

# **Strategic Management of Widening Participation: Institutional Distinction and Vocational Entry Routes to Higher (0262)**

**Webb Sue** <sup>1</sup>, **Simon Warren** <sup>2</sup>, <sup>1</sup>*Monash University, Melbourne, Australia,* <sup>2</sup>*University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom*

## **Introduction**

Statements from both David Willetts and Vince Cable suggest that, although the structure and funding of higher education (HE) may change, widening participation (WP) is likely to remain a feature of English HE. Assessing the strategic management and experience of recent initiatives is timely. This paper focuses on the use of vocational qualification routes and Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) as mechanisms for accessing HE, specifically research intensive, selecting universities. It draws on empirical research in one research intensive higher education institution (HEI) to examine the tension between WP and the strategic management of institutional distinction in a stratified mass HE system. Our findings show that in the context of both national and global competitive pressures the institution's core mission modifies and shapes the nature of WP activities and largely determines institutional learning cultures and student's experience.

The paper begins by acknowledging recent literature about vocational entry into and through HE that highlights enduring patterns of social class entry and progression, despite the policy focus of WP and the policy narrative attached to LLNs. Secondly, we outline the empirical study and the theoretical stance taken in the research. Finally we discuss key findings from the study that lead us to raise questions about the capacity of this type of national policy to effect structural change.

## **Context**

Although there is an extensive literature about WP and non-traditional entry into HE, there has been relatively little work that has focused on vocational entry routes into and through HE. Recently studies, such as Hoelscher et al. (2008) and Foster (2009), have attempted to address this gap, examining the patterns of entry and progression by qualification route and the student experience. Based on an analysis of HESA and UCAS data for 2003/4 and 2006/7 respectively, the researchers concluded that those entering HE through alternative (e.g. vocational qualification) routes tended to go to the less prestigious institutions (see also Connor & Little, 2007; Crozier et al., 2008). Although LLNs were introduced as mechanisms in 2004 for the development of pathways into HE based on local collaboration between further education colleges and HEIs (HEFCE, 2004) and to require the more selecting universities to share the responsibility of WP, it appears that differential entry into HE remains largely unaltered. Therefore, it is important to examine how selective institutions respond to the WP agenda.

## **Theoretical approach**

We draw upon an empirical study of one research intensive HEI and its strategic management of vocational entry routes into and through HE. The study adopted Bourdieu's three-level analysis (Grenfell & James, 2004), in particular Warren and Webb's (2007) 'recursive methodology'. The study has two components – student and institution focused work.

#### *Student-level work*

This comprised:

- Analysis of admissions data
- Survey of vocational qualification route students in two Faculties
- In-depth qualitative interviewing with a sub-sample of students

#### *Institutional-level work*

We applied the concepts of 'economies of performance' and 'ecologies of practice' as heuristic devices to organise our fieldwork exploring both the extra and inter-personal dimensions of the institutional context (see Coffield, 2008 ; Stronach, 2002). The aim was to focus on those aspects that regulate performance in relation to vocational transitions and towards personal/professional identities and practices, or what elsewhere have been referred to as 'learning cultures' (Colley, 2003; James, 2007), and external environments including wider professional networks, labour markets, and community relations.

### **Discussion**

The case study HEI can be characterised as a 'global university' (Marginson, 2004 & 2006). According to Marginson selecting universities are located within local, national and global competitive markets and are in the business of trading in institutional status. In systems, such as that in England, where revenue via student fees is regulated, relative advantage and institutional distinction is secured through grant capture and research excellence, rather than teaching quality. The case study can be seen as a mid-range elite institution in the sense that it is globally competitive in terms of the national brand (a UK English language university) and its status as a Russell Group university. However, this does not mean it has no local or national commitments (Jones, 2008). The tension between its position as both a global and local institution is found in its key strategic WP statements and activities. While the institution has long established schemes to attract a broader social profile into various professional areas, and runs a wide range of outreach activities, these can be characterised as 'cream skimming' activities targeting the most gifted and talented young people (Adnett & Coates, 2003). The management of bursaries in the access agreement similarly targets non-traditional university entrants with the highest examination grades, mirroring the pattern found in other Russell Group universities (McCaig, 2009). Likewise, admissions criteria seek to give access only to those BTEC entrants scoring at the highest levels.

