Approaches to Widening Access in England

ESRC Think Tank 2: Widening Access to Higher Education:
Scotland in UK Comparative Context
8th October 2013
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In looking back over the last thirty years, I realise how the whole relationship of the English universities to the English people has changed and broadened. Within that time we have seen one barrier after another crumbling, parting, and being swept away. Thirty years ago the universities of England were the universities of the few; to-day they are the universities of the many; tomorrow, I trust, they will be the universities of all. The barrier of creed has practically gone, the barrier of sex is going, and now the task before us is to see that the social barrier shall go as well – that the possession of money or the want of it shall no longer stand in the way of getting a sound, solid, and complete university education.

Dale, J. A. (1905). Some Functions of a University. London, An Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men.

Key issues in widening access and participation in the English system

- Structural

- Financial

- Attainment

- Socio-cultural

- Underpinning discourses

Structural issues

Binary divides, stratification and hierarchy:

- State / private schooling

- Separation of FE/HE

- Vocational /academic divide

- 'Diversity' and stratification within the HE system

Financial Issues

HEFCE funding to institutions

- Generated support for WP in institutions
- The flexibility of the funding was welcomed by HEIs
- Most common and effective activities: work with schools and colleges to raise aspirations, activities that expose potential students to HE environment; pre-entry and on-programme academic and pastoral support, dedicated disability support unit.
- Widespread view that progress has been made re access – with the funding seen as a key driver of rising participation rates nationally.
- Little evidence of systematic evaluation of WP activities in institutions.
- Without HEFCE WP funding a lot of this activity would cease

(CFC and Edge Hill 2013)

Financial Issues

Student finance:

- Fees and loans

- Bursaries and scholarships

- Pre-HE financial support

- Issues for access, participation and achievement

Issues of Attainment

- 'Poor attainment in secondary schools is more important in explaining lower HE participation rates amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds than barriers arising at the point of entry into HE'

(Chowdry et al 2010)

- In 2012-13 38% of disadvantaged student gained 5 'good' GCSEs (inc. Eng & Maths) or equivalent, compared to 65% of other students.

(David Laws March 2013)

- Importance of closing the attainment gap between 'less well-off pupils' and 'better-off pupils'

(Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2013)

Socio-cultural issues

- Aspirations, knowledge and perceptions of higher education: social and cultural capital and the field of higher education

- Most WP activities designed to 'raise aspirations', increase knowledge, and change attitudes of disadvantaged young people

- E.g. Aimhigher, 'Reach for Excellence', Sutton Trust Summer schools

- Issues of evaluation and comparable data, but evidence that such programmes do have positive impacts

What aspects of these interventions appear to be most effective?

- Partnerships and collaboration
- Full and resourced involvement of schools, colleges, HEIs
- Starting early – and sustained interventions
- Coordinated processes and enthusiastic staff
- Immersive experiences (visits, summer schools)
- Information sessions on applications and finance
- Subject-specific sessions/activities
- Mentoring

Problematising widening access policy: underpinning discourses

- Social mobility

- Meritocracy

- A marketised system

- A prestige economy of excellence / mediocrity

And problematising social mobility

Tuesday 22 November 2011

The Telegraph

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David Willets: feminism has held back working men

The rise of equal rights for women has left working-class men struggling to get on in l
according to David Willetts, the Universities Minister.

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Student tuition fees
protest

David Willets, the universities minister, claims feminism trumped egalitarianism   Photo: EDDIE MULHOLLAND

By Rosa Prince, Political Correspondent
7:00AM BST 01 Apr 2011

💬 102 Comments

The Government's social mobility strategy, which will conclude that movement between the classes had "stagnated" over the past 40 years, will be published next week and Mr Willetts blamed the entry of women

Asked what was to blame for the lack of social mobility, Mr Willetts said:

'The feminist revolution in its first round effects was probably the key factor. Feminism trumped egalitarianism. It is not that I am against feminism, it's just that is probably the single biggest factor.'

Apart from enabling the elite to justify being what it is, the ideology of giftedness, the cornerstone of the whole educational and social system, helps to enclose the underprivileged classes in the roles which society has given them by making them see as natural inability things which are only a result of inferior social status, and by persuading them that they owe their social fate (which is increasingly tied to their educational fate as society becomes more rationalized) to their individual nature and their lack of gifts. The exceptional success of those few individuals who escape the collective fate of their class apparently justify educational selection and give credence to the myth of the school as a liberating force among those who have been eliminated, by giving the impression that success is exclusively a matter of gifts and work.   (Bourdieu, 1974)