Open Research Online

Editorial

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Welcome to the second edition of our journal in 2016. I am delighted to take on the editorial role for the first time, and I am pleased to introduce six interesting and very different articles, all of which present scholarly findings from research-informed perspectives, challenging received wisdom about higher education through a perspective informed by commitment to widening participation and lifelong learning. The rigour and energetic engagement in these articles encourages an optimistic outlook that there are researchers and practitioners across the globe focussed on extending our understanding, and on influencing institutions and policy-makers, in order to galvanise higher education into fulfilling its transformative potential for all learners. I am reminded of the lively exchanges at our recent biennial international Widening Participation conference [insert link] at which five keynote presentations from University and sector leaders enthusiastically shared radical visions of higher education which encompassed inclusive values and rejected the thin gruel of marketization. These spoke to a collegial dynamism (reflected in the 30+ presentations at the conference) which is too often missing from government policies: evidence enough that the fight to remove barriers to HE learning, and to strengthen and enhance provision aimed at so-called 'non-traditional' learners, is worth continuing.

But before I introduce the six articles, a brief aside about the changing context in which colleagues in the UK are seeking to address educational disadvantage.

O, how we continue to live in interesting times. Not only do we have to contend with the shrill noise around the referendum on whether to leave the European Union (the current media-driven debates appear to be justifying the maxim about generating more heat than light) but the publication of an era-defining White Paper 'Success as a Knowledge Economy' (BIS, 2016), and associated legislative programme, has provoked controversy across the higher education sector. Sometimes sub-titles, in yoking together opposing ideologies, reveal tensions at the heart of policy. This White Paper is subtitled 'Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice', but its three chapters are headed as 'Competition'; 'Choice'; 'Architecture': Interesting balances are being enacted here. Colleagues committed to social justice will see some welcome encouragement within the 84 pages (the devil will of course be in the detail), but some potentially threatening aspects flavour the

discourse too (for a thorough critique of the White Paper, see the response 'The Alternative White Paper for Higher Education' (Convention for Higher Education, 2016).

Jo Johnson, Minister of State for Universities and Science, strikes a less divisive pose than his brother Boris (see Euro referendum above) and encouragingly commences his foreword with an assertion that 'Access to higher education can be life changing for individuals…we have made the possibility of participation …a reality for more people than ever'. Reference is made to Lord Robbins' guiding principle that higher education 'should be available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue it' (1963), complementing assertions in the White Paper that 'more people from disadvantaged backgrounds than ever before' went to university.

What is challenging is that the radical 'more to be done' position adopted in the White Paper conceptualises the UK university system as a potential engine or catalyst of social mobility, while pointing out that access remains uneven. The Government asserts it is 'focused on strengthening the education system to enable everybody to achieve their potential' (BIS, p.10). Colleagues may recognise the symptoms, and welcome the diagnosis, but not the prescribed 'cure'. While welcome attention is given to: the flexible support needs of those who can only study part-time; to the non-continuation rates for black students; to the need to double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university by 2020; to increase participation among young white males from lower socio-economic groups; and to supporting participation by those with disabilities, the 'answer' is expressed in depressingly familiar terms. The problem in UK HE is identified in the White Paper as inflexibility, lack of innovation, insufficient competition and a lack of informed choice: there is no mention of the economic, the structural, the social capital issues that are the real barriers to effective access.

Instead, we are to look forward to a Teaching Excellence Framework, in which metrics (yet to be developed) to evaluate how teaching supports improved outcomes in the widening participation of those from disadvantaged backgrounds will link to fee setting. We await an Office for Students, which will become a single HE market regulator responsible for accountability around all spending on HE access. And we reflect on the potential impact on widening participation of the opening up of the sector in terms of degree awarding powers and University title.

So the context in which widening participation operates in the UK is entering an even more volatile period, and the articles published in this edition offer plenty of food for thought to inform responses.

First, I welcome an important and thoughtful perspective on alternative pathways to education in Australia provided in the article 'Counting the cost of second-chance education: evaluating the outcomes and costs of University-

based Enabling programs' by Bookallil and Rolfe. Drawing on social equity literature, the authors explore data from a decade-long programme aimed at supporting disadvantaged groups into HE. Interestingly, they utilise an economic lens to analyse their data. Findings suggest financial investment in programmes aimed at widening access/participation (the programmes in this study were subsidised and offered free of charge) need to be fit for purpose, given that while initial student enrolments increased, subsequent progression and successful outcomes decreased. The authors conclude that for institutions involved, it is insufficient to offer second-chance education if augmented teaching and support strategies based on student need are not in place. More importantly, while individual stories of improved self-esteem and self-confidence could be reported, the dearth of research on what happens to the most vulnerable students, those who discontinue their studies, and could be psychologically damaged, is missing. The need to rigorously evaluate efforts to address social justice initiatives is strongly underlined in this article.

