

WHY WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION MATTERS?

Paper by Yasmin Valli in preparation for the CSE Faculty Widening Participation Event on 15/09/05

The Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education (CSE) offers a wide range of initiatives regarding widening participation. This paper examines current research in the widening participation field and identifies some of the issues faced by the Faculty of CSE. Widening participation perspectives are examined from both, national and regional perspectives

The Higher Education (HE) environment can be, at times, dominated by tensions of under-funding, under-planning and the prospective impact of variable fees serving to stimulate a market. However, we should never lose sight of our commitment to increasing and widening participation in higher education and thereby improving life-chances of all our citizens. An individual's life-chances could be immensely increased by access to education, including higher education (Bell, 1968). How can we extend opportunity to participate in HE to young people from family backgrounds in what the Office of National Statistics would call social classes C2, D and E. essentially semi-skilled and un-skilled manual occupations. No matter how we look at it their life-chances, in terms of their ability to access HE and thereby access graduate level jobs remain severely restricted. Recent statistics published by the Leedsmet Marketing and Business Development confirm these findings (Leedsmet, Monitoring Widening Participation July 2005). Further scrutiny of such statistics will offer information regarding the admission of students from under-privileged backgrounds and non-traditional entrants to the CSE faculty. They will also highlight any restrictions that we may place upon them through the selection criteria. We certainly need to integrate strategies such as early application schemes and advance prior learning experience (APEL) with more certainty into our admissions process. (Corporate Plan 2004-2008, pg1. objective 3.2)

The current Labour party's manifesto states that 50% of 18-30 year olds should have some experience of higher education by 2010. With this target in mind, we need to consider factors that lie beyond the arithmetic of student places such as the social mix of students and extending educational opportunity to those who have not traditionally aspired to it. The origins of 50% lie in the studies conducted in the late 1990's established that in our 'knowledge based economy' the majority of new jobs created will depend on graduate level skills. This then means that as we move towards a more knowledge based economy, so participation in HE will underpin social inclusiveness (Newby, 2005). We already know that, from the outset, graduates earn more than non-graduates. As we strive towards creating a 'world-class regional university with world-wide horizons' (Corporate Plan 2004-2008, Vice Chancellor's forward) we need to remain mindful of our regional partnerships and how best we can exercise social inclusiveness within this context.

The broad parameters of this problem are well known. Amongst the ethnic minority groups, Bangladeshi females and Afro-Caribbean males are exceptions as most ethnic minority groups are well represented in HE in England. However, this pattern varies between institutions. Although females are over-represented they are mainly from the middle classes and the sector shows that it caters for students with disabilities, however, this varies between institutions. Overall participation in HE has moved from one in seven to just under one in two over the last 15 years, but the vast majority of increase in participation noted above has been from the middle classes. With reference to the above factors, I think it would be true to state that as a Faculty there are issues we need to address regarding ethnicity, gender and disability. Some of this is confirmed by the statistical information contained in the Monitoring Widening Participation Report, Leedsmet, 2005

Access to HE in the UK should not be passively made available to all those who can benefit from it, but actively promoted and made an achievable reality to under-represented groups. Universities are seen as repositories of culture, learning and civilising values. Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells (2000) has argued that universities are a core element in inculcating civilising values in a multi-ethnic and multi-faith world therefore the growth of knowledge is a great driver of social progress. This is a true reflection of the region the University serves. How can the CSE Faculty ensure that we prepare our students to engage in a multi-ethnic and multi-faith world? This message has appeared in various reflections from the Vice Chancellor and was recently reinforced by Professor Ian Markham in his lecture about 'Globalisation and Islam' during the Staff Development Festival, 5/09/05.

Archer et al. (2003) have recently suggested that for all the expansion of the 1990's there has been a persistent, consistent and continuing tendency to recruit students from the middle classes. As they point out:

'The size of the middle class has itself increased but this is a relatively minor explanatory factor. Over the same period it has become acknowledged that the possession of a higher education qualification counters powers and privileges. Graduates are differentially incorporated into our society and benefit materially in status'.

So why has the proportion of young people from poorer backgrounds entering HE only slightly changed?

One reason could be that universities and colleges are systematically discriminating against candidates from poorer backgrounds through their admissions processes – (e.g. Laura Spence case). The National Audit Office Report on widening participation 2002 (NAO 2002a) found that there was no evidence of systematic social bias in university admissions. Empirical evidence suggests that proportionately fewer young people from poor backgrounds enter HE because fewer of them present themselves. Two plausible reasons could be – that there is lack of achievement in those schools and colleges in which poor children are disproportionately

represented and there might be a failure of aspiration even to consider HE as a feasible and desirable opportunity.

To make a real difference we need to reach out into schools and colleges and, in the spirit of partnership, work with them to raise aspirations and to improve achievement. This is the philosophy that lies behind Partnerships for Progression, the HEFCE and Learning and Skills Council programme which has now been absorbed into Aimhigher. Activities related to this initiative remain buoyant as Universities engage in innovative programmes to attract candidates into HE. The monitoring of such activities remains limited. The CSE Faculty can boast excellent practice in activities associated with raising aspirations, such as, focus days, residential, outdoor adventure residential, taster sessions, summer schools which is done with much enthusiasm.

As we move towards a more mass higher educational system it is unreasonable to believe that we will succeed simply by offering 'more of the same'. Graduate skills need to be more attuned to the labour market meaning that HE will encompass a wider range of both academic and vocational programmes than was the case when universities supplied graduates to just a few elite professions. The challenge is for HE to be refreshed and updated – it needs to be delivered into a more flexible, student centred form – part-time as well as full-time, in the work place, on-line via distance learning and so on.

