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Access to and Widening Participation in Higher Education

Penny Jane Burke

Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, The University of Newcastle, Newcastle, NSW, Australia

Widening Access and participation (WP) has emerged as a major policy concern in a number of national contexts. It is connected to longer histories over struggles for the right to higher education, to concerns for greater fairness in society, and to ensuring that higher education is more equitable and inclusive. It is also shaped by the growing diversification of student constituencies that have resulted from higher education expansion over the later decades of the twentieth century. In the English context, during the period of the New Labour Government (1997–2010), widening participation, often shorthanded as “WP,” gained discursive hegemony, and this discourse has gained momentum internationally. However, the concept of “widening participation” is highly contested within and across different national contexts, and there is no one agreed definition.

The different meanings circulating from policies of WP are often implicit, while assumptions are often made about a common or universal understanding of the term. The meanings attached to WP are not only highly contextual but are also connected to diverse and competing values and

perspectives, as well as interconnected policies across the public sphere. WP is thus a contested terrain, and there are different perspectives underpinning policy and practice, which have different outcomes and effects. WP is largely concerned with redressing the under-representation of certain social groups in higher education. WP is also connected to wider social movements for greater educational equality, for example, through access, enabling, and foundation programs driven by concerns to develop more socially just higher education systems. Such approaches to WP aim to transform educational structures, systems, and cultures and to create more inclusive institutional contexts, sometimes characterized as “transformatory” approaches to WP (Burke 2002; Jones and Thomas 2005).

Although such transformatory approaches are at play, which are embedded in a social justice orientation to WP, “utilitarianism” has been identified as the dominant approach to WP (Jones and Thomas 2005). A utilitarian approach to WP might be described as focusing primarily on individual attitudes couched in a compensatory and remedial framework. This approach is underpinned by notions of individual deficit and strongly emphasizes the relationship between higher education and the economy (Jones and Thomas 2005: 618), characteristic of neoliberalism. The purpose of HE in the utilitarian, neoliberal framework is reduced to enhancing employability, entrepreneurialism, and economic competitiveness (Morley 1999; Thompson 2000;

Archer et al. 2003). This has arguably led to greater stratification of institutions. Indeed it has been argued in the British context that “one of the most pernicious effects of the government’s widening participation strategy could be to solidify existing hierarchies (of institutions and knowledge) within higher education” (Barr 2008: 36). Neoliberal perspectives and outcomes underpin utilitarianism, with a focus on the types of employability, human capital, development of skills, and competencies that promote an efficient and competitive workforce in global knowledge economies and markets. Neoliberal and utilitarian discourses of WP have been critiqued for individualizing social inequalities, concealing the social structures, processes, and discourses that reproduce exclusions and marginalization in and through higher education systems.

WP policies and strategies include identifying specific groups who should be targeted by WP initiatives and activities. The target groups are different across different national contexts, are debated and contested, and might change over time. The targeting strategies and methods used by policy makers and institutions aim to ensure that WP resources, opportunities, and funding are distributed specifically to those groups who have experienced social and educational disadvantages. Without targeting strategies and methods, it is always possible that WP initiatives and activities might reproduce inequalities by distributing further resources and opportunities to those individuals, families, and groups who already benefit significantly from social and educational advantages and privileges.

However, targeting strategies are always potentially problematic in the way they focus on some groups to the exclusion of other groups and tend to perpetuate deficit discourses, which are based in flawed assumptions that students associated with WP target groups lack aspiration, motivation, capability, resilience, and so forth. Targeting could unintentionally contribute to the construction of negative stereotypes or to unwittingly pathologizing communities who have already suffered histories of misrecognition (Fraser 1997). Furthermore, targeting specific groups tends to construct those groups as

homogenous, as having a singular voice, history, and a shared set of needs and interests. This fails to acknowledge that personal and social identities are complex formations of multiple and intersecting differences, shaped by deeply embedded structural, economic, and cultural inequalities.

