

Widening Participation Research and Practice in the United Kingdom on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Dearing Report, Reflections on a Changing Landscape.

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Abstract

This paper is a reflective and critical **review of aspects of** research relating to widening participation (WP) in higher education (HE). The motivation for undertaking this **review** was the twentieth anniversary of the Dearing Report *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (1997); **a document that ignited a wide range of WP activity and policy**. Dearing's report was published in the United Kingdom and represents one of the most significant reviews of higher education in this country since the Robbins' Report of 1963. His vision for HE included a "compact" between local and regional communities and their universities, and emphasised WP and greater student diversity. **I draw on my own research in WP since Dearing, compare with other research projects, and compare with my experiences as a practitioner and researcher in various contexts, including most recently in a post-1992 university known for being a WP institution.** This paper identifies several core themes that emerged from WP activities over the last twenty years **and that leads to the development of an added dimension in WP research**. It calls for more consideration of the complex and heterogenous identities of WP students today. It then returns to some of Dearing's original themes and considers how WP is situated in the current neoliberal climate affecting HE; it **presents a set of ideas for discussion with respect to the future of WP research**.

Key Words: Higher Education, widening participation, Dearing, identity, policy, research.

Introduction

The year 2017 marked the twentieth anniversary of Dearing's *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (1997). Following Dearing's landmark report a raft of initiatives and policies relating to widening participation (WP) and lifelong learning appeared in the United Kingdom, initiated by the election to power of New Labour, also in 1997. The report represented the largest review of higher education in the United Kingdom since the Robbins Report in 1963. The consequences of the Dearing Report initiated my research interest in the field of widening participation and a career in higher education (HE) began shortly after Dearing. This resulted in researching a range of WP-related projects over the subsequent years; as a researcher, a WP practitioner, a supervisor of theses, and a lecturer. The Dearing Report contained a twenty-year vision for an inclusive learning society. Dearing covered a wide range of important themes that still resonate, including:

- the need for higher education to expand to allow for widening participation;
- a greater focus on students' learning skills;
- a greater diversity of provision of higher education;
- public funding of institutions to take more account of student choice;
- ensure that its support for regional and local communities is at least comparable to that provided by higher education in competitor nations.

(Dearing, 1997).

Whilst much research and development in WP has taken place in the intervening years since Dearing, the economic, social and political context is very different today. It is therefore worthwhile taking stock of Dearing's original vision. However, the breadth of the Dearing Report is far too wide to review in a single paper and requires further study on its many individual aspects if this is to be achieved. Synthesising other researchers' findings with my

research since the phrase “widening participation” came into the higher education lexicon, this paper will focus on the following two themes derived from Dearing’s original report:

- access and widening participation for all learners
- the local and regional role for higher education

The first tranche of WP funded “special” projects (circa 1998) emerged shortly after Dearing; funding has continued in many ways since. This led to my research on several initiatives over the intervening years including; a project to widen participation for Muslim women, research into the retention and progression of students from low participation neighbourhoods, research on minority ethnic groups and teacher training, and research into the progression of school pupils to university study. Furthermore, being a practitioner in a U.K. institution recognised for its commitment and reputation in supporting WP students, has informed my understanding of the challenges presented, resulting in several related reports and publications that are synthesised in this paper (Thompson, 2017, 2012, 2009, 2008, 2006, 2004, 2000; Thompson and Tomlin, 2013).

It should be acknowledged that whilst WP has become a familiar term over the last twenty years, the aim of widening access to education for a greater diversity of the United Kingdom population is not a new phenomenon. For example, Simon (1960, 1990, 1994), Lowe (1989), Fryer (1992), Fieldhouse (1996), and Rose (2001) discuss the history of working class adult education. More generally, moves to increase participation is reflected in the extension college movement of the late nineteenth century, organisations such as the Workers’ Educational Association, and initiatives such as community education and Access to Higher Education programmes in the 1970s and 1980s (Thompson, 2012).

