Theory, Evaluation and Practice in Widening Participation: Presenting a new framework to evaluate WP interventions (0320)

Annette Hayton, Andrew Bengry Howell
University of Bath, UK

This paper explores the development and application of a framework for evaluating and researching university-based widening participation interventions. Drawing on the theoretical work of Bourdieu, it provides a basis for designing interventions to develop social and academic capital which foster a sense of belonging in the Higher Education (HE) environment. It actively rejects a 'deficit' model to explain low participation and attainment, recognising the need for change within HE as well as the need to develop student capacity. Based on a structure of broad aims and learning outcomes it is accessible to practitioners and non-specialists alike, enabling them to think strategically about interventions, encouraging reflexivity among university staff engaged in widening participation activities, and rationalising evaluation processes to improve the quality of data and demonstrate impact.

As the demand for more rigorous evaluation of the impact of widening participation gathers momentum we need to ensure that it is informed by academic research and is not reduced to a management information exercise. In turn, academic research, both qualitative and quantitative, should not be confined to describing the problems but should start contributing to solutions. (Whitty, Hayton and Tang, 2015)

The need to develop effective frameworks for evaluating Widening Participation (WP) interventions is widely recognised, but it is less clear how to underpin these frameworks theoretically to provide an effective mechanism for designing interventions and demonstrating their impact. Gorard and Smith (2006) famously criticised Aimhigher for lack of rigour in evaluation of WP outreach activities, claiming it was impossible to demonstrate any impact at all on increasing progression from under-represented groups. His conclusions jarred with the perceptions of many but his criticisms can still be levelled at interventions being developed and delivered within this field. Moreover, because many interventions aren't overtly underpinned by theory there can appear to be little rationale for their design or delivery and understanding of how they could widen participation in Higher Education.

The WP Evaluation Framework designed and implemented within an HEI context is firmly grounded in the need to utilise theoretical understandings about widening participation to inform practice and indicators of impact against which interventions are assessed and evaluated. It brings together three previously disconnected areas in this field: theoretical perspectives and related academic research; external monitoring requirements; and effectiveness of institutional or collaborative interventions. The framework has been created by integrating a top-down theoretical analysis of the aims of the University WP intervention programme, and a bottom-up analysis of how the design and delivery of activities and events meet specific objectives, in terms of the realisation of these broader aims.

Theoretically the framework is underpinned by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and his notions of capital and habitus. Bourdieu constitutes capitals in terms of a system of differences in status and power within an unequal social system. Drawing specifically on his exposition of how capitals operate in relation to education, Bourdieu makes a distinction between

intellectual capital (subject expertise), academic capital (understanding of rules and customs within the academy) and social capital (social connections). Whitty, Hayton and Tang (2015). At the same time the framework recognises the responsibility of HE institutions (HEIs) to develop and offer 'enabling' interventions which encourage institutional reflexivity and do not focus solely on the personal changes required by participants.

Social and academic capital
Although many students from lower socioeconomic groups have aspirations to progress to HE they can 'have less developed capacities to realise them' (Bok, 2010: 176); are unable to access "hot" knowledge from within their social networks (Whitty et al., 2015:44); and lack 'navigational capacities' (Appadurai, 2004).These understandings have informed development of our *progression curriculum*, (Paczuska, 2002) which addresses the first two aims in the framework:

> (*1) 'Develop students' knowledge and awareness of the benefits of higher education and graduate employment*.'
> (2) *'Develop students' capacity to navigate Higher Education and graduate employment sectors and make informed choices.'*

The next strand of the framework is concerned with *student identity* and the experience of HE.. It is theoretically underpinned by Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and informed by research investigating how sociocultural factors shape perspectives and student experience (e.g. Archer et al., 2013; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Reay et al., 2009). Bourdieu's concept of habitus can encapsulate the way in which cultural experience and background shape individual dispositions, capacities and practices whilst recognising the capacity for change and transformation. The inclusion of 'developing resilience' in our aims for was highly significant as it provides a method for recognising the additional challenges that often face students from under-represented groups in accessing and experiencing what can be perceived as the alien environment of HE. In terms of identity and habitus our interventions aim to support students in finding and inhabiting a 'third space' (Ingram and Abrahams, 2013) rather than expecting them to adopt the cultural values and attitudes of the academy. Its inclusion also opens a space for institutional reflection and discussion to challenge normative views and attitudes. As a result our third aim is to:

> (3) *'Develop students' confidence and resilience to negotiate the challenge of university life and graduate progression.'*

Our fourth aim is concerned with skills development and builds on Bourdieu's taxonomy through the notion of 'Educational Capital' which we formulate as:

> (4) *'Develop students' study skills and capacity for academic attainment and successful graduate progression.'*

The final strand of the framework is related to the *knowledge curriculum,* and is concerned with developing students 'Intellectual Capital' through the extension and contextualisation of subject knowledge:

> (5) *'Develop students' understanding by contextualising subject knowledge.'*

The evaluation framework enables a more strategic approach to the planning, delivery and evaluation of WP interventions and provides a basis for clear objectives for interventions at five levels, corresponding with students' academic journey. It also provides a rich source of

data to inform practice; develop institutional reflexivity; improve monitoring and contribute to theoretical understandings within the field.

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