

## Rethinking ‘widening participation’ in higher education

Professor Sarah O’Shea, Director National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE)

The term ‘widening participation’ has gained currency across the higher education (HE) environment and is generally used unproblematically in both policy and institutional discourse. A Google search of this term returned nearly 20 million hits with a multitude of ‘widening participation’ units, departments and programs across HE providers both within Australia and beyond. However, the unproblematic use of this term is questionable as it is neither politically neutral nor unambiguous in intent. This brief ‘think piece’ will critically consider the concept of ‘widening participation’ by situating it politically, socially and also, in relation to dominant knowledge constructions. The aim of this piece is to foreground some of the more contentious and ambiguous nuances of this term in order to better consider equity in, through and beyond HE.

Applications of the term ‘widening participation’ evoke both positive and negative reactions amongst different sections of the educational community. This is a complex phenomenon that combines social justice imperatives with economic and human capital framings (Walker, 2008; Stevenson, Clegg & Lefever, 2010). The resulting ambiguity means that efforts to widen participation are simultaneously applauded for attempting to ‘open up’ universities but equally seen as pushing a neo-liberal agenda that essentially valorises the entrepreneurial, self-sustaining worker responsible for the self (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth & Rose, 2013). A continual perpetuation of an open or widened participatory program essentially fails to recognise how ‘individual “choices” are not entirely free and not everyone can make “rational” choices in the (higher education) marketplace’ (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006, p.37). Failing to recognise how individuals are constrained by the material, as well as the social and cultural, results in a situation where limitations around choices and opportunities remain hidden or unrecognised.

By positioning access to university as an unproblematic opportunity to achieve social mobility, the responsibility for achieving this mobility is placed solely on the shoulders of the individual. The only qualification for success becomes wholly marked by the concept of ‘hard work’ and aspiration. But this is a deeply flawed and partial perspective; valorising the individual or the ‘independent learner’ ultimately serves to remove learning from the more ‘embodied’ and ‘passionate’ realms. This creates an environment which engenders a sense of detachment and isolation (Leathwood, 2006, p.629) perpetuating a ‘masculinist myth’ (p. 630) that is based upon the ideal of a self that is not distracted or defined by ‘domestic responsibilities, poverty or self-doubt’ (Leathwood, 2006, p.615).

To provide an alternative framing, Burke and Crozier (2013) advocate the use of ‘reflexivity’ to foreground the ‘subtle ways that some identities, experiences, forms of knowledge and values are privileged’ (p.15). Within the HE equity field, this process is underpinned by the use of a praxis-based framework (Burke, 2002) that engages in ‘critical dialogue’ to question and reframe dominant perceptions of HE in order to ‘inspire a reimagining of equity and widening participation’ (Burke, 2018, p.17). Such a reimagining is defined through richly ‘reflexive’ conversations between the various actors within the widening participation and equity fields. Through the creation of ‘communities of praxis’ (Burke, 2018, p.17), students, equity practitioners and academics are encouraged to reflexively consider the felt reality of such constructs; this relational approach creates spaces for productive discourse that legitimises alternative, but equally valid, perspectives on widening participation.

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The HE sector is a highly complex and differentiated one, characterised by individual participants encountering and negotiating different levels and types of opportunities and choices. While widening participation appears to work within an equity context it can sometimes slip unnecessarily into unhelpful discourses that validate those individuals who while poor or disadvantaged are also regarded as 'deserving' in their quest for additional learning. Situated within a meritocratic system, the widening participation agenda also runs the risks of being solely constructed as rewarding those that raise their aspirations and demonstrate they are deserving of this opportunity. Based on this understanding, perhaps those of us who work within the widening participation field need to deliberately and purposefully reject this positionality, however unintentional it might be, and instead recognise the opportunities offered by access to HE in more relational and fluid terms. Adopting a praxis-based framework (Burke, 2002) offers an opportunity to foreground marginalised or 'hidden' knowledges, a shift that enables alternative but equally legitimate perspectives to underpin all widening participation agendas.

## References

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