Excellence and Equity

A key contemporary discourse at play in higher education is “excellence,” profoundly shaping possibilities and imaginaries in relation to challenging underrepresentation and exclusion in HE. The forces of neoliberal globalization have placed pressure on institutions to strive toward becoming “global universities” and to position themselves as “world-class,” competing for the “best students” in a stratified market driven by league table rankings. Institutions attempt to negotiate the regulatory demands of “excellence” and “equity,” despite the often contradictory values attached to each. “Excellence” as part of a “ranking movement” is “both a manifestation of the new global competitive environment and a driver of change in the field of HE” (Rostan and Vaira 2011, p. vii). Although excellence should not be perceived as in opposition to equity, discourses of “excellence” in higher education institutions (HEIs) often overshadow and/or challenge discourses of WP (see, e.g., Stevenson et al. 2014).

Excellence thus poses tensions for the overarching aim of creating greater equity in higher education. For example, in seeking “excellence,” processes of selection and differentiation often become embedded in everyday practices and naturalized, increasingly seen as a necessary and inevitable dimension of HE. Maher and Tetreault (2006) argue that discourses of excellence are associated with struggles for prestige, which compel institutions to participate in competitive practices in the race to be ranked as “world-class.” Nixon (2013, p. 96) warns that competition for funds and for students has led to institutional stratification and the self-protective groupings of institutions, which lobbied intensively for their

market niche. Within this context, prestige has itself become a marketable commodity, reinforcing institutional stratification.

What we see are levels of institutional sedimentation that provide the bases for structural inequalities that define, restrict and control the horizons of expectation and possibility. ‘Competition between and within universities’, as Stromquist (2012) points out, ‘does not foster equity but instead creates “winners” and “losers.”’ (Nixon 2013, p. 178)

In the US context, Lazerson (2010, p. 23) argues that HE has expanded in a segmented and hierarchical fashion in ways that might well be interpreted as having “preserved the social structure of inequality.” In the Chinese context, the impact of “excellence” on WP is similarly observed, with “elitism being reinvigorated” (Zha and Ding 2007, p. 55).

Raising Aspiration

As a key part of WP strategy, many universities have developed targeted outreach activities aimed at raising the aspiration of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The focus on “raising aspirations” has been critiqued as confusing material poverty with a so-called poverty of aspiration (Morley 2003; Burke 2012; Whitty et al. 2016). There are a number of examples emerging from the UK context where “aspiration-raising” activities have been shown in fact to reinforce rather than overcome cultural and socioeconomic divisions and inequalities (Slack 2003).

The focus on “raising aspirations,” it has been argued, oversimplifies aspiration-formation, ignoring the ways that aspirations are formed in and through complex structural, social, economic, and cultural inequalities, relations, and identities (Burke 2012). The problem is not that students from backgrounds targeted by WP policies lack aspiration but that they are too often denied access to the web of social networks, pedagogical opportunities, educational resources, academic practices, and symbolic and material forms of capital legitimated by institutions such as schools and universities that facilitate high levels of

educational attainment and expectation. Some have highlighted that educational aspiration is mediated by students’ attachments to locality and the feelings of belonging and social inclusion that underpin those attachments (see Ball et al. 1995; Gewirtz et al. 1995; Reay and Ball 1997). Young children imagine future possibilities in the context of the commitment they have to their local area, contexts, and communities (Connolly and Neill 2001). Reay et al. (2001) similarly observe how HE applicants from working-class backgrounds often stress the importance of locality and community in their decision-making process and the sense of security, comfort, and familiarity generated through these localized expressions.

