018)
  • Distribution of disadvantaged students across a stratified system
Other tensions in a stratified system

- Under-representation... ‘where?’ (McCaig and Adnett 2009; Bowl and Hughes 2013)
- ‘Heavy lifters’ – lower tariff institutions = better rates of WP (HEPI 2019)
  - But ironically – less money to support WP
- Social and cultural profiles of HEIs stubborn (Wakeling and Savage 2015)
Implementation issues
Targeting

‘For the purposes of an access agreement, outreach work means any activity that involves raising aspirations and attainment and encouraging students from under-represented groups to apply to HE’ (OFFA 2004)

• Involves primarily working through school partners
  • Open to various biases: self-selection / school selection / attainment requirements – targeting the students already likely to go to HE

• Danger of WP outreach become a specialised recruitment activity – HEIs fight over a limited pool of already high-achieving ‘WP students’.
‘Doing’ ‘WP’

• Financial support
  • limited evidence of impact on pre-HE decision making

• Reduced grade offers - contextual data debated – recognition of academic and other challenges in compulsory education sector
  • Relationship between disadvantage and L3 outcomes
  • Counter-pressure by league tables which include a calculation on average prior attainment grade

• Outreach...
Evaluation – ‘What works’ vs ‘Why it works’

‘What works’
- Policy makers – simple narrative
- VFM
- ‘Robust’ evaluation
- Trial based designs
- Evidence of impact

VS

‘Why’ It Works
- Complex social reality
- Complex narratives
- Context
- Generalisability
Office for Students Approach

• Data driven regulator
  • Deliverology informed approach – setting targets down the delivery chain
  • ‘Policy reification’ – proxy measures and indicators become the thing itself – disadvantage and its impacts are framed off

• Focus on eliminating gaps
  • Reduces complex situations to opposed sets of binary measures

• Shift to outcomes from outputs

• But – also counter-trajectory
  • focus on theory-driven evaluation – focus on what happens and why – how to deliver change.
Conclusion – ‘Getting WP Done’ – Policy vs Practice

• The need to formulate and perform a policy concern with inequality is driving a broad strokes approach
  • Contradictions and tensions only become apparent at the level of practice
  • The ‘wicked problem’ (Bore and Wright 2009) of how to resolve the challenges is delegated down to practitioners working in complex environments
• Continued slow progress in access – LPN gaps persist despite overall increase in participation
• Continued tension between under-representation (easy to measure) vs disadvantage (need causal knowledge and to address structural factors – need to know what works and why)
And I haven’t even touched on...

- Ethnicity
- Lifelong learning
- The impact of marketization
- The impact of student number controls
- Student social and geographical mobility
- The schooling effect
- Bourdieu....
- HE decision-making
- International / global WP
- HE and civic responsibilities
Over to you: Comments, questions....
Selected references


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