

Challenging Curriculum: exploring access and equity within doctoral education and academic profession learning (0122)

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Context and Focus

This paper reports on an international collaborative research project funded by the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN). The project focus is on the access and equity agenda within higher education and looks at the different policy contexts of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK. This paper will focus predominantly on the UK context but it will also reflect on differences and similarities across these varied national contexts. Much of the recent policy on access and equity in all four countries has been at the undergraduate level and the means to ensure greater participation and success in higher education for people from historically under-represented groups. In the UK context, these groups include; black minority ethnic (BME), asylum seekers/refugees, disabled learners, looked after children, those from lower socio-economic classes (SEC), those from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN), parents/carers of potential students, those in workplace or work-based learning (McCaig, 2014). Underlying the policy and discourse around access and equity has been an emphasis on indicators to measure the enrolment, retention, progression and completion of these under-represented groups, particularly from those within lower socio-economic classes (SEC). However, Gale (2014) has argued that the tendency up until recently has been “to see equity in terms of just access, rather than to consider what is being accessed” (p.15). A challenge, therefore, to the concepts of access and equity, is to consider the place of curriculum and, in particular, how its design recognises and challenges dominant knowledge forms – what ‘is being accessed’- thus creating space to address different value systems. Understandings of different value systems and the knowledge(s) that are dominant in disciplines, are, we argue, crucial, not only in ensuring that issues of access and equity are foregrounded in higher education curricula but also in developing engaged citizens. The aim of this project, furthermore, is to explore the concepts of access and equity in relation to curriculum in two different and under-represented domains, namely doctoral education and academic professional learning. This project’s focus on access and equity within these two specific ‘curriculum domains’ poses the question of what ‘curriculum’ might mean in these contexts since the notion that these two contexts for learning (the doctorate, and academics’ professional learning) might even be considered through a ‘curriculum’ lens, is still relatively unexplored. The guiding research questions for the project are;

1. How is curriculum conceptualized in doctoral education and academics’ professional learning?

2. What understandings of access and equity are driving decisions about higher education curriculum in doctoral education, and academics' professional learning?
3. How do people involved in shaping doctoral education, and academic professional learning contexts understand themselves and others in relation to access and equity?

In terms of the theme of the conference on converging concepts in higher education research at local, national and international level, this paper raises questions and problematises the concept of *curriculum* in higher education and particularly curriculum in the areas of doctoral education and academic professional learning. We examine the relationship between curriculum and concepts of *access* and *equity* and meanings of this relationship in different locations and different national contexts.

Methodological Approach

The research undertaken for this project involves an exploratory qualitative study of academics and doctoral researchers at one UK institution. Individual in-depth interviews will be conducted with a sample of 6 early career academics enrolled on a professional programme plus the Programme Director and Tutor(s). This will enable us to explore the perceptions and experiences of academics engaged in a 'formal' aspect of the 'curriculum' within the university in relation to requirements for their mandatory professional development. The focus will be on the extent to which the ideas of access and equity in higher education are included and explored and potentially problematised within this learning domain. It is likely that the academics will come from a range of disciplines from across the university. Documents relating to the programme will also be analysed in order to establish how the content of the curriculum is formed and where specific questions of access and equity might be raised.

The second part of the study will involve one or two focus groups with doctoral researchers in the social sciences and explore their experiences and perceptions of access and equity through their participation in various aspects of the formal (in terms of their Doctoral Programme) and more informal 'curriculum', namely their participation in optional courses relating to continuing professional development in teaching. The rationale for choosing doctoral researchers from within one Faculty is that they will follow similar trajectories in terms of the formal curriculum, although their participation in wider optional courses may be quite different.

Thematic analysis will be utilized to explore the data and participants may also be asked to consider critical incidents that may have influenced their experiences and perceptions of questions relating to access and equity. Ethical considerations are very important in this study and although ethical approval has been sought, issues such as informed consent and confidentiality as well as dynamics of power relations need to be re-visited throughout the project.

Anticipated Outcomes

The paper will report on the findings from the project, which is intended to be exploratory in order to better understand individual participant's experiences within a relatively under-researched area. It is anticipated that new insights will be gleaned about the particular challenges of curriculum and how it is developed within these two domains and in what ways this might relate to the complex issues of access and equity and the ways in which participants make meaning of these ideas in relation to their own practice.

References

Gale, T. (2014). Reimagining student equity and aspiration in a global higher education field. In H. Zhang., P.W.K Chan & C. Boyle (Eds.), *Equality in Education: fairness and inclusion* (p. 9-22). Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

McCaig, C. (2014): The retreat from widening participation? The National Scholarship Programme and new access agreements in English higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*