Review of selected Widening Participation literature – Mark Dawson

The modern 'widening participation' (WP) agenda arguably started in the late nineties with the publication of the Dearing report (Harrison & Waller, 2017). In their paper, 'Success and impact in Widening participation policy', Harrison and & Waller provide a useful definition of the WP agenda: organising and co-ordinating a portfolio of activities targeted at groups that were historically under-represented in higher education in order to incentivise them to apply. Their paper gives a good overview of the WP climate in the UK and, more specifically, the AimHigher programme in England. The authors note that 'elite', more selective institutions often seem focussed on attracting 'able' pupils who would have gone to other HE providers anyway – a reallocation of participation rather than a true 'widening' (known as targeting 'deadweight' in WP vernacular) and that progress to increase participation in HE for the most disadvantaged groups has been modest and mostly concentrated in 'recruiting' Universities: those with much lower entry requirements. Having interviewed a number of senior WP practitioner-managers, a key finding was tension between providing inspiring activities that promote HE generally and simply running, what is in effect, a marketing/recruitment programme for an individual institution. There was a recognition that the efficacy of the most common 'aspiration raising' activities is questionable and there needs to be a focus on attainment to truly widen participation, but there is also disagreement about whether this should be the remit of WP activities and at what point in compulsory education University-led attainment raising work should start. The paper also notes problems with identifying who is to be targeted, particularly with regard to the much-maligned POLAR metric and the well-known issues that arise due to its reliance on geographical area as a primary factor meaning many affluent pupils are inadvertently targeted and many less-affluent pupils are deemed ineligible. The leaders interviewed valued collaboration and shared ideas of best practice between HE institutions and clearly understood the need for effective evaluation but were realistic in their appraisal that Higher Education is effectively a competitive market which limits the extent to which HE providers will truly collaborate and the sorts of activities that proved popular with schools may not be the easiest to evaluate (nor be the most effective). For example, visit days may not demonstrate a good WP agenda return on effort (subsequent entry to HE for targeted pupils) but the feedback from participants is frequently excellent. The pressure to evaluate programmes and demonstrate value to HE leaders led to less risk-taking and narrower ranges of activities. Further, Practitioners struggled to disaggregate potential factors to show that it is specifically WP activity that has had an effect on the trajectory of a young person. A problem that continues to vex WP managers. The paper concludes with a call for efforts to promote more collaboration between HE providers (that has subsequently been realised with the funding of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme – now 'Uni-connect') and more work towards attainment-raising strategies with younger cohorts to try to mitigate some of the ingrained issues of educational disadvantage.

Echoing the calls for less 'aspiration raising' activity, Rizzica's (2019) article 'Raising aspirations and Higher Education: evidence from the UK's Widening Participation Policy' gives a comprehensive statistical account that raises questions about the nature of WP work. Providing another good summary of WP in the UK from an external perspective, the central point is that there is little concrete quantitative evidence that many of the traditional WP activities designed to 'raise aspirations' (Uni visits days, subject tasters etc.) have had any significant effect on the numbers of pupils from low-participation groups actually enrolling in HE. The statistical element of the paper is complex and caution should probably be applied before drawing any causation conclusions from this sort of analysis given that human behaviour is notoriously tricky to explain and predict. That said, the paper finds that aspiration raising activities do help make it more likely for pupils to self-report that they *intend* to go to HE. However, this does not translate into a statistically significant rise

overall in actual enrolment (though it does in some sub-groups of the target population). Regardless, the effect is smaller than might be expected if 'aspirations' was a strongly influential variable. Given the continued prevalence of aspiration-raising type activity in the sector this does suggest that the focus of WP activity may need to change to significantly achieve its stated aims.

Backing up the previous assertions of the AimHigher managers, in their report 'An investigation of the views, understanding, knowledge, experience and attitudes of sixth form teachers in regard to the preparedness of their students for the transition to university', Hugh, Massey & Williams (2016) found that teachers value University visits as part of a useful WP offer. The report was commissioned by the collaborative outreach network for the Northeast Midlands and is unusual in that it takes into account the opinions/thoughts of teachers. It is a mixed-methods study but the response rate for the 'quantitative' survey was low. The value here is in the rich qualitative data from the focus groups. A number of practical interventions are identified by teachers as potentially very useful in supporting students in transition to HE. These include: the use of tasks and 'proactive' exercises rather than basic information and guidance presentations; the use of engaging speakers, day-in-the-life videos, taster classes, and activities to develop resilience/self-management skills. Teachers in the study seem to continue to believe that fear and lack of self-efficacy might be holding some pupils back and there was a need for resources/training to help teachers combat this. The study does hint at a prevailing belief amongst school staff in the value of aspiration raising activity.