The intervening years since 1997 has seen a proliferation of WP-related projects and support networks such as Aim Higher and Action on Access. This has resulted in a strong and

vibrant WP community of practitioners and researchers. However, many of the concerns about how we engage with “non-traditional” (sometimes considered as a pejorative term) students remain. **This includes: how we recruit and support students regarded as non-traditional or under-represented, student debt levels and its impact on recruitment, and access seen through the lenses of race, gender, class and disability.** There is also underrepresentation at postgraduate level, an example of this is fewer students from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds undertaking teacher training through P.G.C.E. (Post-graduate Certificate of Education) (Thompson and Tomlin, 2013). Clearly, WP is still work in progress; as recently as 2016, a call went out to increase the participation of black and working class students more generally (Johnson, 2016). Mature students have also been at the centre of WP (Smith, 2008) research, often with a focus on gender. Researchers frequently conceptualise much of WP-related data within sociological discourses focussing on class, habitus and cultural capital, for example (Reay, 1998; Reay et al, 2010; Ball, 2006).

The diversity of students **should make us stop and reflect critically about our experiences as** practitioners and researchers, and the changing demands and pressures on students entering higher education and who fall within this generic label of widening participation. This paper, therefore, represents a brief pause for breath within a rapidly changing sector that over the last twenty years has seen a huge rise in fees and a growing trend towards the marketisation and commodification of education; in part sustained by mechanisms such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

The anniversary of Dearing has encouraged me to reflect on how the landscape of WP and its concomitant research has changed. When practitioners first started undertaking WP “special” projects from 1998 onwards, managing a local project began as an entirely utilitarian approach to research and data collection. Practitioners across many institutions met periodically to compare experiences and data, before returning to their institutions to write

their annual reports and strategies to the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE). These reports set out how “successful” projects had been, what they had uncovered about target groups, what had been achieved, and what was left to do. WP projects often addressed a wide range of different themes, examples include (not exhaustive): community voices, adult learners, part time study, acknowledging the student voice, progression and access, aspiration-raising, underrepresentation of minority ethnic communities, WP in rural areas, low participation neighbourhoods, gender.

After twenty years, research into widening participation has grown considerably. There is now a proliferation of research and papers published, both in journals directly relating to the theme of WP and lifelong learning, and within subject disciplines as well. Furthermore, “for widening participation to survive it must be prepared to evolve and adapt” (Reed et al 2015, p.391). Theoretical and philosophical debates around WP are a measure of the distance travelled in the field and the ideas that have been generated. Immediately post Dearing the focus was almost entirely practical, with practitioners mediating between academia and access. Most WP conferences at that time were almost wholly practitioner-based. Since then many practitioners have undertaken Masters and PhD qualifications, often based upon research from their practitioner focus. What this means is that today we have a greater evidence base around recruitment, pedagogy, retention and progression... although we can do more around locality, the micro, and the complexities and intersectionality of students’ identities and lifestyles. There are calls for “a theorised and nuanced approach to understanding aspirations that accounts for identity, context and social relations” (Burke, 2006, p.731).

What follows is a review relating to some of the key conclusions synthesised from my research, compared to wider research on WP more generally. Following a discussion about

the current education climate with respect to WP, HE and the implications of the findings from this paper, the article will briefly return to Dearing to formulate a conclusion.

Reflections: comparative research from the “micro” world of the local and the learner

The process or cycle of critical reflection (Schön, 1983) in this article represents observations from a systematic narrative review of a selection of research projects starting shortly after the Dearing report and up to the present day. The primary focus of this paper reflects on the findings of a project to widen participation for Muslim women by developing “new sites of learning” (Thompson and Rabiee, 2000). The aim is to re-evaluate the conclusions derived from a project researched in the early years following Dearing and then to compare the outcomes within the context of subsequent projects (Thompson, 2000, 2004, 2009, 2013, 2017) and the contemporary climate with respect to WP. The findings are synthesised with conclusions from research in the intervening years conducted in a range of HE institutions. The research on the Muslim Women Project (MWP) was also compared and contrasted to twenty different and diverse projects across the country running concurrently. The aim was to elevate the findings, enabling reliable extrapolations and generate new perspectives that would develop understanding and be useful to other researchers. Several core issues have emerged from this comparative process.

