Developing a new theorisation of 'success' in widening participation (0312)

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Abstract

This paper will draw on the findings of an SRHE-supported project examining the conceptualisation of 'success' within widening participation in England. Past and current managers within the sector have provided their perspectives on the features that underpin effectiveness and the methods by which this can be measured or codified. These data show a degree of change over time, as well as conflicting contemporary approaches and paradigms, especially in response to the prevailing 'what works' agenda within education.

The paper will go on to present a new theoretical framework for understanding widening participation activity that moves beyond the discourses about 'aspiration deficits' that have tended to dominate across the last two decades. Instead it will prioritise the role of higher education institutions in challenging the accumulated educational disadvantage which underpins the stark and persistent inequalities in progression to university.

Paper

Despite 15 years of government policy attention, the social mix within UK higher education remains strongly divided, both in comparison to the general population and between individual universities. Young people from the poorest households are still significantly less likely to enter higher education than those from more affluent backgrounds, as well as being under-represented in elite universities.

National data does show some modest improvement in recent years, with the proportion of young people receiving free school meals going on to university rising from 13 percent to 21 percent (BIS 2014). However, this growth has been heavily concentrated in lower status universities and in London (Croxford and Raffe in press). The main driver for this growth appears to have been a rapid improvement in Key Stage 4 attainment in the late 2000s, with more young people progressing into qualifications that ultimately provide opportunities for entry to higher education. Indeed, the proportion of young people with Level 3 qualifications progressing to university is quite similar between different social groups (Coleman and Bekhradnia 2011).

Meanwhile, within the sector, the social mix between universities remains as divided as ever – and potentially slightly more so. Most elite universities have seen their intake from deprived areas fall over the last ten years, with the 'fair access' agenda failing to have an impact (Boliver 2013). Increasingly, the end of the national Aimhigher programme in 2011 has seen universities retrench into competition for small numbers of high-achieving young people from low income backgrounds in order to fulfil their obligations under the Access Agreements made with the Office for Fair Access (McCaig in press).

In this context, the very idea of widening participation needs critical re-examination. What has been a major undertaking for universities and governments since the early 2000s has actually shown relatively little return-on-investment in terms of the social mix revealed in national figures, especially with respect to elite universities. Practitioners working on

widening participation show a strong values-based commitment to the activities they provide, yet ideas of 'what works' remain ill-defined.

This paper will report the findings of the SRHE-supported *'Assessing impact and measuring success in widening participation initiatives'* project. The project has collected data from ten former senior managers of Aimhigher, 57 current university directors of widening participation and an expert panel of policymakers, practitioners and academics. The primary focus has been on the idea of 'success' in widening participation work and, in particular, what activities and conditions underpin success and how that success is (and should be) measured.

At the time of writing this proposal, the final analysis and theory development is ongoing. The paper will seek to achieve two specific aims. Firstly, it will introduce four themes that emerge strongly from the data:

1. **Partnership, collaboration and competition.** The end of Aimhigher in 2011 has seen a clear shift away from the horizontal and vertical partnerships that were a prominent feature of the early years of widening participation. Even though these were often imperfect and pragmatic in nature, they were felt to promote a shared enterprise and provide a framework for collaboration and effort-sharing. Current managers are more likely to conceptualise their activities in terms of recruitment targets rather than social change, sometimes leading to duplication of effort and aggressive competition for high-achieving individuals.

2. **Deadweight, leakage and targeting.** Despite significant attention over the course of the last decade, issues remain about the effective targeting of individuals. Managers have defaulted into using proxies about which they have concerns, while around one-third lack confidence in the ability or willingness of schools to identify appropriate individuals for interventions. As a result, an unknown (but potentially very high) proportion of activities actually engage with young people already safely on the conveyor belt to higher education, although they may not know it at the time. This 'deadweight' is inefficient, while a 'leakage' of resources inadvertently finding their way to relatively advantaged individuals acts to reinforce inequalities rather than disrupting them.

3. **Over-focus on aspirations.** With a few notable exceptions, managers reported focusing on providing activities that were designed to demystify and raise aspirations for higher education. Few reported working with schools on improving attainment. Some explicitly saw this as being out-of-scope for their institution while most of the remainder felt that success had been muted; career-focused activities were also relatively uncommon. However, with the vast majority of inequality in university admissions being formed in the earlier stages of the educational system (Chowdry et al 2008), so the importance of aspiration-raising may be over-stated.

4. **Monitoring, evaluation and proof.** The data suggest that consensus on establishing which widening participation activities are successful is still elusive. There is evidence for the conflation of monitoring and evaluation and simplistic conceptualisations of proof for effectiveness. This may be driven, in part, by pressure from government to establish value-for-money metrics and a more general paradigm shift toward reductivist approaches. There were dissenting voices who were more tolerant of the messy and non-linear nature of changing attitudes and behaviours among young people.

Secondly, it will construct a new theoretical model for understanding widening participation that moves beyond the traditional 'aspiration deficit' model that has tended to dominate public discourse and practice for the last decade. This will seek to refocus understandings of widening participation away from strategies to increase the proportion of qualified individuals demanding higher education and towards increasing the size of this pool of potential students. It will contextualise this within the ingrained educational disadvantage that accumulates early within young people's lives and the role of local labour markets in constructing perceptions of appropriate life choices. It will aim to provide practical suggestions for how universities can enhance both their portfolios of activities, as well as the evaluative work to support their effectiveness.

References

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