Complementing this is a cross-continent study 'Policy enactment in Widening participation: enablers and barriers in a comparative English and Australian study' by Singh and Mountford-Zimdars. The authors use two illuminative case studies of selective universities, contextualised through national and institutional policy and resource differences, to identify a space in which practitioners perceive similar challenges: balancing recruitment imperatives against social justice aims and balancing short-term reporting requirements with the longer term aspirations of outreach activities – the result being an unintended focus on admissions rather than the whole student lifecycle, and competition for the same small group of high-attaining students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Our third article succeeded in taking the editorial board out of its comfort zone. While tackling a familiar topic, a Foundation Year programme aimed at widening participation for those without the entry qualifications for an undergraduate degree, Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald focused on evaluating two psychometric tools aimed at identifying students at risk of failing to progress. In reporting on the results of a survey carried out at the start and towards the end of four Foundation programmes across two UK universities (one in Wales, one in England), confidence measures in relation to grades and attendance were identified as measures indicative of subsequent disengagement problems. Fascinatingly, the article suggests students who are expecting high marks may disengage when those expectations are not fulfilled, and that the notion of 'doubting' can be significant as early as the first weeks of the Programme in relation to sustaining patterns of attendance. The authors acknowledge the limitations of this approach to understanding the student experience, but suggest such a quantitative approach may help provide a multi-faceted account of how disengagement progresses. With increasing use of all manner of learning analytics across HE, it would be

interesting to know what readers think of such approaches, and whether they might allow institutions to target support before patterns of learner behaviour

Taking us in a very different direction, Wardrop and colleagues report on their lexical analysis of access agreement texts in England to better understand the extent to which HEIs refer to research in the context of widening participation activity and policy. The authors question that, even after a decade of access agreements, widening participation research is not fully embedded in the academic practice of higher education. They regard this as problematic for two reasons: first, sustained and rigorous research can provided much needed evidence of impact; second widening participation research has the potential to 'trouble' dominant rhetoric and challenge 'controlling' assumptions in HE.

If the first four articles were insufficient evidence of the wide variety of perspectives currently energising research around widening participation, the final two articles extend our understanding in ever more diverse ways. Bracke's article 'The role of university teachers in increasing Widening Participation to Classics' reports a student-led Widening Participation programme in Wales which uses the 'perceived elitist subject area of Classics', in a Literacy through Classics project to raise aspirations amongst school pupils aged 7-17 in deprived communities. The author argues that, by using student teachers as role models, engagement and enjoyment amongst primary school pupils was enhanced and HE aspirations were raised. Although results were more mixed with secondary school pupils (suggesting early intervention can be crucial), the role of students in promoting university WP strategy was emphasised.

Last, but by no means least, connections between employability outcomes and the experiences of access graduates are reported in Keane's article 'Considering the 'Impact' of Widening Participation: The Employment Experiences of Access Graduates from an Irish University'. The author reports the impact of HE on the life chances of two groups: graduates from school-leaver age pre-entry access provision, and graduates from mature pre-entry accesses provision. Findings were generally positive in gaining employment, in the type of employment, in satisfaction with current employment and in the opportunity to 'give back' to society in public sector roles. However, the older group were more likely to be unemployed, and more likely to be affected by labour market discrimination at a time of recession. Social class-related difficulties were raised in 'high-status' employment like Law, with a lack of contacts cited. Importantly the article concludes that institutions need metrics which ensure relevant individual outcomes are prioritised over 'increasing numbers to meet targets'.

In addition, I recommend David Gosling's book review of *Higher Education for the Public Good: views from the South* (Leibowitz, 2013) which highlights the collection of essays as shining a light on the failure of

HE in South Africa to transform the lives of its black citizens – pinpointing the problem at the door of universities which do not change their methods of teaching, their curricula or their methods of assessment and place underperforming students in special support programmes in the context of selection processes which reproduce pre-existing social classifications. As the editor and the reviewer suggest, such problems are not unique to the south, and calls for a 'hopeful pedagogy' to transform HE into a public good.

Taken together, the six articles and book review in this edition offer evidence that research around widening participation is in robust health across the globe, and that insights from such scholarship should inform HE policy.

Main text

References

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