Another interesting take on the issue of aspiration can be found in 'Network-based ambivalence and educational decision-making: a case study of 'non-participation' in higher education', (Heath, Fuller & Paton, 2008). Although this study is from over a decade ago, it is unusual in its ideographic focus. The paper takes a sociological network approach to investigate the perceptions of an older individual who has not participated in HE. The authors conclude that individuals are not just blocked by lack of opportunity but are also influenced by opinions held within their networks and a pragmatic approach to their own needs and wants. Obviously, it would be ridiculous to form any general conclusions about non-participation from a study of one. That said, the deep-dive approach highlights some interesting points of reflection for WP practitioners: Why do a degree if you don't want a higher-paying job and have already satisfied your education goals? If you witness a peer getting a degree but ending up in a part-time role unrelated to the degree, to what extent is it believable that HE is a worth-while investment of time and money?

The problematic nature of potentially patronising WP activity that fails to recognise reasoned rejection of HE options is similarly raised by Clark, Mountford-Zimdars & Francis (2015). In 'Risk, Choice and Social Disadvantage: Young People's Decision-Making in a Marketised Higher Education System', the authors seek the opinions of Y13 pupils currently pondering post-compulsory education options. This highly readable, qualitative study is very illuminating and runs counter to the idea that young people have low aspirations. It suggests that highly-able pupils are far more aware and strategic in their thought processes about HE than many HE professionals perhaps give them credit for. Although they see the value of 'elite' Universities, they may also be influenced by a need to make the best use of 'home' advantage when considering their options as the need to save money and potential for part-time work are important factors for them. This often limits what they are willing to consider but this can be considered a result of logical thought processes rather than a fear of the unknown or a lack of awareness about alternative options. Students from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds in particular often exhibit strong aversion to financial risk and will only consider vocationally-orientated degrees that they consider are more likely to result in well-paid employment after University.

This tendency for pupils from less-advantaged backgrounds to disproportionately attend less selective Universities is a persistent condition in the UK as illustrated by Iannelli's (2007) longitudinal study 'Inequalities in Entry to Higher Education: a Comparison Over Time between Scotland and England and Wales', which used data from the Scottish School Leavers Survey and England and Wales Youth Cohort Study from the late 90s to review some of the descriptive statistics relating to HE participation in these regions. It found that although Scotland has higher rates of participation in HE overall and therefore higher rates of 'working class' pupils in HE than England and Wales, the difference in participation rates between the social classes in Scotland was actually higher. The study argues that the greater provision of vocation sub-degree courses probably contributes to this increased HE participation effect as it facilitates subsequent access to HE. However, 'working class' pupils mostly study more vocational courses at less prestigious Universities which may have subsequent implications for the jobs they are able to secure after HE; this raises questions about to what extent the increased rate of HE participation in Scotland is reducing inequality between the social classes. This is an old paper but serves to highlight that we have known for some time now that increasing participation in HE is not necessarily going to lead to more equitable levels of affluence later, particularly if the most prestigious roles in society continue to mostly go to those who have attended a very small number of 'elite' institutions.

This idea of entrenched systemic inequality is also address by Andrew Morrison's (2014) traditionally academic paper which takes a critical post-modern approach in evaluating WP texts and the hegemonic structures that underlie them. Although the practical utility of this paper is questionable given its focus on analysis and lack of suggestions for an alternative strategy (admittedly this might be beyond the scope of the study), nonetheless it raises some interesting questions regarding the language and statements WP practitioners might use. It takes a critical discourse analysis approach in reviewing a number of official WP documents concluding that the documents are powerful illustrations of how the dominant narrative of 'responsibilisation': an orientation of a person towards the role of 'good citizenship' – striving to improve themselves and their contribution to the state - is dictated by middle/upper class influences on culture. The author argues that this creates a disconnect for 'working class' pupils who struggle to identify with this culture. This can be counterintuitively reinforced by official communications which seek to portray HE as suitable for all striving to 'better' themselves, by implying that to disagree/choose not to engage with HE is to be regressive and disappointing. This paper neatly encapsulates both the value and frustration of academic discourse. The central point is powerful and disconcerting: WP professionals are probably reinforcing through language the same repressive structures they seek to counterbalance. The solution might be to change the language of WP to mitigate this, however the detail of how this might be done remains (at least here) elusive and undefined.

