

K7 Chepstow Thursday 6 December 11.30 - 12.00

Binary Code? Bridging the 'Academic'-'Technical' Divide and the Permeability or Perpetuation of Pathways in England (0480)

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Questions of diversity and equity in higher education are not only addressed through its systems and structures but by the possibilities for students to make transitions within them. In an English policy environment encouraging diversification through the promotion of a 'competitive market', the Sainsbury Review articulated a substantive divide between 'academic' and 'technical' education extending into higher education, recalling the shape of England's former binary divide. Case studies of programmes designed to support bridging into higher education were undertaken with the aim of examining the potential of each to support transitions across such pathways. Whilst each case study demonstrated potential to support progression, the distinctive aims and internal logic of each tended to support continuity within particular university-oriented, 'academic' or work-oriented 'technical' pathways. This implies that 'bridging' provision may reflect the persistence of, and indeed perpetuate, binary tendencies rather than support permeability across an academic/technical divide currently emerging in England.

The means by which higher education systems accommodate a widening variety of curricula and students represents one of the key questions for national and international higher education policies (Teichler 2008). The questions of diversity and equity that arise are only partly addressed by such decisions as whether professional or marginal provision is organised in unitary or binary systems, or form different strata: a further question inevitably arises about the permeability of such divisions and students' ability to cross their boundaries, deemed integral to 'mass' higher education (Trow, 1974). The results of 'cooling out', frustrating the progression of disadvantaged US community college students in the US, contributed strongly to poor equity and consequent disillusionment with that system (Clark 1980; Marginson 2017).

These questions are posed with renewed urgency by higher education policies in England that promote a more 'competitive market' (DBIS, 2016). A more-or-less unitary higher education system until recently accommodated a high degree of diversity, albeit with some uncertainty for more marginal provision (Huisman et al., 2007; Tight, 2007; Parry et al., 2012). Moves to further differentiation include provision more closely associated with the workplace, notably sub-bachelor higher apprenticeships from 2010 and bachelor-level degree apprenticeships from 2015 (Powell, 2018). This raises new questions in relation to possibilities of transition across different routes and institutions.

A particularly sharp delineation of a higher education divide was expressed in the Sainsbury Review (Sainsbury et al., 2016). Primarily addressing 16-18 education, this report extended its comments and recommendations to level 4 and 5 (sub-bachelor) 'technical' qualifications, represented as needing to be designed:

against requirements defined by panels of industry professionals – convened by the Institute for Apprenticeships – who will be best placed to judge what is needed to move to skilled employment at these higher levels (2016, p.44).

A diagram of ‘academic’ and ‘technical’ pathways showed the former including bachelor degrees and the latter including ‘levels 4/5 technical education’ (Foundation degrees and awarding body equivalents) and both higher-level and degree apprenticeships (2016, p.28). The same diagram included ‘bridging provision (where appropriate)’ between the two routes at the point of entry to higher education.

The study reported here was designed to examine what existing provision might contribute to such bridging activity, around the specific question of what current practice might work towards this aim in current provision and what areas of difficulty are encountered. Moves to widen participation over the last forty years have given rise to a number of alternative routes into higher education, ranging from the Access to Higher Education courses that began to offer alternatives to A-levels from the late 1970s to the ‘foundation year’ courses currently experiencing strong growth at English universities. However, these routes have as their aim supporting progression within a unitary system. A further question, then, emerged during the study: to what extent is progression already structured around differentiated provision that represents in outline the distinctive routes of the Sainsbury Review?

The study was constructed around four case studies. Two of these were selected as oriented to promoting access to a more ‘academic’ higher education: Access to Higher Education courses, offering university progression to candidates without the usual ‘A’-level entry requirements; and an innovation module developed at a Further Education College, enabling its Foundation degree students with work experience to build this into their studies. The other two were selected as supporting progression to more work-based forms of higher education: a bridging course designed for a Sector Skills Council preparing workers from one industry for transition into professional degree study; and a range of higher and degree apprenticeships.

Three case studies were based on a single location, where local documents relating to course provision and interviews of staff and students provided data for analysis. Because of the diversity of apprenticeship routes (some jointly with universities and some entirely employer-based) data was collected from three employer-based and two institutional sites. Interviewees included current and past students, course tutors, leaders and designers, admissions tutors and employers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted around ethically-approved schedules, taped and transcribed in full. Data analysis was informed by a systematic review of literature in this field published during the last ten years and by emerging categories.

All four case studies were evidently able to support effective transitions into higher levels of study. The well-organised Access programmes had good rates of success to a successful ‘plate-glass’ university (former College of Advanced Technology) and nearby post-92 institutions, providing a thorough grounding in expectations of academic practice. Students completing the industry-based ‘bridging’ programme were reported by the destination university to perform as successfully as candidates with other prior learning experiences. The innovation module enabled students to bring their work experiences to bear on their studies through critical reflection on industry practice. The higher and degree apprenticeships developed high levels of expertise, including in recognised academic skills, not least mathematics.

Each of the cases studied achieved its successes through an unswerving focus on the expectations of candidates’ destinations. Course documents, current and former students on Access and industry-based programmes attested to the development of their academic literacy during these programmes. Apprentices and innovation module students spoke highly of their preparation for more demanding work roles. These findings were reminiscent of Gale and Parker’s (2014) categorisation of activities supporting university transitions as induction and development,

compared to a category of transitions supporting 'becoming' where students' differences and existing knowledge were more fully acknowledged. In these bridging activities, similarly, less account was taken of students' prior knowledge, even where they held qualifications at levels that could already provide a basis for higher education study.

In consequence, it is less clear whether any of these routes provided a basis for supporting 'bridging' across 'academic' or professional routes. The knowledge and achievement that they recognised related directly to destinations, encouraging applicants already committed to these routes, even though these have no formal status in higher education. Such provision may reflect hidden binary tendencies, whether or whenever any formal divide may be enacted, and may serve to perpetuate these rather than to support its crossing.

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