

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0338

L2 | Beaumaris 1

Chaired by Rachel Spacey

Thu 12 Dec 2019

14:15 - 14:45

Widening participation in England: policy phases from 'diversity as a good' to 'competitive differentiation'

Colin McCaig¹

¹*Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract: This paper is derived from a critical policy discourse analysis (PDA) (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013) of sixteen policy documents covering a thirty-year period (1986-2016) that identified five distinct stages in the development of the marketised English HE sector. It takes as its focus the changing role of widening participation policy (WP) as envisioned, rationalised and justified by government policymakers over time, and locates this uneven development throughout various stage from 'diversity as a good' (Stage 2) in the 1990s to WP's role in the 'competitive differentiation' of HE (Stage 3 & 4) and into the new regime of 'risk and exit' (Stage 5). PDA is employed to analyse use of argumentation in policy documents that may not share the same context, but that change the frame of reference and often employ change discourses of persuasion, for example as in changing arguments to justify marketisation of HE system. The paper traces these discourse shifts as they impact WP policy over time.

Fairclough, I and Fairclough, N (2013) Political Discourse Analysis: A Method for Advanced Students. Routledge, London

Paper: The development of English HE can be categorised as developing over 5 distinct stages covering a 30 year period (1986-2017) (McCaig 2018). This paper focuses on policies concerned with equality of access for under-represented groups:

- ***stage 1 efficiency, accountability and human capital (1986-1992)***

This stage was exemplified by reforms that aimed to make the existing binary HE system more responsive to the needs of the economy and help develop the nation's human capital. The context was set by wider policy aims: the system would be expanded (necessarily widening the social base of entrants to HE) and unified (the purpose of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act was to end

the binary divide) in the hope that institutional competition would ensue, the better to meet the changing basis of demand for human capital in the knowledge economy of the future. This stage simultaneously enhanced autonomy (especially for the former polytechnics, locus of much widening participation activity) but also led to the centralisation of the system around national economic imperatives.

- ***stage 2 diversity as a good (1992-2000)***

Having created a competitive environment and overseen a huge expansion in student numbers (the Age Participation Ratio doubled between 1988 and 1992 when funding-per-student costs were drastically reduced) the new Higher Education Funding Council for England published two major statements (HEFCE 1994; 2000) that celebrated and encouraged diversity and the prospects for widening participation. The new landscape of different types of institutions and modes of HE were seen as essential for expansion and lifelong learning needs, as well as 'good' in itself. While the discourse of stage 2 shifted radically in some ways from stage 1, human capital needs were still to the fore; as important as social justice arguments when it came to arguing for a widening of participation. The Dearing Review (1996-97) was the key locus of policy in this period, straddling an outgoing Conservative government that recognised that a new way had to be found to fund expansion and an incoming Labour government wedded to social justice objectives and lifelong learning.

- ***stage 3 diversity becomes differentiation (2003-2010)***

The major policy statements covered in this stage - the 2003 White Paper, the 2004 HE Act, and the 2009 White Paper - introduced new arguments to foster differentiation in the system that impacted widening participation policy. Diversity would no longer be celebrated for its own sake, HEIs were now exhorted to differentiate their offer in the marketplace to attract applicant-consumers. Responding to institutional lobbying for more funding government introduced a variable tuition fee, on the assumption that only the most 'prestigious' highly-demanded universities would justify the higher fee of £3,000 per annum. An Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established to regulate activity designed to enhance and protect access, including mandatory bursaries for those from the poorest backgrounds that might otherwise be deterred by variable fees. The introduction of variable fees reinforced the notion that HE was becoming like any other market, leading as it did to calls for ever more consumer information for applicants; at the same time, government continued to prioritise WP (in the name of human capital needs of the economy) and thus needed the whole sector to buy into the enterprise. Greater centralisation, in the form of requirements that institutions submit access agreements including how they were actioning them, became the regulatory framing for the market encouraged by variable fees.

- ***stage 4 competitive differentiation (2010-15)***

This stage can be seen mainly as the continuation, even fulfilment, of the implications of the previous stage; the arguments deployed in the Browne Review of student finance (2010) and the 2011 White Paper *Students at the heart of the system* and accompanying (BIS 2011) OFFA guidance (OFFA 2012) which shifted the emphasis away from simply widening participation through outreach and bursaries. Now access agreements were required to ensure that such WP students were retained on their courses and had successful outcomes as a result of their studies (OFFA 2012). The 2011 White Paper was largely concerned with creating mechanisms (student number controls and encouragement of

new cheaper providers) that would incentivise the opening up of a fee distribution, and with the provision of still more applicant information.

stage 5: risk and exit

The fifth and latest stage not only consisted of the legislation required to make the competitive market reforms of stages 3 and 4 finally possible (the HERA 2017), it also introduced a much stronger regulatory regime (Office for Students, OfS) based on two new sets of metrics by which institutions could be ranked in relation to their 'risk' of failure. Firstly the Teaching Excellence Framework introduced a measure of apparent teaching quality; secondly, new Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data (based on graduates' tax receipts) provided a 'value for money' measure so that applicants could judge which institutions and programmes would prove the most remunerative. Discursively, the Act shifted the responsibility for the size of their repayment portfolio onto applicants, expected to shop around for appropriate value, thus leading to legitimate fears that students with lower entry qualifications (more likely to come from poorer households and some BAME groups) would be expected to attend newer, lower-cost (and less transformative) higher education opportunities.

Discussion

This final stage of the marketisation process is clearly designed to meet the economic need to lower the average tuition fee across the system by pressurising existing providers to lower their fees or lose market share to cheaper alternatives. This could mean that the market fails to adequately match supply and demand, equalise opportunities for all or even satisfy the labour market's demands for more highly skilled labour across the economy. The clear signalling of HERA and statements from the OfS suggest that WP students that come to market without sufficient credentials to enter more prestigious HE providers will be expected to accumulate in either lower profile providers (including FE and other alternative providers) or undertake other routes, e.g. apprenticeships.

References

DBIS (2011) *Students at the Heart of the System*, Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, By Command of Her Majesty, June 2011. CM8122 Crown copyright 2011

DBIS (2016, May). *Success as a knowledge economy: Teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*. White Paper, Cmnd 9258.

Fairclough, I and Fairclough, N (2013) *Political Discourse Analysis: A Method for Advanced Students*. Routledge, London

HEFCE (1994) *Overview of Recent Developments in HE* Bristol: HEFCE.

HEFCE (2000) *Diversity in higher education: HEFCE policy statement*, Bristol, HEFCE 2000/33

HEFCE (2009) *Higher Education in England: Achievements, challenges and prospects*, Bristol, HEFCE 2009

McCaig, C (2018) *The marketisation of English Higher Education: a policy analysis of a risk-based*

system, Emerald Publishing ISBN: 9781787438576

NCIHE (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society (The 'Dearing Report')*, London: HMSO