Developing a theoretical framework to explore what widening participation has done for ‘non-traditional students‘ and what it has done to them

Conference or Workshop Item

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Developing a theoretical framework to explore what widening participation has done for ‘non-traditional students’ and what it has done to them.

Widening Participation Conference 2014
Widening Participation through Curriculum
30th April and 1st May 2014
Jury’s Inn, Milton Keynes, UK

Dr Jonathan Hughes (Open University) and Alice Peasgood (Independent)
In-depth interviews with seven leading authorities in the field of widening participation
Seeking to make sense of the context, continuities and the challenges apparent when students are categorised as ‘non-traditional’.
Thematic Analysis

• Seeks to extend theorisation on the basis of a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of seven interviews with leading academics who have all contributed to thinking about widening participation.
• By interviewing academics whose careers have coincided with the drive to widen participation in higher education in the UK, we are able to explore in detail a range of views about widening participation.

• Table 1: Phases of Thematic Analysis
• Phase Description of the process
• 1. Familiarising yourself with your data
• 2. Generating initial codes
• 3. Searching for themes: data relevant to each potential theme
• 4. Reviewing themes
• 5. Defining and naming themes
• 6. Producing the report
From (Braun and Clarke, 2006)
Context, Consequences and Challenges

Three important themes:

1. The policy context linking higher tuition fees and widening participation.
2. The wider context of a marketised higher education.
3. How policies are interpreted and operationalised.

- The context, including universities’ curriculum and admissions policies, and their consequences make positive and negative contributions to widening access.
- The interactions of key elements of context and their consequences create challenges.
- Need to understand these challenges in order to outline the role of theory in ensuring that gains made are fully appreciated.
- Outlining the key challenges also means that a critically informed agenda for research and practice becomes possible.
The lack of a single straightforward narrative of widening participation highlights a complex interaction of factors which is evident in the English context, which in turn, reflects global developments.

• The concern with widening participation, historically linked to a concern for social justice and equity, has been fuelled by the realisation that, in challenging economic times, a university degree is becoming essential in order to have a worthwhile career (Burke, 2012 and Meyer et al, 2013).

• At the same time universities are challenged to position themselves to be competitive in a global market.
Fair Access vs Global Competitiveness

The need to reconcile issues around fair access, on the one hand, and global competitiveness, on the other, means that widening participation policies and practices reveal much about the ways in which higher education has changed in the past and how it will change in the future.
Theoretical Framework

• Need to develop theoretical frameworks in order to make sense of the impact of the widening participation agenda and to arrive at conclusions that go beyond just acknowledging complexity. Such frameworks have been suggested, for example Jones and Thomas (2005).

• Burke (2012) suggests that theory drawn from feminism and from the critical sociology of education is particularly relevant.

Jones and Thomas (2005)

• The academic strand ‘gifted and talented’ young people into an unreformed higher education system.

• The utilitarian approach – reform needed to meet the requirements of employers and the economy.

• Transformative approach – values diversity and focuses on creating a system of higher education that does not place the burden of change upon potential entrants.
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Findings

Three distinct but related questions:
1. What have been the key aspects of the historical context which have positioned students as ‘non-traditional’?
2. What were seen, at the time of the interviews, as the consequences of identifying a category of student that can be labelled as ‘widening participation’?
3. According to the interviewees, what were the main challenges that need to be addressed?
“Up until now ... we have talked about widening participation; by widening participation we mean allowing ... a larger cross section of people to come into higher education. ... if you look at the White Paper, there isn’t a chapter on widening participation, but there is a chapter on social mobility. ... the notion of widening participation is being trumped by the idea of social mobility ... defined primarily in terms of fairness ... not disadvantage. And it’s fairness, not disadvantage that is meant to be steering future policy ... trying to get more kids into the most prestigious universities”
Context

“Some of the increase in participation is associated with a higher education sector that was expanding. In the future, both in the short term, and the medium term, it looks as if the higher education sector will not be expanding.”

“So, it’s higher education institutions that are being told they must take more responsibility for increasing social mobility, rather than the government … we’ll have to wait and see how successful higher education institutions are, and what strategies they can introduce to try and meet these new pressures and whatever new demands arise from the Office of Fair Access.”

Office for Fair Access - “refocusing institutional minds on the student experience, on how different groups of students might fare in the higher education system”.

“moving of widening participation to a much more central place in institutions.”
Consequences

The most salient consequences stem from the linkage between the introduction of higher tuition fees and widening participation. This linkage acts as a reminder that widening participation cannot be separated from the wider context of higher education.

• “You can’t abstract the notion of widening participation from the whole notion of what happens in higher education”.
• “University education is being converted from a public good to a consumable commodity”.
• “So the student is being increasingly seen as a consumer and student choice ... is being seen increasingly as ability to pay.”
• “My perception is, we’ve got this increasingly competitive managerial climate ... universities are being forced to compete against one another. They’re in the market ... it’s actively encouraged by the government “(}
Consequences

One interviewee portrayed this as a situation in which widening participation is cast as student choice in a market with subsidies for the poor.

The marketization of higher education is seen to have led to a stratified system of higher education.

• Market position is everything to a Russell Group University ... so what they would never want to do is to compromise their market position and there is an implicit notion that if they let in too many people from non-traditional, non A-Level backgrounds, they would be compromising their market position because they are worried about achievement and retention.
Consequences

A key consequences of the widening participation agenda is that the category of non-traditional student tends to be linked with a number of default characteristics. One of these is the such students are likely to be especially motivated by prospects of enhanced employability. Another is that they tend to lack confidence. 

• I’m quite interested in this idea about self-confidence ... I’m not very happy with it as a concept ... What does it mean and how do you get it? It’s very much a culture thing. Those people who exhibit self-confidence, or seem to, it’s not a personal attribute ... it’s an asset that they’ve got from their family ... or through their social position. So they’re given credit for having this self-confidence ... similarly, people who don’t have self-confidence are penalised and it’s seen as their own personal failing”
Challenges

• “the whole critical question of analysing what higher education is; what it is really for and who it is really for ...”
• “we are facing huge challenges at the moment in relation to widening participation. And this is not least because of the radical cuts to higher education funding and now the substantial increase in student fees.”
• “still very big divides amongst who goes to university, which kind of university ... there’s still massive inequalities.”
• “there is still ... a certain kind of perspective is still the dominant perspective. There’s not been the changes of knowledge to that potentially brought in by women (or) by more working class students have not really transformed the parameters of what the disciplines are talking about...”
• “Because if you start to question what knowledge is, who can transmit it, how it’s created in the classroom, it’s unstable and de-stabilises a lot of things that people would rather keep stable.”
• “we’ve kind of got stuck ... how to make everybody fit in to something that is maybe outmoded or was never for them in the first place. You can’t have a transformed student body without a transformed university. That is the challenge that people face. How to really respond; it’s not just about diversity, it’s about inequality ... not just so and so is different from somebody else. It is so and so has fewer resources than someone else, different issues to face, different barriers to face.”
To summarise

• ‘Widening participation’ is often presented as a-theoretical and pragmatic. In fact, draws on a range of assumptions often derived from neo-liberal and individualistic viewpoints.

• A key narrative equates being a ‘non-traditional’ or ‘widening participation’ student with a deficit view of such students.

• Both these locate particular aspects of context while presenting a key consequence as groups of student who present challenges.

• This matched by a narrative that suggests that the challenge for widening participation is to find exceptional individuals who can benefit from HE education despite coming from under-represented groups. In this view the context is dominated by ‘potential’ and ‘ability’.

• Need to refocus on the challenge of how HEIs transforming their curriculum to better meet wider needs and aspirations.