

Learning and Not Learning from policy and practice: widening participation and organisational learning (0311)

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Summary

We are interested in how the discourse, policy and practice of WP is learnt or *not* learnt within different institutions. A two-stage mixed methods appreciative inquiry is used to elicit current discourses on WP. By exploring WP from the perspective of organisational learning – how institutions gain, retain and share knowledge for access and equity – a complex picture of institutional dynamics, associated with power, freedom and control, emerges. We contend that policy and research on WP occupies a troubling position within higher education (HE) and that by illuminating the nature of organisational learning for WP, we can build more targeted values-led performative strategies for achieving greater access, equity and social capital within institutions and across the sector.

Background

Universities and colleges in England invest millions of pounds each year to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in HE. Despite this investment, persistently stubborn gaps remain in participation and attainment rates for some groups. Recent UCAS (2015) data showed only 3% of disadvantaged 18 year olds entering highly selective universities, compared to 21% of those from the most advantaged backgrounds. Further, we see a widening gap between entry rates for men and women with young men, especially white men, falling further behind (BIS 2015, 2016; UCAS 2014, 2015). It seems unlikely that the sector will meet government goals for WP by 2020 (Mian and Richards, 2016). How are institutions responding to, and learning from, these challenges?

WP discourse has been critiqued as a manifestation of neoliberal power, enacted in institutional policy documents like access agreements (Bowl and Hughes, 2013; 2016; McCaig, 2015; Rainford, 2016). We suggest institutional power has a propensity for morphostasis (Archer 2000), *not-learning* from its experiences, research, students and staff. Building on Wardrop *et al.* (2016) where research was argued to occupy a troubling position for institutional policy, we suggest the role of WP across institutions operates in a similarly troubling way – both agitating and agitated by the very real dynamics of power, control and freedom occurring in the 21st century HEI. The context for translation and enactment of policy is complex and multi-faceted with inequities persisting despite collective investment across the sector. At a time of significant change for the sector, when the regulation of WP is set to change, it is timely for all those working in the field to critically reflect on the dynamics of WP and organisational learning within their institutional settings.

Methodology

Organisational learning for WP offers a fruitful focus because it has not been investigated within UK HE. Conceiving of WP as a field for investigation opens a discourse for examining *both* its relationship to maintaining the power of the institution *and* its capacity to empower the institution to transform itself. Moreover, making sense of WP through the lens of organisational learning situates this study within HE research which seeks to critically reflect on the capacity of diversifying institutions to re-work stultifying hegemonies (Ahmed 2012, Burke 2012, Jackson 2015) and question the dominance of “what works” approaches to research and evidence (Lingenfelter 2015).

A two-stage mixed methods appreciative inquiry is used to elicit current discourses on WP. Results from an online survey of HEIs will identify how knowledge about WP is gained, retained and shared. This is complemented by four case studies investigating WP policy and practice in post-1992 and Russell Group universities based on interviews and focus groups with academics and practitioners supplemented by documentary analysis of institutional policies. Thick descriptions of how WP is learnt provide situated narratives in a wider theoretical context, accounting for how WP contributes to institutional performance and power (Ahmed 2012; Burke 2012, Jackson 2015, McCaig 2015, Stevenson et al. 2010).

Illuminating learning and not learning for values-led performativity

Argyris and Schön (1978) identified two distinct kinds of learning associated with organisational learning, *single-* and *double-loop learning*. *Single-loop learning* describes where something is not working and individuals and organisations alter the approach through action without changing their underlying assumptions and values; by contrast, *double-loop learning* is where underlying assumptions and values are called into question such that norms, policies and objectives are challenged and modified (Argyris and Schön 1978: 2-3). But policy implementation and working practices are more complicated when change is experienced by different stakeholders in different ways. Evans extends Argyris and Schon’s approach to encompass different layers in policy implementation (2003). Where Evans identifies *policy as espoused* and *policy as enacted*, she also highlights *policy as experienced*, supporting the quest to “get inside policy as it is experienced and valued by individuals trying to navigate the system” (2003: 419).

The significance of understanding organisational learning for WP is captured in Ahmed’s (2005; 2012) critiques of diversity. HEIs can be seen as ‘diversity-led’ simply because they have many students representing ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic backgrounds. This enables presentation of organisational self as ‘being diverse’ without having to do anything. Ahmed developed the language of performativity with the concept of ‘non-performative speech acts’. These work precisely by *not* bringing about the effects they name or the change they purport. Being seen to be diverse could simply mean such organisations need not commit to ‘doing diversity’ or provide a reflexive mirror for Foucault’s ‘panopticon’ as a metaphor for institutional self-discipline or surveillance.

Institutional strategies directed at issues of equality and diversity are profound locales for non-performativity. In this reformulation, texts, whether policy, legislation, or strategy, will not *initiate action* where conditions to support their enactment have

not yet been realised and a change of behaviour need not be transformative. Ahmed's work is not cynical but rather reminds all who work to develop, inform, and realise institutional policies *must* pay attention to what is not working; to the *gap* between what is being said and what is being done.

Implications

We contend that policy and research on WP occupies a troubling position within HE. By illuminating the nature of organisational learning for WP, we can build more targeted values-led performative strategies for achieving greater access, equity and social capital within institutions and across the sector.

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