'To engage and challenge students of all ages and all backgrounds by offering diverse learning opportunities and a flexible award framework' (Aim 3, pg 8. Corporate Plan 2004-2008)

Therefore widening participation will mean more than just persuading a greater proportion of non-traditional students to apply to university, it will also mean adapting the content and delivery of HE to make it more relevant to their needs. There is some existing good practice in the CSE Faculty which reflects the above but we need to do much more to cultivate flexible awards, (Objective 3.3 Corporate Plan 2004-2008).

HE needs to accommodate the 'vocational' as well as the 'academic' need in the same way as in the 19th century onwards it encompassed the vocational needs of lawyers, doctors engineers and so on. Both, the academic and vocational need to be integrated into our teaching and learning programme.

By obtaining 2 A-Levels, 16 year olds wishing to go to university can do so. For a 16 year old wishing to follow a more vocational route the message is a mixed one – a B-Tec qualification, an HNC or HND, then to move on to Foundation Degree and with some luck, to top this up with an honours degree. Another consideration could be to do vocational A Levels, an advanced modern apprenticeship. a foundation year in a further education (FE) college and then, progress to university. Therefore it is not clear to a 16 year old what this pathway is. Pathways into and through higher education should be clear to any student at any point of entry. This is a challenge we face in the attempt to develop a genuine mass higher education system. Progression routes, pathways, credit transfer systems allowing a genuine system of lifelong learning is to be developed and marketed to those who need it most. The government announced today its plans to consider post qualification entry into HE (BBC News, 9/09/05) This it believes will help

students from poorer background to enter HE. About 90% of those on a conventional A-Level programme enter HE but only 40 to 50 per cent of those qualifying at level 3 in vocational subjects do so (Newby 2005). This makes progression a key factor both at FE and HE level to connect with each other to create clear signposted pathways. Such practice promotes life-long learning networks linking colleges and higher education institutions (HEI's) across a city, region or area that potential learners will identify with. These networks would therefore maximise opportunities in the local and regional context. The Dearing committee made specific and major recommendations addressed to the provision of higher education in the further education sector (National Committee of Inquiry into HE, 1997). The University Corporate Plan 04-08 states that there will be an annual increase of at least 10% in entrants from the Progression Module. We need to examine current practice within the CSE Faculty regarding this.

The majority of working-class (and minority ethnic) students are concentrated in the post 1992 universities, i.e in institutions which tend to have lower levels of prestige and funding (Connor, Tyers, Madood and Hilliage, 2004). Gender, ethnicity as well as social class have an impact upon opportunities in the graduate labour market with working-class, minority ethnic and women students all likely to earn less on average. Are certain groups underrepresented in higher education because they are not interested in participating, because they do not have the necessary academic preparation or because they lack the ability to pay? How do students and potential students make their decisions about enrolling and persisting in college? Do they rationally weigh the costs and benefits of education? Do they compare the lifetime earning streams they can expect with and without a higher degree? A university's mission must thus be much wider than perpetuating the life of scholarship for its own sake. The world depends increasingly on universities for knowledge, prosperity, health and policy thinking. Universities are thus required to become engines of development for people, institutions and democracy in general (ACU 2001:1). Through our aspiration raising activities we can begin to engage students to think about such issues.

Widening access is only one part of widening participation. Successful inclusion of underrepresented groups in HE requires a substantial engagement in pedagogy not just outreach programmes. The student life-cycle (Layer et al, 2003) suggests that widening participation requires a long term engagement from before a student thinks of applying to HE and beyond their graduation into employment. Statistics show that in the UK 40% of the workforce is educated to Level 3, the threshold to HE level learning, compared to Germany where the percentage is 75 per cent (Steadman 2001). Compared to other European Countries Britain has the second lowest participation levels (Office of National Statistics 2001) Student success requires an understanding of barriers to access as much as to participation. As a Faculty we need to continue to refresh our pedagogy to ensure that we address the needs of underrepresented groups.

Castells (1998) observes that in a network society in which we now live, connections are no longer simply linear and are more unequally distributed.

All of the education system needs to engage with its class ridden past and examine new ways of engaging with diverse learners. Regarding students in the 21st century, Fraud (2000) states:

This vision challenges our institutions not only to look at new ways of doing what we have always done but also to look at new things. Students with an information-age mindset expect education to emphasise the learning process more than a canon of knowledge. They want to be part of learning communities, with hubs and spokes of learners, rejecting the broadcast paradigm of television (or a note taker in a lecture hall). Our institutions need to expand their primary focus from the internal, on-campus, temporal experience to include the external, global, lifelong experience (p.24)

This is a transformative approach that works with the students immediate needs rather than focusing on the curriculum and its needs. In the CSE Faculty there is a move towards e-learning and blended learning. Eddie Obeng in his session during staff development festival, 31/08/05 and Curtis Bonk on 8/09/05 reinforced this message. This also appears in the University's teaching and learning strategy. Such approaches will also engage the student's knowledge that may not be known by the lecturer and will tackle some of the issues regarding educational and social disadvantage and student identity. Students who are currently being encouraged to take on further study in Britain through schemes such as Aimhigher (HEFCE 2004), which seek to raise aspirations and attainment towards HE, need to feel confident that the learning and teaching environment for their HE level study will be developed with their experience and needs in mind.

Through examining the literature on widening participation and thinking about practices within the Faculty of CSE, I feel that we have solid grounds to build upon. We are in a strong position to incorporate new ways of working to achieve our goals and to fulfil the requirements as identified in the widening participation strategy 05-08 and to address Aim 3 of the Corporate Plan 2004-2008 in order to deliver the local, regional and national agenda.

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