These ideas of how language and positioning can be alienating structures is also addressed by Gartland (2015) who argues in 'Student Ambassadors: 'role-models', learning practices and identities' that care needs to be taken when using students to provide input in WP activity. This paper focusses on the use of student ambassadors in WP work and makes the case that caution needs to be applied to the assumption that they might act as 'role models' for WP cohorts. In interviewing student ambassadors and observing WP events, the study found that the demands of the activity, stakeholders and policy can work to constrain how student ambassadors are able to interact with pupils that can lead to increased alienation and emphasis of 'otherness' between current students and pupils aspiring to HE. The need to be seen as an authority and a 'representative' of the University can inhibit meaningful connection with pupils who are struggling to see themselves in such 'formal' environments. Conversely, the paper found that where activities were less didactic in nature, contextualised with subject-meaning and practical in nature, with

ambassadors taking on a facilitation rather than IAG type role, pupils were far more likely to engage and relate to them as individuals.

Continuing the theme of reinforced power and privilege 'Targeting of widening participation measures by elite institutions: widening access or simply aiding recruitment?' (Rainford, 2017) argues that many issues continue block progress with regard to WP at certain UK Universities. This case study of a single 'elite' University, aims to shine a spotlight on the limited progress a more selective University has made in widening access to the most disadvantaged students and attempts to explain why this might be the case. The paper highlights some potential reasons for the lack of progress including well-known issues with targeting metrics (POLAR), the problem with only admitting 'highly-achieving' pupils to the WP programmes and exclusionary programme design that requires significant time/financial investment from participants (usually in the form of travel expenses) that are likely to prevent the most disadvantaged pupils from engaging fully. In an interesting sociological take, the author asserts that 'elite' Universities have an existential need to reaffirm their legitimacy through the maintenance of existing perceptions of quality and hierarchy and that this, in practice, works to prevent them from truly widening access. It is a good example of desk research based on publicly reported figures but suffers somewhat from a lack of qualitative input which might have provided a useful humanistic triangulation of the main points.

In a similar vein, McLennan, Pettigrew & Sperlinger's (2016) article 'Remaking the elite university: An experiment in widening participation in the UK' describes efforts to widen participation through the use of a Foundation Year. This paper also gives a useful overview of WP practice in the UK and takes an interesting anti-elitist stance, arguing, like Rainford, that universities have failed to truly widen participation because they too rigidly guard access to the institution using high-grade entry requirements that disproportionately exclude students from low HE participation groups. This case study of a Foundation Year as a mechanism to bypass the traditional route provides a useful example of what has become a common strategy in the UK. While the outcomes from the course are undeniably positive, the authors acknowledge that one might reasonably ask if they are stepping on the perfectly adequate toes of local FE provision. Is this a case of HE aggressively swerving into FE's lane? They are somewhat vague about the selection criteria also which does raise questions of how they targeted their cohort.

Different routes into HE is one of the themes discussed in 'A 'home-international' comparative analysis of widening participation in UK higher education' (Donnelly & Evans, 2019). This study also takes a sociological approach at reviewing the situation in the home countries of the United Kingdom. It uses thematic analysis to critically review policy documents and uses Basil Bernstein's work to view success in HE as a function of two dimensions: institutional culture and the culture of a student's family. It argues that English policy making is more aligned with an 'equality of opportunity' approach as it focusses on increasing learner capacity to enter HE by attempting to address gaps in attainment, knowledge and aspiration at the individual level. By contrast the Welsh policy documents are more focussed on providing a range of options for learners to pursue HE making greater use of flexible delivery in time (more PT options) and form (community settings and use of FE) which is a focus more on 'equality of outcome' and the needs of the learners rather than the needs of the HE sector. Scotland and Northen Ireland (NI) are seen to sit between these two poles with Scotland making an effort to flex towards the learner in terms of access (contextual applications and FE routes into HE) but ultimately failing to offer much beyond the standard model of full-time HE provision. NI policy talks of learners needing to 'possess a number of characteristics' which is similar to the English approach but also of the need to offer varied HE options such as Foundation Degrees. The paper illustrates some interesting differences in how HE is perceived across

the UK and how this might hint at underlying variance in political ideology but, ultimately, there is a limit to what can be gleaned from a thematic analysis of policy text.

