

Widening Participation in an evolving differentiated market: a policy analysis

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper uses a policy analysis approach (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013) to explore developments in widening participation (WP) policy in the English HE system since 1997, in the context of system marketisation (McCaig 2018). Situating WP as a natural corollary of system expansion (dating from the Robbins report of 1963) and a developing process of marketisation of the English system since 1986, this analysis traces the entanglement of dual social justice and economic 'human capital' imperatives in policy discourse. Alongside increasing concerns about the costs of a demand-led market, particularly after the removal of number caps in 2015/16, the HE system has been subject to growing regulatory oversight since the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) and the establishment of the Office for Students (OfS), and higher-level policy concerns have switched away from widening participation for all, bringing the choice-driven market back into question.

Full paper

This paper uses a policy analysis approach (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013) to explore developments in widening participation (WP) policy in the English HE system since 1997, in the context of system marketisation (McCaig 2018). Widening participation has increasingly become part of the normal 'business' of higher education (HE) providers during the last 25 years. WP entered the policy

mainstream for the entire English HE sector following the Dearing Review (NCIHE, 1997) and the election of a new Labour government with an overt social justice agenda but also concerned with 'lifelong learning' in the name of human capital growth. As such, WP policy in England can be seen as inherently tied up in the global, neoliberal development of HE systems, which that this plays out very differently according to the historical development of national systems (Bowl, in Bowl et al., 2018). This paper outlines to the specifically English market context, reflecting the presence of certain unique characteristics that impact WP policy and practice: the historical rationing of HE places; the legal autonomy of institutions, free from state control (but subject to increasing regulation for their undergraduate provision); the presence of an established prestige hierarchy; relatively high tuition fees; and successive governments wedded to market solutions and system expansion.

In the United Kingdom and later, post-devolution, England, access to HE has been traditionally rationed by social class (Archer, 2003; Reay et al., 2005). Given the predominant 'personality development' residential model of university attendance in the United Kingdom (Gellert, 1991), access to HE was effectively restricted to those families with the ability to (financially and culturally) support their offspring living away from home for several months at a time. The challenge, then, became how to expand from such a rationed system to a system that could incorporate (and serve the needs of) 'nontraditional students' in ever-increasing numbers?

Part of the response was to create a market in HE, offering both choice to the potential student and competition between providers for student numbers. Conservative governments of the 1980s encouraged the use of market principles for the allocation of public resources in the name of greater accountability and efficiency in state-funded services. This was an example of New Public Management theory in practice (the use of private sector practices in the public sector of the economy, Hood, 1995) in the name of national economic competitiveness, employing 'human capital' economic theories to counter emerging globalisation, something that

can be traced back at least to the Robbins (HM Government, 1963). These manifestations implied a need for governments to centralise powers over the education system, first in order to reduce the amount of inter-party political dispute about the means and ends of the system. The public sector of HE, formally established from 1965 (the Polytechnics, HE institutions without their own degree-awarding powers and Colleges of HE), was controlled by local authorities (LAs) with their own political agendas, and second to maximise economic outcomes in the face of international competition. As marketisation has evolved in stages, culminating in the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act (McCaig 2018), the English system is characterised by competitive differentiation as each HE provider (now 419 registered with the Office for Students, 183 of which use University in their title) takes its own approach in relation to access and participation, albeit there is mandatory collaborative support for access in acknowledgement of 'market failure'.

The introduction of tuition fees, first through the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, and then further 'top-up' fees in the Higher Education Act 2004 (to a maximum of £3,000 per year, followed by another trebling of fees to £9,000 from 2012/13), was a factor in focusing attention on the point of entry to higher education and on the role of all institutions in widening participation. Once students were framed as consumers and beneficiaries of HE, a focus on their ability to exercise choice within the system and to receive fair benefits from participation became crucial parts of the justification of fees. Henceforth, the emphasis of WP policy focused on ensuring non-discriminatory 'fair access' for the brightest of the disadvantaged, with new or alternative HE providers expected to offer WP opportunities for the least qualified. However, with increased pressure on the financing of the HE system in recent years (Augar Review, 2019; DLUHC 2022; Donelan 2022) policy began to reflect government's increasing antipathy to expansion (at degree level) and widening participation for its own sake, to the extent that the 2017 market regime based on choice appeared less coherent.

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