

Neoliberalism and the drivers of system differentiation: a journey from equality to equity (0098)

Colin McCaig

Sheffield Hallam University, UK

This paper takes as its starting point the notion that the marketisation of HE systems is based on differentiation and that differentiation may be harmful to equity. Differentiation can appear in indicators of cost and value (tuition fee price differential), indicators of quality and prestige (as portrayed in league table rankings based on entry requirements, satisfaction of students or employment outcomes) or by specialisation (i.e. by provision offered, by types of student attracted or by specified links to labour markets). Differentiation can be both expressed in and reinforced by marketing practices, in the 'look and feel' of the institution (e.g. by the use of branding, advertising and website design) and revealed by institutional mission statements and policies, for example in relation to access statements and admissions policies and procedures.

Equity is used in this paper to describe the fairness or impartiality of access to higher education, and more specifically the extent to which equity is affected by the processes of marketisation and increasing differentiation (Lynch 2006). An important aspect of equity in HE systems is the notion of diversity (i.e. a system cannot be equitable if it is not socially diverse), but equally a system that socially engineered diversity could not be considered equitable if it impinged on access for others (Meek 2000; Savage et al 2013). The key drivers for more equitable systems are often cited as national efficiency and competitiveness, and as such equity is a notion closely allied with human capital, the restructuring of education and the development of the 'neoliberal imaginary' (Lingard 2010).

In a neoliberal universe equity is about equality of opportunity (rather than outcome) and places the onus on individuals to maximise their own educational success, based on the assumption that parents and children can demand and obtain quality education irrespective of their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The obligation to make the system more equitable, rather than more equal, shifts responsibility from states and universities to (meritorious) individuals. Equity (as fair and impartial access) is also a variable concept, context dependent rather than an absolute concept like equality, and is often framed as a market enhancing mechanism (Savage 2013) which means that in a differentiated HE system there can be a tension between equity and the market positioning of institutions (Bowl and Hughes 2014).

The main research question it sets out to explore is: does differentiation support or undermine diversity in HE contexts? Of equal importance, to what extent are developments in English higher education 'exceptional' or are they comparable to those in other national contexts?

Literature

Key literatures and concepts explored in this paper include commodification (Shumar 1997); structure and agency in the context of marketised HE (Canaan and Shumar 2008); comparative systems analysis (Schuetze &

Slowey 2002; Huisman, Meek and Wood 2007) and literatures concerned with the context under the following headings: global expansion in the post-war world; human capital; social pressure for equity; the development of system differentiation; the growing role of the centralised state; shifting the burden from state to the individual; massification and the emergence of global HE market for students; the shift from widening participation programmes designed at enhancing equality to 'fair access' programmes designed to enhance equity.

Methods

Data derived from two projects.

The sample of access agreements used in this paper consists of 10 large pre-1992 institutions (all members of the Russell Group) and 10 large post-1992 institutions. The main sampling criteria were institution size (by student numbers); and geographic distribution; and was partly informed by previous research (e.g. the National Evaluation of Aimhigher, HEFCE 2006) that indicated contrasting widening participation policy behaviours by pre- and post-1992 institutions.

A small purposive sample of those responsible for drafting access agreements in both pre- and post-1992 institutions (drawn from institutions not in the access agreement sample) was used to identify subjects for a series of semi-structured interviews (carried out in 2012). Eight interviews carried out in five institutions (four post-1992, one pre-1992) to explore themes including rationales for changes to financial and outreach support priorities; perceptions of the impact of the new student support system; perceptions of the impact of student number controls and other reforms.

The paper builds on previous analyses of access agreements by the author and others (e.g. Callender 2009) that show how the level of financial support and access and outreach priorities vary by different types of English HEI. This current paper draws on thematic content and discourse analyses of the sample of 20 access agreements for 2012/13 and a comparative analysis of 2012/13 and original 2006/07 agreements, augmented with a small number of interviews with those responsible for access agreement development. The findings presented here show the extent to which both pre- and post-92 institutions in their 2012 access agreements are adapting to the new landscape in which widening participation to all is seen as less important than targeting support only at the meritorious and those that may help fill recruitment shortfall, e.g. demonstrating a shift from concerns about equality of access for all to concerns about 'fair access' for the few that are qualified enough.

The research also draws on the findings of a HEA-funded research project exploring the impact of student number controls following the introduction of the English HE White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011). The research was carried out between 2013 and 2014. This used a mixed methods design incorporating a national survey and subsequent in-depth semi-structured interviews with a selected representative sample of different HEI types. The initial stage took the form of a survey of senior managers in all English universities and further education colleges with significant HE provision. The survey had an overall response rate was 19% of 173 institutions surveyed. Follow up interviews were carried out face-to-face by the authors during the Autumn of 2013 and in total our qualitative analysis was based on the contribution of 17 individuals from 13 institutions.

The research found that while many institutions were concerned about the impact marketisation was having on their institutions, threatening autonomy, institutional mission, subject breadth and social justice goals, with impacts felt from admissions policy through to curriculum and pedagogy.

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