Appadurai (2004) conceptualizes aspiration formation as a “navigational capacity” (Sellar and Gale 2011). This draws on insights by sociologists such as Ball and Vincent (1998) who highlight how students from middle-class backgrounds are able to draw on both the formal forms of “cold” knowledge available as well as “hot” knowledge – the knowledge available through informal social networks. Students from working-class backgrounds usually do not benefit from access to “hot” knowledge about higher education and therefore must rely on official forms of “cold” knowledge, which might be challenging to access and decipher. In this way, students from historically under-represented backgrounds “typically have diminished navigational capacities – the result of their limited archives of experience – with which to negotiate their way towards their aspirations” (Gale and Parker 2013).

Diversity

“Diversity” is a key theme of WP, and meeting the needs of diverse learners has become a central concern. In some ways, this has helped highlight the importance of teaching and learning in higher education, with concerns to develop pedagogical strategies to address increasingly diverse student groups. However, diversity is too often reduced to tokenistic notions, for example, in the marketing

images of university students from diverse backgrounds (Leathwood and Read 2009) without ample attention to how diversity raises serious challenges for admissions, student support, pedagogical, curricula, and assessment strategies in a highly stratified system (Stevenson et al. 2014; Burke et al. 2016). The emphasis of WP policies on equality of opportunity, through treating all individuals the same, conceals *histories of inequalities* and the significance of social differences that are reproduced through educational systems and structures, as well as differential familial, social, and cultural habitus and capital. Such inequalities require an acknowledgement that WP strategies might at times need a focus on difference and its intersection with structural and cultural formations of inequality. This has led to some heated debate about policies for and practices of affirmative and/or positive action, raising questions about how to address the tensions between practices of “fairness” and “equality” and how to recognize entrenched historical and social inequalities of different groups who are differently located and positioned in terms of access to educational opportunities and outcomes (Fraser 1997). This has led to a focus on how WP strategies might be most effective when framed by *both* redistribution (e.g., of resources and opportunities) and recognition (e.g., of social and cultural differences), even when these might be in tension (Burke 2012).

Researchers also point out the need to understand diversity in relation to *intersecting social differences*. In the US context, Maher and Tetreault draw on the concept of diversity to “analyze the challenges to institutional privilege brought about by the entrance of new groups into the academy” (Maher and Tetreault 2006: 5). They understand diversity to mean “people and ideas that are different from the assumed norm of White, heterosexual, middle-class and college-educated men” (Maher and Tetreault 2006). In their study of the implications of increased diversity in British higher education, Chris Hockings and her colleagues argue that diversity extends beyond the traditional structural divisions of class, gender, and ethnicity, also encompassing diverse student entry routes and the different

ways that students combine life, work, and study (Hockings et al. 2008). Critiquing the often used terms of “traditional” and “nontraditional” students in WP policy and practice, they argue that such terms tend to mask the complexity of diverse student populations (Hockings et al. 2008). They examine the ways that difference is used as a source of diversity, enriching the lives of others, or as a mechanism of isolation and marginalization of those who are seen as not fitting in or as “others” (Hockings et al. 2008).

Fair Access

WP policy has been largely preoccupied with questions of “fair access.” In England, for example, the 2004 report on admissions practices in HE, chaired by Steven Schwartz, examined “the options that English higher education institutions should consider when assessing the merit of applicants for their courses, and to report on the principles underlying these options” (Schwartz 2004, p. 4). Schwartz asserted that there was no evidence of poor admissions practice in universities but that there was a need for greater transparency of entry requirements and selection processes. This perspective tends to conflate “transparency” and “fairness,” both of which have acquired considerable currency in discourses of HE admission policy. However, making admission processes and practices clear and transparent does not render them “fair” if they continue to discriminate against groups who have been disadvantaged or marginalized socially and educationally (Burke and McManus 2009).

