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# How to think about widening participation in UK higher education

**Discussion paper for HEFCE by  
David Watson, Institute of Education,  
University of London**

## **1. Introduction: talking about widening participation**

A public discourse analysis would probably reveal that ‘widening participation’ (WP) is the most troublesome item in talk about higher education – in the media, in politics and beyond. Its record in creating moral panic (as in the Laura Spence affair or in aspects of the Second Reading debate on the 2004 Higher Education Bill) is notorious. Second on this list, I would suggest, comes ‘employability’ as a code for what students should want and employers say they are not getting; and third ‘dumbing-down’ in all its manifestations (entry standards, ‘Mickey Mouse’ courses, grade-inflation and so on).

Talking about widening participation is, however, not the same as thinking about it. These three areas of contention share another characteristic: that the related research field is so cluttered with non-commensurate, non-replicable research that anyone with a strongly-held opinion can find a research study to back it up.

There is also code in the WP arena. It can get bound up in discussions about social engineering and meritocracy in the wider society. It can be prayed in aid by colleges and institutions which feel disadvantaged by competitive approaches to resourcing (especially of research). It could be said to have derailed the Government’s attempts to improve the funding of universities, as the debates over the 2003 White Paper and 2004 Higher Education Bill shifted (as they invariably do) from questions about how to fund institutions to questions about how to support students.

This short paper has been commissioned by HEFCE to complement the “barriers” review - *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education* (Gorard *et al.* 2006 – cited below as Gorard). This paper’s status is defined in that report as a ‘thought-piece, presenting no new evidence or re-analysis’ (Gorard: 19). It is intended, however, to provide a way into what the report, and the mass of work on which it rests, can be said to mean in the current climate of policy for and strategic management of our higher education (HE) system. As for widening the scope, I have attempted to confine references here to items explicitly not covered in Gorard. This may be either because they do not meet that team’s methodological and substantive criteria, or because they emanate from the wider policy debate.

## **2. Why does widening participation matter?**

At its heart, of course, widening participation is an issue of social justice. More concretely, succeeding at it contributes to social cohesion.

The iron law seems to be that if you want higher education to be fairer, you have to allow it to expand. As you allow it to expand, you also have to consider the position of those who do not participate.

The more successful that national systems are in increasing participation and achievement, the greater will be the gap between those who stay on a ladder of educational attainment and those who drop off. In the UK we have solid, longitudinal data about the positive effects of participation, not only on the economic status of the individual beneficiary (in terms of HE the current Government's almost exclusive selling-point for its reforms), but also on their health and happiness and democratic engagement and tolerance; to say nothing of the life-chances of their children. See, for example, the output of the Wider Benefits of Learning Group at the Institute of Education (Bynner et al., 2003; Schuller et al., 2004).

In the meantime, we have a lot of hand-wringing about completion, persistence, or retention (as well as their reciprocals, drop-out and wastage). But the big picture is that we don't talk enough about re-starting or re-engagement.

The most important issue is the growing gulf between a successful majority and a disengaged minority. This becomes even more dangerous as, in Gorard's words, 'the culture of HE/FE has merged with mainstream culture' (Gorard: 12). The permanently disengaged become the individual 'self-blammers' whose histories have been eloquently mapped by Karen Evans and others (Evans 2003); collectively they make up what Ferdinand Mount calls the newly discovered class of 'downers' (Mount, 2004).

There are serious issues here for social mobility. Is HE simply a sorting device or does it have transformative possibilities? Unless it begins to deliver the latter, its social effects will be regressive. Gorard refers throughout to the problem of the 'usual suspects'. In another recent report, Nigel Brown and his collaborators have mapped the territory as it affects young adults. Their title gives away the story: *Breaking out of the silos: 14-30 education and skills policy* (Brown et al., 2004). What they call the 'royal route' (5+ good GCSEs, 2+ A-levels, followed by a full-time degree) dominates patterns of aspiration as well as of analysis (Brown, 2004: 14). It's also worthy of note that the royal route invariably leads away from home, with a direct correlation between A-level achievement and distance travelled to study (Gorard: 116).

