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## **Blueprints, Bridges and Cluttered Landscapes: Exploring Metaphor and Motif in Widening Access Policy**

### **Introduction**

The higher education landscape is in flux, with fissures and tensions around defining and measuring excellence and the tremors caused by tuition fees continuing to rebound (e.g. Burke *et al* 2014,). New policy landmarks have appeared and efforts are being made to forge new pathways into and through university learning. Policy and political discourse has focused on the uneven terrain of access and social mobility (Scottish Government 2016, Social Mobility Advisory Group 2015, Butcher 2015). Indeed, university 'learning spaces' themselves are in flux, with thinking of the bounded campus being replaced by consideration of the 'porous university' (Stewart 2015).

Metaphors abound in such discourse – spatial, temporal and geological (Nicholl 2006). This is manifest particularly directly in the carving in stone at Heriot-Watt University of the former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond's oft-cited pledge that 'Rocks will melt with the sun before I allow tuition fees to be imposed on Scotland's students'. Behind such rhetoric there are, of course, distinctive 'real world' differentials in widening access policy and practice across the higher education landscapes of the UK and beyond (Riddell *et al* 2016). Such divergence (and convergence) in pathways are themselves subjected to diverse imaginings and representations.

What should we make of this geographical imagining of higher education and, more specifically, the discourse around widening access? Such turns of phrase could be dismissed as simply rhetorical tools to facilitate engagement with the (at times rather dry) policy frameworks they refer to. Imagery and framing metaphors matter as "useful organising concepts" (Raffe 2003), yet may obscure meaning and associated action. Yet exploring such discourse can help open opportunities for alternative viewpoints on the issues, to look beyond the foreground and see the wider picture of interconnections / disconnects between policies and lived experiences of higher education (Edwards *et al* 1999).

This paper presents a creative think-piece centred on a critical review of *A Blueprint for Fairness*, the final report of the Scottish Commission on Widening Access (Scottish Government 2016). It explores the way geographical and spatial metaphors have been used in contemporary higher education policy discussion, particularly the arena of widening access. Re-appropriating and reframing these metaphors can, the paper argues, open space to think beyond existing policy parameters.

### **Beyond Blueprints and Bridges? Exploring the work of the *Commission on Widening Access***

The Scottish landscape and, in particular, the terrain of widening access to higher education represented by the work of the Commission on Widening Access (Scottish Government

2016) provides our central case study through which to explore the use of metaphors and motifs.

The Commission's Final Report, *A Blueprint for Fairness*, sets out to redraw the higher education landscape, to open new pathways in to higher education and allow new actors to access university. Realising this is seen as achievable, with Scotland presented as a place of possibility, where there is space (distinctive to the rest of the UK) to explore alternative pathways. It is framed around the significance of harnessing this particular space—time opportunity within a conducive, yet shifting, landscape. The report also sets out the boundaries and barriers that constrain individuals' access to universities and limit the scope of key stakeholders to make the connections and build the required pathways.

The report is framed by a mix of geographic and architectural metaphors, highlighting the interplay between the landscape of social and educational opportunity and the necessity to (re)build infrastructure to help navigate through that landscape. From the broad 'blueprint' for fairness itself, through to the call for strong 'architecture' to support the construction of new paths and bridges into, between and through stages of an educational journey, such imagery is both vivid in its presentation, yet leaves space for significant re-imagining and alternative interpretations of action. Through critical exploration of this imagery and imaging, the paper unpacks what is privileged in this particular view of the widening access landscape and – crucially - what is excluded.

For example, the notion of a 'blueprint' for action can be perceived as a call to action, with plans already in place awaiting implementation. Yet, as the detail of the report highlights, more research and evidence is essential if we are to fully appreciate what works in particular contexts. A more nuanced, colourful perspective is needed if we are to engage with the needs of a diversity of learners, a shading and vibrancy that is missing from a 'blueprint' approach.

Similarly, the focus on bridges as a key motif throughout the report emphasises the importance of creating links between points in the education landscape: articulation, direct entry from college, and a changed relationship between schools and universities. Yet, we can more fully explore the diversity of architectural forms these 'bridges' can take in order to imagine the range of relationships and interfaces they could facilitate. Is the transition from college to university, for example, a simple linking between two places, or a more complex construction? Could we, for example, imagine a Ponte Vecchio-style structure, that allows greater mixing of curriculum, multiple interactions across student groups, and opportunities to pause at points during the crossing?

Exploring the metaphors that shape the report also highlights those who are missing or cast in to shade in this landscape and those who have a privileged position in the foreground. For example, the place of part-time learners remains, from Alex Salmond's 'rocks in the sun' statement through to *The Blueprint for Fairness*, cast in shadow and set to the fringes of the widening access landscape.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

This close reading and creative development of the metaphors within *The Blueprint for Fairness* will resonate strongly – albeit with different motifs – with policy discourses across the UK and beyond. Such exploration of the language of widening access is important. Metaphor and motif inform how we understand contexts and frame action. We need to be aware of these dominant motifs and use them to challenge thinking and practice: To rework and adapt where required and to reject where they limit our creativity and ability to support diverse learners.

## References

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