What is 'widening access' to higher education in Wales? A review of the approaches adopted by HEIs in Wales to widen access?

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Background

Despite major expansion of higher education (HE) in the UK over recent decades individuals from the least socially advantaged backgrounds continue to enter HE at lower rates than their socially advantaged counterparts (Croll and Attwood, 2013), and when they do, they enter less prestigious HEIs (Ball et al., 2002, Reay et al., 2001; Boliver, 2013). These patterns of inequalities exist in Wales, mirroring their pattern in the wider UK (Rees and Taylor, 2006).

In recognition that these inequalities have implications for social justice and the health of the nation's economy, the Welsh Government has been committed to an agenda for 'widening access' to HE over recent years (Welsh Government, 2009). HEIs in Wales have thus been under pressure to implement strategies aimed at widening participation in HE amongst individuals under-represented in it. This pressure has been exacerbated since the most recent tuition fee hikes in Wales. The paper takes a critical look at how the Welsh Government's 'widening access' agenda is being implemented by individual higher education institutions (HEIs) in Wales, considering to what extent, and how, HEIs are implementing Welsh Government's widening access agenda through direct intervention. This will enable us to speculate its consequences (cf. Bridger et al., 2012) for rates of participation amongst less advantaged social groups. Ultimately, this paper aims to address broader questions about to *whom* and to *what* institutions are widening access, and the implications of these approaches for equality of opportunity.

Methods

The data on which the following discussion is based is derived from a range of sources. Primarily, it comes from semi-structured interviews carried out with 'widening access' practitioners located within HEIs in Wales. It also comes from content analysis of the most recent institutional Fee Plans and widening access strategies produced by HEIs. Analysis of these data sources explored the approaches adopted by HEIs to implementing widening access strategies. Given that further education (FE) colleges also deliver HE opportunities, it was important to include a small amount of interview data with key staff members located in

FE colleges in the analysis, as a way of exploring the role of FEIs within the widening access agenda.

Findings and discussion

Interviews with widening access managers in HEIs in Wales and analysis of widening access documents revealed that HEIs were not homogenous in their approach to and implementation of 'widening access' strategies, and in the form of HE that widening access strategies are targeted at. These differences reflect variations in the ethos, culture and status of HEIs delivering them. The data revealed that the *form* of HE that widening access strategies are directed towards fell into two categories. One of these is a conventional form of HE, namely, under-graduate degree programmes. The other is a non-conventional, more vocational and less academic form of HE (for example, FDs, HNDs, HNC etc). In these cases, widening access was not so much a strategy but a function of this sort of HE curriculum delivery and design.

All HEIs in Wales aimed to widen access to conventional forms of HE but the manner through which they did this varied. While almost all HEIs invested in aspiration raising activities, an approach reminiscent of Jones and Thomas's (2005) 'academic strand,' far fewer directed activities aimed directly at raising levels of GCSE or A-level attainment in young people (to support their progression on to HE). These varied approaches to widening access reflect different understandings of the nature of inequalities in access to HE. A focus on raising aspirations, providing information, advice and guidance and changing 'cultures' of understanding about HE assumes that inequalities in participation can be attributed to differences in aspiration, even after controlling for social class differences in attainment. In contrast, an emphasis on raising levels of educational attainment prior to entry to HE assumes that inequalities in participation reflect variances in educational attainment which predict access to HE (Gorard, 2005; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003).

The paper calls on us to speculate not only the appropriateness and effectiveness of these different approaches to widening access but also to ask questions about which type of HE Welsh Government policies should be aiming to 'widen access' to. Both aspiration-raising

and attainment-raising approaches evoke deficit understanding of individuals as lacking the right kinds of aspirations, educational attainment or both. By implication, this model of widening access does not view the curriculum as problematic, leaving the onus for change on the individual rather than the institution. As such, these approaches are unlikely to stimulate institutional reform which would bring about enduring changes to inequitable patterns of participation. In contrast, where the curriculum functions to widen access to HE (for example, through the delivery of vocational programmes, delivered part-time) it is most likely to widen participation in HE to non-traditional HE students. Yet, the extent to which this strategy of widening access provides entry routes into the sorts of higher education opportunities associated with the most lucrative employment opportunities might be questionable. It remains the case that widening access to high status forms of HE has positive impacts on individuals' life chances given the lucrative labour market rewards associated with obtaining a degree from a high ranking university (Chevelier and Conlon, 2003). The paper therefore addresses broader questions about how far policy makers should centre their attention on improving access to high status forms of higher education, namely at selective institutions, or how far they should be concerned with improving rates of participation in HE amongst under-represented groups, including participation in vocational forms of HE. These questions are central in addressing issues in relation to equality of opportunity and social justice.

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