Flexibility

There has been a need to be much more flexible in terms of how institutions administer and support “non-standard” (especially part time) applications, requiring greater dedication of staffing and time. This also requires flexibility within systems and processes and responsive approaches to “non-traditional” students. Issues around funding, recruitment, enrolment,

registration, induction etc. still arise and are a particularly problematic for part time students. Flexibility and the need to provide clear and relevant information is essential; these are structural aspects of provision. The work needs to be supported by “proactive services” (Stevenson and Toman, 2013). This can be done in tandem with other support networks: “support from people, including employers and colleagues should be seen as an important contributing factor in determining whether or not a non-traditional student succeeds with the struggle to balance their work and study commitments” (Davies, 2013, p.67).

Other issues such as flexibility of timetabling, pace of provision, and delivery was raised by community providers and students within the MWP, however, distance learning was not seen as an option that provided a suitable solution. The communal and collective act of learning was regarded as important; this is reflected in Worsley’s recent research (2017). Pace and timing (and a feeling of belonging) are important for mature and PT students (Thompson, 2009, Worsley, 2017). However, too much fluidity and not enough sequential direction can be problematic as students attempt to navigate through HE. Contemporaneous with Dearing, Edwards suggested removing the (inflexible) field boundaries of educational provision, and provide “open moorland” (Edwards 1997) for the learner to roam at will. **However, as a metaphor, moorland suggests** a landscape where one can easily become disoriented and lost. A metaphorical compass and a map should be provided so that students have a clear sense of direction. In other words, you need good guidance, counselling, information etc. This resonates with WP research in a very different context, where pupils in local schools in the West Midlands felt the need for much more information, advice and guidance on progression to higher education (Thompson, 2017). The institution and the practitioner need to guide students on their pathway, many of whom will be the first generation in their family to attend university. Furthermore, Worsley’s research notes the importance of the relationship between students and their tutors in the support process and building confidence (2017).

Identity

A clear theme that emerged from the MWP was the sense of collective student identity. This allowed the students to develop peer support, bond, encourage each other, empathise, and cooperate to achieve mutually desired outcomes and develop understanding. Given that the part time (PT) students in the MWP studied off-campus and met perhaps just once per week, encouraging a group dynamic was important; “supporting each other through hard times” from “strangers” to “sisterhood” was highlighted in the research as a key theme raised by students (Thompson, 2009). This resonates with recent research (Worsley, 2017) with PT local students who developed a PT learner identity partly as a sense of “otherness” as mature students. In addition, they embodied their own routines and ways of doing things. Pegg et al (2012) note that PT learners often positioned themselves carefully in terms of their engagement with learning, working and personal life.

A conclusion, therefore, is to make more pro-active associations within new cohorts that remove feelings of isolation, help bond, and create a sense of institutional identity as well as group identity. Researchers have observed that engagement and belonging is important to student retention and success (Thomas and Jones, No Date), but this is more challenging to local students (Stevenson and Toman, 2013). Feedback from part time students, and from full time “commuter students” doing very long hours of paid work, corroborate this view in my experience. “Commuter students” is a term much more widely used in the U.S.A., where more than 85% of students fall within this category. There is also concomitant research from the U.S.A. (Jacoby, 2015; Newbold 2015; Forbus et al, 2011). However, it has been suggested that in the United Kingdom there does not appear to be “an explicit or shared definition” (Thomas and Jones, no date, p.14). Twenty percent of young full-time entrants

live at home in England and Wales, this figure decreasing with much higher socio-economic groups (HEFCE, 2009). With the number of mature students commuting from home likely to increase, it suggests a need to study in closer detail the phenomena of U.K. commuter students and how best they are supported.

It is important to increase students' sense of belonging and to help them socialise into University life. This socialisation process could be extended, research has pointed to the positive support of family members in supporting career and education aspirations: "drawing on existing social and cultural capital in families and communities might play an important factor in increasing applications and supporting students... such an approach needs to be reinforced with additional help in terms of understanding fully the application process" (Thompson and Tomlin, 2013, p.60)

The complexity of the student character is also observed: "results suggest that measures to aid recruitment require a multi-faceted approach that is complex" (Thompson and Tomlin, 2013, p.60). Whilst Thompson and Tomlin's research focussed on Black and Minority Ethnic students (BAME) and their lower participation in teacher training programmes, the conclusions of others suggest that one should be vigilant in not falling into the trap of making assumptions by purely race, class or gender alone. Race, for example, is subject to changing identity and "is not a stable category... a reified object that can be tracked and measured as if it were a simple biological entity"; identity is "not necessarily a stable, permanent, united center that gives consistent meaning" (Apple, 1993, p.vii). Burke's (2006, p.731) research into men accessing education concludes that "it is crucial to understand that aspirations are not constructed exclusively at the individual level but are tied in with complex structural, cultural and discursive relations and practices".