The tension between the institution's core mission and WP is heightened at the faculty and departmental level. Vocational qualifications route students interface with the institution in two main ways – departmental learning cultures and professional services. Departmental learning cultures appear to be premised on an expectation of A-level entry and the social and cultural capital transmitted by this. As a selecting institution resources are geared towards the selection of 'able' students already socialised into the expectations of HE learning and the recruitment of research active staff. Consequently the students report an experience of learning culture dissonance, taking the form of large student cohorts, an intensification of workload, and a lack of personalised support. Support is either voluntaristic (the student approaches student support services) or responsive. Departments are faced with having to improvise responses to the difficulties faced by students. Many members of academic and professional service staff have demonstrated a commitment to making WP work. But this is conducted in an institutional context where Faculty missions are geared towards ensuring the institution's relative advantage in regional, national and global HE markets. Vocational qualification entry brings high transactional costs. In a political and economic context of heightened competition for places, selecting, research intensive institutions may well question the sustainability of WP activities.

## References

- Adnett, N. & Coates, G. (2003) Encouraging cream-skimming and dreg-siphoning? Increasing competition between English HEIs, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 51(3), pp. 202-218.
- Ball, S.J., Davies, J., David, M. & Reay, D. (2002) 'Classification' and 'Judgement' ; social class and the 'cognitive structures' of choice of Higher Education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(1), pp. 51-72.
- Ball, S.J., Maguire, M. & Macrae, S. (2000) *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16: New youth, new economies in the global city* (London, Routledge Falmer).
- Coffield, F., Edward, S., Finlay, I., Hodgson, A., Spours, K. & Steer, R. (2008) *Improving Learning, Skills and Inclusion: The Impact of Policy on Post-Compulsory Education* (London, Routledge).
- Colley, H., James, D., Tedder, M. & Diment, K. (2003) Learning as Becoming in Vocational Education and Training: class, gender and the role of vocational habitus, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 55(4), 471-497.
- Connor, H., & Little, B., (2007) When will diversity of higher education mean diversity of entry routes for young people? *Journal of Access Policy & Practice*, 4(2), pp.134-156
- Crozier, G., Reay, D., Clayton, J., Colliander, L. & Grinstead, J. (2008) Different strokes for different folks: diverse students in diverse institutions - experiences of higher education *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), pp. 167- 177.
- Foster, T. (2009) *Alternative Routes into and Pathways through Higher Education* (London, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills).
- Grenfell, M. & James, D. (2004) Change in the field - changing the field: Bourdieu and the methodological practice of educational research, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4).

- HEFCE (2004) *'Lifelong Learning Networks'* (Joint letter from HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council). HEFCE circular letter 12/2004, dated 3 June 2004.  
[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/ciclets/2004/cl12\\_04/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/ciclets/2004/cl12_04/) accessed 23.11.08
- Hoelscher, M., Hayward, G., Ertl, H. & Dunbar-Goddet, H. (2008) The transition from vocational education and training to higher education: a successful pathway?, *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), pp. 139-151.
- James, D. & Biesta, G. (2007) *Improving learning cultures in further education* (London, Routledge).
- Jones, G.A. (2008) Can Provincial Universities be Global Institutions? Rethinking the Institution as the Unit of Analysis in the study of Globalisation and Higher Education, *Higher Education Policy*, 21(4), pp. 457-468.
- Marginson, S. (2004) Competition and Markets in Higher Education: a 'glonacal' analysis, *Policy Futures in Higher Education*, 2(2), pp. 175-244.
- Marginson, S. (2006) Dynamics of national and global competition in higher education, *Higher Education*, 52(1), pp. 1-39.
- McCaig, C. (2009) English Universities, Additional Fee Income and Access Agreements: their impact on widening participation and fair access, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 57(1), pp. 18-36.
- Stronach, I., Corbin, B., McNamara, O., Stark, S. & Warne, T. (2002) Towards an uncertain politics of professionalism: teacher and nurse identities in flux, *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(1), 109-138.
- Warren, S. & Webb, S. (2007) Challenging lifelong learning policy discourse: where is structure in agency in narrative-based research?, *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39(1), pp. 5-21.