Policy documents are also a theme in Chapman, Mangion & Buchanon's (2015) paper 'Institutional statements of commitment and widening participation policy in Australia'. This article has an excellent summary of the situation in Australia, which mirrors the UK and serves as an interesting comparison. Similar issues around persistently low participation from certain socio-economic groups, a perceived mismatch between degrees and national vocational need, and concerns about the degree to which WP students are supported at University persist in Australia as they do here. The study is interesting because it sought the opinions of staff and highlighted a potential discourse conflict between policy documents other sources of WP information creating confusion about WP practice. It highlighted a potential mismatch between the stated aims of WP policy, neo-liberal realities for HE institutions and the ability of staff to contribute to a WP agenda due to competing demands for time/resources and a lack of organisational support. The paper highlights how important messaging is in the WP agenda and the need to ensure both that staff are clear about the core aims of a WP programme and believe the institutional commitment to those aims.

A nice summary of some of the most relevant contemporary issues for WP practice in the UK is provided by Vignoles and Murray (2016) in their editorial piece 'Widening Participation in Higher Education'. This introduction to four other papers provides a nice summary of four key issues in WP today: the need for a transparent and fully-evaluated form of contextual admissions system, the extent to which pupil expectations about their futures influence HE participation rates, how bursaries work in practice and how can the bursary allocation process be made as fair as possible? Following a short, but well-argued, case for more robust evaluation (including the use of random control trials), the final paper summarised highlights the shocking finding that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who have made it through the system still earn less in the labour market than their wealthier peers, suggesting that Universities may need to extend their WP activity into the realm of career support to be truly effective.

The ongoing issue of effective evaluation is addressed by Neil Raven's (2016) paper 'Making evidence work: framework for monitoring, tracking and evaluating widening participation activity across the student lifecycle'. The paper details a possible framework for WP practice and evaluation that might usefully structure a comprehensive WP programme from Primary up to post-16 provision. Incorporating three key areas: access, success and progression, the framework divides evaluation into that of delivery and impact (over short, medium and longer term). Although it provides useful holistic view of how a progressive programme might be structured and how evaluation can be logically planned to inform practice and support an evidence base for value/efficacy of WP activity across the full range of programmes, it is a little light on detail.

Some key themes from the reading:

- The key to truly widening participation probably lies more in attainment raising intervention and progressive collaboration with schools than in one-off aspiration-raising campus activity

- Dominant discourses in more selective HE's probably alienate some of the pupils targeted by WP practice and care should be taken around the use of language and in how student ambassadors are deployed as part of a WP programme

- The wording used in policy documents is vitally important not just for signalling the commitment to WP but also in helping staff to understand the aims clearly

- Some pupils are probably correct in concluding that HE/'elite' HE options may not be the best pathway for them and WP activity should aim to be perceived less a HE marketing tool and more a genuine non-partisan advice service that aims to help pupils make an informed decision that fits their personal circumstances

- Issues around WP and societal equality are not a uniquely British problem and the recognition that HE has a role to play in addressing these issues is shared internationally and across the home nations, though practice is influenced by differences in local political trends

- Whilst flexible options for admission and access can help increase participation, it is likely that WP activity needs to extend right through the HE journey in supporting students with degree study and post-HE options if the broader aim of reducing society inequalities is to be achieved.

- Evaluation is an ongoing issue for WP and proving efficacy and value are likely to continue to be a primary concern for WP practitioners. A mixed-methods approach to data will probably yield more useful information than a purely quantitative or qualitative approach.

- The ongoing neo-liberal marketisation of HE is likely increase tensions between providers chasing enrolments. The move of HE providers into the realm of transition courses will probably result in conflict with FE and potentially government intervention through funding changes - watch this space!

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