However we define or recognise identity, an institutional culture needs to be developed that facilitates a greater sense of belonging. Paradoxically, the U.K. higher education system is currently undergoing a construction “boom” (Plimmer and Viña, 2016), but “if we think a new building will make life better and it doesn’t, then maybe we need to think again” (Stevenson and Toman 2013, no page number). Teaching and learning strategies may also need to be reconfigured as students are expending so much time and money commuting, especially so in institutions known for widening participation and serving the local region (Southall et al, 2016; Thomas and Jones, no date). The student experience seems increasingly fragmented with very little time for extra-curricular activities, although a strong relationship with the course and course staff is important, (Worsley, 2017; Stevenson and Toman, 2013).

Mentors and Role Models

Mentoring is of course not new, however relatively little thought is applied to mature, local or PT students specifically. Having an experienced student study alongside others does have advantages. It addresses lack of awareness, confidence, and builds aspirations. There might also be the possibility of mentors returning to schools and communities as role models. Developing a collective identity and creating peer support is important, a strong sense of this came through in research from the MWP. This idea of students as a self-supporting collective, with a group identity, is raised in Worsley’s work (2017) and requires further thought about how this is utilised to maximum effect.

Mentors provide the new student with a certain sense of security; reducing the anxiety and apprehension that may occur, by providing accurate information concerning graduate education expectations, and by suggesting ways for making graduate education a positive and

successful experience. Having a mentor allows the student to begin his or her graduate career in the right direction with well-thought out, yet flexible goals, and realistic expectations (Peyton et al, 2001, p.348 cited in Clark, R and Andrews, J. 2009). Reed et all (2015, p.386) highlighted increased confidence and a sense of belonging, motivation and increased social capital resulting from mentorship programmes.

Confidence

Confidence was a significant outcome of research into both the MWP, and barriers to learning for students from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) (Thompson, 2009; 2004). For LPN students there was a perceptible difference in students' confidence that was best exemplified by their response to questions on their career development. Students from high participation postcodes (Thompson, 2004) registered a much more confident outlook as opposed to their LPN peers. The former's feedback reflected a more can-do approach... a "well once I have my degree I can go and do anything" philosophy, whereas LPN students were characterised by a much more hesitant and cautious approach about what they "hoped" they might do, if they were lucky. Students on the MWP felt that as their course progressed they "were better equipped to deal with the outside world" as their confidence increased. There was a discernible difference in confidence levels in both projects that ties in with Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital, for example (Lizardo, 2004). The importance of institutional habitus in the role of student retention, student diversity, and self-confidence has been highlighted (Thomas, 2002), especially with respect to the identity and habitus of working-class students (Reay, 2010). In future, more research on these themes would be welcomed, for example with respect to employability and career outcomes.

Commonalities with other projects

The diversity of conclusions in many different projects' reports across the United Kingdom reflected the differences between meeting the needs of a diverse range of students; yet consistent themes from many diverse projects were evident (Thompson, 2009). For example, the importance of information, advice and guidance, flexibility of provision, help with study support, communities of learning (peer support) and confidence. Certain interconnected themes emerged; the MWP (Thompson, 2009) and LPN (Thompson, 2004) project raised the issue of confidence and has been highlighted in other research; in a literature review on research into widening participation in higher education, "confidence" was referred to twenty-six times (Moore et al, 2013). The student demographic in the LPN research was mostly young students, predominantly white, on full time courses and from a wide geographic area. But there were similarities to the Muslim Women Project in the sense that what looked like a homogeneous group revealed subtle differences in students' thinking and their expectations. The research involved both quantitative and qualitative analysis that uncovered subtly different outcomes in terms of students' confidence and in the way they applied their degrees to career paths. Indeed, the most common theme in many projects was confidence – yet this is rarely highlighted in policy and strategy. Sometimes in the past policy-making has been at the expense of a "deficit model" (Jones and Thomas, 2005) where there is a discourse based upon the learner shortcomings, rather than building upon their qualities, experience and expertise.

