

Post-Compulsory and Higher Education Network

Tuesday 16 February 2016

*SRHE, 73 Collier Street, London N1 9BE
11:00-16:00*

Social justice, access and diversity in higher education: home international comparisons

This seminar brings together three leading researchers whose work provides insights into the changing practices of HE across the different nations of the UK. The focus of the seminar is on question of equity and social justice, with a particular interest in patterns of equity/inequality in a diversified system. As part of this, a key area of concern is the contribution of colleges (the equivalents of Further Education colleges in England). Questions of the ways in which diversity may lead to democratisation or alternatively diversion in a diversified system will be considered across the contributions, highlighting how these issues may play out differently across the countries of the UK.

Scottish higher education and social justice: tensions between data and discourse

Sheila Riddell, Professor of Education, Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity, University of Edinburgh

This paper considers the extent to which higher education in Scotland may be seen as a socially just system. The paper begins with a discussion of recent literature on the nature of social justice, drawing on the writing of Fraser (2005), Phillips (2004) and Sen (1992). Phillips' argument that social justice must be understood in terms of equality of group outcomes, and not just equality of opportunity, is noted. Administrative data are used to explore social differences in higher education participation rates, which are linked to social differences in school attainment. The social priorities implicit in the allocation of the education budget by sector are discussed. The paper then explores policy makers' understanding of fairness and their views of Scottish Government policy. Key informants in the most selective institutions were strongly supportive of universal free tuition, whilst those in colleges and post-92 universities were more critical, suggesting that budgetary priorities should be reviewed in order to channel more funds to schools and colleges. The paper concludes by suggesting that there is a need for a more critical and nuanced debate on the type of social justice which is sought within higher education, the ways in which progress should be measured and the initiatives which are likely to foster a more socially just system of higher education in Scotland.

Embedding widening access and participation (WAP) in Northern Ireland: from policy to sustained participation

Ruth Fee, Professor of Public Services Education, Ulster University, Northern Ireland

Through the policy document Access to Success, the Department of Employment and Learning for Northern Ireland (DEL) has stressed partnership with higher education providers, disabled group representatives, employers and their representative bodies, individuals and trade unions, the voluntary and community sector, and other government departments and agencies in order to deliver the longer-term vision for WAP. Widening access to work-based learners is a key aspect of Access to Success. It is also the central feature of DEL's strategy paper Graduating to Success and has been embodied in 'Project 10' - the promotion of greater collaboration between HE and FE to bring access to HE closer to the point of need and, in particular, into rural districts. This paper examines the range of DEL policies designed to increase WAP in NI and, in particular, traces Ulster University's key policies and initiatives to embed and achieve WAP. Ulster University WAP activities include the validation of an extensive network of collaborative provision with FE and other educational or training institutions across NI. FE colleges have provided access to further education to those with barriers to learning, those with no or low qualifications, those who are furthest from the labour market, and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Using a range of sources, this paper seeks to evaluate the success of DEL and Ulster policies relating to WAP and the challenges posed to the sustainability of the WAP agenda in an increasingly difficult FE and HE financial environment.

Access to Higher Education in Wales: devolution, social democracy and equity

Gareth Rees, Research Professor, Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD), Cardiff University

The Welsh Government has pursued increasingly distinctive policies on access to higher education, which have reflected the broadly social democratic consensus that dominates Wales's politics. Hence, not only is the regulation of student finance different from other parts of the UK, but also the Government has adopted its own approach to widening access, as well as being somewhat *dirigiste* with respect to higher education's institutional structure. Important questions remain, however, with respect to the effects of these distinctive policy approaches on actual patterns of participation in higher education. Recent analysis (based on research funded by the ESRC) shows that, whilst there is some indication of more equitable patterns of participation in higher education in Wales than elsewhere in the UK, these differences are marginal and the principal determinants of access to higher education in Wales are broadly equivalent to those in England (where comparable data and analysis are available). In some respects, these findings illustrate the limitations of the devolution settlement with respect to Wales (at a time when devolution to regions within England is a current political issue). Moreover, the findings prompt more general questions about the nature of the social democratic agenda with respect to equity in access to higher education. Some of the limitations and, indeed, contradictions within this agenda are clearly illustrated by the Welsh example.

Professor Sheila Riddell is Director of the Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity, University of Edinburgh. She was previously Director of the Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research at the University of Glasgow. She has written extensively about social inclusion, equality and education.

Professor Ruth Fee is Head of the School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy at Ulster University. A main focus of her activity is access to Higher Education and widening participation, accreditation of prior and work-based learning, and developing programmes with a range of collaborative partners of Ulster University including FE colleges, the Police Service of NI and Health and Social Care Trusts.

Professor Gareth Rees is a Research Professor at the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) and the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. He has researched and written widely on lifelong learning, post-compulsory education and training, devolution and education policy, and the social relations of higher education.

Event booking details