The notion of “fair access” has its roots in liberal concerns to promote access to HE among individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds that are deemed to have high levels of potential and ability (Kettley 2007, p. 335). This concern has been expressed at different moments and in different ways throughout the twentieth century. The seminal Robbins Report in Britain presented the meritocratic principle that HE should be provided for all those who have achieved the appropriate entry qualifications and who wish to pursue such courses (Robbins 1963). This underpinning

principle has not changed in English policy discourses and is echoed in many other contemporary national contexts. For example, Australian Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham stated that:

We need to ensure that good quality higher education is accessible to all students who have the ability and well informed motivations to benefit from it. (Birmingham 2015, p. 9)

This view of “fair access” is strongly framed by notions of meritocracy (Young 1961). Meritocracy is premised on the belief that all individuals who work hard, and have the prerequisite ability, can succeed within a fair and democratic system. However, such a perspective does not address differential social positions and power relations, which provide some social groups with greater access to the valuable cultural and material resources necessary to gain institutionally legitimated academic forms of success. This lack of attention to the social reproduction of inequalities through cultural, educational, social, and academic forms of capital constructs “success” and “failure” in terms only of individual effort and talent. This reinforces flawed explanations of deficit and locates the problem of WP in the individual rather than in inequitable educational and social structures, cultures, and discourses.

Morley and Lugg (2009) argue that WP might thus be understood as a *technology of differentiation and stratification*, rather than a social justice intervention (2009, p. 41). Leyva (2009) traces the implicit logic behind meritocratic discourses to the historically entrenched relationship between social Darwinism and neoliberalism. This logic tends to naturalize social inequalities on the premise that the socially “fittest” groups, those who demonstrate economic and educational success, gained their social advantage through their evolved ability, intelligence, and merit. Individual underachievement and nonparticipation in HE are thus constructed largely as the result of lack of (cap)ability and/or lack of aspiration.

Inclusion, Belonging, and Difference

A concern to create inclusive HE cultures in which a sense of belonging is fostered has been a major theme of WP debates. The broad aim is to counter exclusive cultures and elitism and to develop inclusive teaching and learning practices, curriculum, and assessment frameworks. However, “inclusion” has been critiqued for placing responsibility on those students deemed to be “different” to transform themselves to meet the dominant and normalized construction of “university student.” Policy discourses of inclusion emphasize the need to:

include those who are excluded into the dominant framework/state of being, rather than challenging existing inequalities within the mainstream system, or encouraging alternative ways of being. (Archer 2003, p. 23)

Fostering a sense of belonging has been identified as a strategy to create more inclusive cultures that are not based on a requirement of students to conform to the dominant framework/state of being. Rather, belonging is premised on the recognition and value of difference, including the different perspectives, histories, and experiences students from underrepresented backgrounds bring to HE. Difference is seen as central to developing inclusive pedagogies for equity and social justice (Chawla and Rodriguez 2007; Barnett 2011). Difference should be embraced:

not as a problem to be regulated for neoliberal processes of standardization and homogenization but as a critical resource to reflexively develop collective and ethical participation in pedagogical spaces. Such collective participation is not based on a notion that we can overcome power relations, but an understanding that power is complex and fluid and an inevitable dimension of pedagogical relations in which difference is and should be part of the dynamics in which we create meaning and understanding. (Burke 2015, p. 400)

Difference helps to reconceptualize WP as relational and “constructed within systems of power” (Brah 1996: 88). Brah argues that it is important to make a distinction between difference as the “marker of collective histories” and difference as “codified in an individual’s

biography” (Brah 1996: 89). However, both forms of difference are significant in the understanding of inequalities in access to and participation in HE and struggles over the right to higher education.

Widening participation in higher education is fraught with dilemmas and tensions, with multiple layers, histories, and forms of inequality running through a range of social and educational contexts and pedagogical relations. It is caught up in power struggles, including questions about the purposes of higher education and who has the right to higher education (Burke 2012). Critical scholars have highlighted the ways that contemporary higher education, a diverse and differentiated field, is increasingly being reframed in relation to the logics of neoliberalism and a complex web of intersecting political forces and discourses (Burke et al. 2016). This raises challenges for how we understand “widening participation” and related policies, strategies, and practices.

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