The complex nature of our task as both WP researchers and practitioners was revealed again in the MWP (Thompson, 2009), and in understanding barriers to progression for students from LPN (Thompson, 2004). One might consider students on the MWP would represent a homogeneous and representative group. In fact, members of the local Muslim community advised the research team to "assume nothing" as each prospective student will

have a range of expectations of the course they undertake, a very different set of abilities, skills and experiences, and different needs. With respect to the LPN students, one would not be able to identify the less confident students any more than you might pick out the “local” student, for example. This is representative of the challenges institutions face. Who are the local or commuter students? Who are the less confident students? What don’t we know? Can we be certain of what we do know? Do we make too many assumptions and generalisations about the changing needs of students? What can we do to address confidence levels, especially of first-generation students in HE? Furthermore, part time students and those students with disabilities should not be regarded as homogeneous (Moore et al, 2013). **All these themes are magnified when one considers the diversity of students now going to university**; further investigation is required if one is to develop our knowledge around these issues.

Discussion

Diversity and Heterogeneity: Reflections on changing student identities and needs.

The broad scope of emerging themes into research on WP include issues of identity, confidence, flexibility, locality, diversity, commuting students, working students, part-time students etc. It suggests that universities need to consider the complexities of people’s lives. The intersectionality of complex identities suggests that previous research focussed purely on for example; class, gender, disability and race are necessary and important but only form part of the picture in terms of what support networks are provided for local students. Worsley (2017 citing Atkinson 2013) discusses “unity” and “difference” as well as “consensus” and “conflict” with respect to her research on student identity; we should consider these concepts in more detail when we try to understand the local and the micro contexts. Part time students

are “unified by this difference” and separation to the mainstream. The part time local learner identity “included meeting academic expectations whilst at the same time facing their perceived otherness as a mature student” (Worsley, 2017, p.125). This is slightly at variance with some of the students’ comments in other research (Stevenson and Toman, 2013) that allude to the need to be treated equally, rather than differently from the rest of the student body. Both views are valid, but it does add to the complexity and challenges we face as researchers and practitioners.

Many widening participation projects focussed on social or cultural groups within society have the effect of homogenising people, rather than acknowledging the intersectionality that produces diverse and complex needs and demands on students’ lives. The corollary of this is not how the institution might respond and adapt; but rather how prospective students were to “aim higher” for example, suggesting a deficit model approach (Jones and Thomas, 2005). Students “are summoned to adjust their behaviour and learning to fit with culturally implicit norms and pedagogical demands” (Wilkins and Burke, 2015, p.435). Non-traditional students may be compared against a core community of ‘included’ citizens seen as having the right kinds of values, skills and aspirations (Burke, 2006, p.730).

Many WP students are “commuter students” local to a university and are heterogeneous in nature with a range of needs to help facilitate their engagement (Thomas and Jones, No Date). Furthermore, current government ideologies “are sometimes abridged through government texts in to a single governing norm” (Wilkes and Burke, 2015, p.436); it condenses students into the simplistic category of consumers within a market and does nothing to acknowledge the diversity and complexities of their lives. Most “non-traditional” students do not form a homogeneous group within a community, as we know from the literature (Moore et al, 2013). One cannot make assumptions; they are holding down jobs, raising families *and* being students. Within this mix education may well play a subordinate

(but still important) role. Feedback from students suggest that it is likely in the contemporary climate that undertaking a degree is more about procuring a job or securing their current job (Worsley, 2017), rather than a lifestyle as Fisher (2008) suggested. However, for local and part-time students the lifestyle aspect might materialise through better employment opportunities, rather than a university experience.

Worsley notes (2017, p.124), with respect to part time mature students (and I would suggest many full time “commuter” students), “for students there was an expectation that they would fit their studies around other aspects of their lives (McInnes, 2003) in the realisation of being a ‘new’ or different kind of student”. This was not always the case for many students previously, who had the flexibility (not to mention student grants) to throw themselves headlong into their courses and University life on the institution’s terms. Today, the student body is increasingly heterogeneous. At a local or micro level, this does present problems when attempting any kind of extrapolation or generalisation to research and our experience as researchers. In terms of recruitment, retention, progression and achievement, it provides challenges to the institution as well. Institutions cannot rely on generalisations about their student intake when making decisions about support and barriers to academic progress. The concept of “highly individualised journeys” of aboriginal students in Australia (Reed et al, 2015) can in some ways be transposed to widening participation students in the UK. Thomsen’s (2012) research exploring the heterogeneity of class in Danish higher education suggests that “statistically and sociologically, university students are often treated as a homogeneous group” but that “the ever-increasing number of students in higher education demand a close examination of the hidden heterogeneity in the students’ social origin and educational strategies” (p.565). This call to explore “hidden heterogeneity” can also be applied to the U.K.

There is still a need for research that focuses on underrepresentation, class, disability, race, gender, etc. However, increasingly in my experience of teaching and research in this field, paradoxically many students do not define or label themselves in these ways. One might argue that this represents a very postmodern or post-structuralist condition, reflecting a view of society that is fragmented and disaggregated. A society where we cannot pigeonhole groups of people in the way that we used to; there is no “typical” student anymore. Yet the “normative” construction of a ‘traditional’ student and their experiences still persist” (Stevenson 2013, no page number). A normative construction has also been applied to those described as “non-traditional” students, in the sense that assumptions and decisions might be made about their needs, based on conceptualisations and previous research that is too homogenous and does not acknowledge complexity as much as it might.

Understanding the student experience (pedagogies and practicalities).

More research is required to understand in detail the needs of commuter students, building on the work of Thomas & Jones (No Date) and Southall et al (2016). Whilst there is research on student identity (Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Holdsworth, 2009; Moore et al, 2013; Southall et al, 2016;), relatively little is known about students and their lives outside the bubble of university study. For many “local” students, it is likely that their studies are juggled with other responsibilities. Stevenson and Toman (2013) concluded that maintaining employment was of key importance to local students. More research on understanding students’ experience and obtaining clearer evidence here would be helpful. There is a need to know more about the challenges students face; both academically and pastorally.

Teaching and learning strategies may also need to be reconfigured. Dawson (2013) draws attention to the use of “multiple learning methods” and technology to support students

that fall within WP initiatives. Many resources are posted on-line on various learning platforms; lecture slides, notes, resources, activities, reading etc. Students might question the point of commuting in to campus if they experience lecturers simply repeating that content. Delivery and content may need to be rebalanced towards activities such as flipped lectures and problem-based learning. If a student is spending so much time and money commuting (Southall et al 2016), they want to be sure they are challenged and are extending their knowledge and understanding. “The role of curriculum and pedagogy as enablers of non-traditional student success” has been regarded as important. There are calls for new pedagogic models for increasing numbers of diverse students, that include the development of “supportive relationships” (Dawson et al, 2013, p.706 and p.719) with academic staff and peers, and transition programmes that help students adapt to learning and teaching in HE.

As Reay suggested shortly after the publication of the Dearing report (1998, p.528) “The vast majority of British research on access to HE has concentrated on macro aspects of student composition”, at micro level it is a more complex picture. The focus on the macro aspect “provides no explanation of the underlying complexities of choice”. This is still the case today; Stevenson and Toman’s (2013) conclusions include: the need to identify student diversity, the need for institutional change that meet local students’ needs and creates a greater sense of belonging, better engagement and inclusion in decision-making for students, developing the student voice, a greater understanding from academic (and other) staff, further investigation into learning and teaching and the use of technology, and greater flexibility.

Wilkins and Burke (2015) have observed that researchers working within a sociological context have explored student choice of degrees and institutions through the background of geography, family, social class, gender, ethnicity or race. How institutions respond to these intersectionalities will be increasingly important in the future. Ball’s analysis through a combination “socosapes” (2009, p.178) and “spacial horizons” (2009, p.219) and

seen through a class lens helps us understand the complex nature of local choice and access, however Holdsworth (2009, p.227) suggests that:

The dominant discourse in the higher education literature has placed more emphasis on class rather than mobility, and as such it is often assumed that mobility strategies are determined by class. Yet this assumption ignores the relevance of diverse mobilities on student experiences.

When assessing the composite picture the research provides, what is clear is that research into widening participation and the whole area of access is far more complicated than is given credit. Added to this are rafts of institutional, policy and systemic issues that are highlighted in many widening participation project reports and research (Thompson, 2009). However:

the status of student identities is less clear. Recent theorisations on self and identity have been dominated by post-structuralist approaches that emphasise fluidity and hybridity, and the importance of seeking to explore the processes of identification, rather than treating identity as a discernible unified ‘thing’ (Anthias, 2001). From this perspective, the status of student identity is problematic (Holdsworth, 2009, p.227).

A Changing Landscape

The HE landscape has also changed significantly. The economic crash and age of austerity has meant society has undergone structural change. It has been suggested that recent economic turmoil “has exposed the vulnerability of widening participation programmes... to ideological swings, policy vogues and economic vicissitudes” (Reed et al, 2015, p.383). The market-led approach to higher education has resulted in decreasing investment in HE and less inclination to fund access initiatives. More recent policies tend to overlook “the growing

evidence of cultural and social barriers” (Reed et al, 2015, pp.383-385). A withdrawal of institutions from their social inclusion responsibilities suggest that reducing:

the diversity of institutions and hence opportunities for social mobility for the many – which is of course a fulfilment of the social justice remit of higher education... could be seen as an attack on the aspiration-raising WP agenda (McCaig. 2016, p.228).

Wilkins and Burke (2015, p.434) refer to the “variegation in the cultural dispositions, attitudes and motivations informing students’ perceptions and valuations of higher education” within the “hegemony of neoliberal discourse” and student choice prevalent today. Others suggest that current discourses within access agreements and scholarship programmes is now leading to intuitions shedding their social justice, liberal and democratic responsibilities (McCaig, 2016). The rules of engagement, therefore, may need to be reconsidered.

Research can still inform the educational journey many WP students undertake. The challenges that diverse ranges of students still face are mediated through the lens of social, cultural, economic, family and employment responsibilities; their identities being complex (Moore et al, 2013). However, more light will be shed on WP practice if we not only consider the HE *landscape* (an oft used metaphor), but we also consider students’ own micro *climate* and how we respond to and influence that climate. In many respects, each micro-climate is unique and ambiguous, perhaps even more so in increasingly diverse and complex cities and regions representing many different lifestyles and diaspora. It is not just about the student negotiating the landscape that institutions have shaped and formed for themselves over the last hundred years or more, but more about how institutions respond to climate change represented by the changing complexities of society. A greater awareness of people’s lives, demands, responsibilities in all their complexity would be helpful and determine new approaches to recruitment, support and pedagogy. For example, empathy is crucial in terms of

generating forms of professionalism that are ‘authentic’ and rooted in lived or ‘real experience’. Professionalism in this context is wedded to the task of authentically knowing the working-class other” (Wilkins and Burke, 2015. pp444-445). I would add that whilst striving to know the “other” we need to ensure we do not fall into generic assumptions about students simply based on class alone, to use one important example. “WP policy involves innovation, experimentation, and contestation rather than the rolling out of a stable programme of reform”. Institutional WP policies and activities should be informed not by neoliberalism, but reworked and “imagined differently” through local actors (Wilkins and Burke, 2015. p.449). I have offered the metaphor of “climate”, Thomsen refers to the development of the “cultural”; attempting to capture:

symbolic changes in peer groups... encompass everything in which the university programme’s students share a common interest. It encompasses the everyday life practices that the members of a given community all ascribe value to and recognize as important... where certain activities and forms of interaction are regarded and recognized as meaningful.” (Thomsen, 2012, p.568).

It is against this background that different cultural practices are to be analysed, as a result of the intersection between the students’ social origin, their habitus, educational strategies, and the institutional (pedagogical, etc.) structures they encounter on university programmes (Thomsen, 2012, p.581). There is however a certain paradox; whilst I suggest class, to take one example, is still relevant to our understanding, there is a growing need to conceptualise WP research in terms of identity, heterogeneity, locality and the changing HE landscape

Conclusion: Return to Dearing

Over the last twenty years WP research has often focussed on barriers to participation with a tendency to homogenise groups by gender, class, race and disability for example. Our knowledge around these themes is by no means complete and further research is welcomed. This includes understanding the priorities of students within the context of shifting HE policy with less investment in WP initiatives. Others have argued that “lifelong learning policy and widening participation is too narrowly focused on simplistic notions of ‘raising aspirations’, which are embedded in discourses of individualism, meritocracy and neo-liberalism” (Burke, 2006, p.730).

There is no doubt that the university sector in the United Kingdom has altered significantly over the intervening years since the publication of the Dearing Report. In more recent years the speed and direction has changed as we lose sight of Dearing’s original vision receding over the horizon, and stumble headlong into a world of Higher Education governed by market forces, performativity, and the continuing neoliberal discourse. It is conceivable that Dearing’s vision can be cloaked within this current climate, but it is a concern that widening participation measures are relegated as universities forge new identities for themselves. Dearing’s “compact” focussed on a developing relationship between higher education and society (Barnett in Watson and Amoah, 2007, p.146). However, writing ten years later, Dearing cites his regrets: “we might have done more to develop the concept we had of a ‘compact’ at local, regional and national level between universities and society” and “we did not do more to address the need of the part-time learner” (Dearing, in Watson and Amoah, 2007, pp.178-179).

Dearing’s second recommendation was to “give priority to those institutions which can demonstrate a commitment to widening participation” (1997, p.107). Whilst this has been supported through mechanisms such as The Office for Fair Access (OFA), there is a concern that in the current climate this commitment is severely tested within a “rigged and over

regulated quasi-market” where the idea of “higher education for most will be abandoned” (Scott, 2015, no page number) leading to a much more narrowly defined “coarsening” of the purpose of higher education. The danger is that universities more attuned to the principles of wider access, “those that have done most to widen the social base of higher education will be left to scramble for business in the marketplace” (Scott, 2015, no page number) and will be negatively affected. “Faculty perceptions are shaped by academic culture that runs contrary to the idea of playing public roles’ and faculties ‘are conditioned to believe that the civic competencies of students and the problems of society are not central to their roles in the university” (Checkoway 2001, pp.135–7). It begs further questions and calls for a discourse on how universities’ responsibilities to local and community needs (Robinson, 2012) are changing within the current landscape of HE. How important is a “HE for society”? – Engaging with place, region and culture. How will structural changes in funding affect the WP vision?

Contemporaneous with Dearing, Barnett (1997) set out a principle for developing HE where knowledge is difficult to pin down in world that is increasingly ‘unknowable’. Ten years later, Barnett noted how some academics faced a “rear-guard action in defence of the lost cause of public service higher education”, whilst others felt “the pendulum has swung too far toward an economic model”. With respect to communities, “there are concerns that other values that higher education might be helping to realise are being neglected” (Watson and Amoah, 2007, p.137). Those concerns must surely be magnified today; as Barnett concluded “in an increasingly marketised situation, can we any longer talk of ‘the idea of higher education’” (in Watson and Amoah, 2007, p.146). Others have commented on the transformation of higher education over recent years but observe persistent patterns of under-representation, of difference and diversity, values, and assumptions about WP policy and practice (Burke, 2012). “The time is apposite for widening participation work... to embark on

a fundamental reappraisal of its function in society. This process needs to dovetail with institutional and sectoral responses to massification and the attendant shifts in higher education funding models and teaching and learning practice” (Reed, 2015. p.393).

Through a comparison of WP research projects over the twenty years since Dearing’s report, this paper has observed some of the changing ideas and discussions generated throughout this time. The combined experience as a researcher and reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) has demanded that I take stock of the evolution of WP over the last twenty years and be critically aware of the progress that has been made. Furthermore, to consider possible directions for future research and practice, how the WP research agenda will be shaped by the changing policy landscape, and how we respond to a changing climate represented by student diversity and identities.

In the next twenty years WP research needs to consider: how meaningful data is collected that is representative of people’s needs; to what extent our knowledge and understanding is problematic or contested, meaningful, and can be extrapolated within a heterogenous climate; whether there are still generic and diagnostic barriers to access – especially within the local context; and how is the changing nature of student identity best recognised and understood? There is a need to acknowledge diversity and complexity in students’ lives and how we respond to this, as well as the need to consider the university’s place within an age of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2014). One must also consider the impact all this has on institutional policy, pedagogy and practice. Furthermore, a discussion on the current direction that HE is taking is required; one that takes into account its relationship with society and widening participation, or even a new widening participation, over the next twenty years.

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