Hence Alison Wolf's devastating description of vocational education as being 'a great idea for other people's children' (Wolf, 2003: 56). Hence also the battles over fair access to HE (and the accusations of social engineering – which has become almost as universal an epithet in contemporary British political discourse as 'liberal' in the United States). Gorard identifies the exact opposite of the royal route for those from multiply disadvantaged backgrounds: limited educational chances and achievement, higher prospects of dropping out at all stages, and – even if you do make it all the way through to graduation – lower earnings prospects and higher debt.

### **3. What do we mean by widening participation?**

WP can be a portmanteau concept. Here is how it is defined by the Teaching & Learning Research Programme (TLRP, jointly funded by HEFCE and the Economic and Social Research Council), in describing the set of projects it has recently commissioned:

‘Widening participation is taken to mean extending and enhancing access to HE experiences of people from so-called under-represented and diverse subject backgrounds, families, groups and communities and positively enabling such people to participate in and benefit from HE. People from socially disadvantaged families and/or deprived geographical areas, including deprived remote, rural and coastal areas or from families that have no prior experience of HE may be of key concern. Widening participation is also concerned with diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability and social background in particular HE disciplines, modes and institutions. It can also include access and participation across the ages, extending conceptions of learning across the life-course, and in relation to family responsibilities, particularly by gender and maturity (for details on the seven WP projects currently supported by the TLRP see [www.tlrp.org](http://www.tlrp.org)).’

So that is the researchers’ view of the field. It doesn’t omit much. The basic point is that widening participation is not just, or even primarily, about minorities. The equation of (class) x (gender) x (ethnicity) x (age) x (location) is a very complex one, and is now being added to by newly prominent variables such as disability. In the United States and the UK, for example, the position of poor young white males is now recognised as one of the most intractable problems (Jones, 2005). Meanwhile for the ‘perfect storm’ concatenation of indicators of educational deprivation, look at the fate of the group of what are now optimistically called ‘cared-for’ children (Jackson et al., 2005).

### **4. How are we (the UK and England in particular) doing?**

International benchmarking is notoriously difficult in this, as in many other educational settings. A dimension we rarely tackle is the comparison of participation indices across the European Union. The data referred to here (analysed by Brian Ramsden) are based upon a study called ‘EuroStudent 2000’, which the UK Government declined the opportunity to join (Slowey and Watson, 2003: 3-19).

Compared to the rest of the (current) EU, we in the UK apparently have: the highest percentage of part-time students; the highest average age of participants; the highest percentage of students with disabilities (although classification is notoriously difficult here); the second highest rate of working-class participation (behind Finland, one of the most planned systems in the EU); the lowest rate of ‘study from home’, and the second lowest level of recruitment to ‘regional’ institutions (Slowey and Watson, 2003: 3-19).

It's interesting to reflect on how this pattern may be changed by the EU accession states (some useful preliminary work has been done by the Higher Education Policy Institute [HEPI, 2004a]). I anticipate not much. In the meantime, it's worth reflecting on why (despite all of our legitimate concerns about equity), the UK seems to do comparatively well. Looking from the United States to the UK, the latter may seem less diverse and more fixed into a traditional mould. Looking from the UK to Europe puts everything in an entirely different light.

By international standards the UK is doing well at some extremely important aspects of HE (research, retention, the global market). We are also doing well at lifelong learning (including continuing professional development) for those members of society who remain engaged. We are doing less well in immediate post-compulsory education, and this is where the fork in the road between the engaged and the disengaged appears to be.

This is largely because of where this particular sector starts in the UK: at 16 formally, and at about 14 informally with increasing evidence of disaffection in schools. What we know is that the 'participation gain' generated by the much-needed reform of the 16+ examination system is probably now exhausted (Aston, 2003). Essentially we have created a fault-line between those who succeed and those who fail post-16 because we are scared of the alternative: that of declaring that nobody's publicly-supported education and training should cease at 16. In many competitor economies employing 16 year-olds without offering education and training would not only be unthinkable but also illegal. In her 1997 report on further education, *Learning Works*, Helena Kennedy was adamant that the threshold level of education for subsequent happier and more productive lives stands at Level 3, not Level 2. If we want a high-added value, knowledge-based, globally-competitive economy, we should understand that it is incompatible with maintaining what is called 'the youth labour market'.

This raises another set of performance questions for widening participation in HE: access to what, and with what effect on life-chances? Gorard points out how little effect the WP agenda has had in 'changing the product' within HE itself. There is no recent practical example that can match the undoubted emancipatory impact on earlier generations of either the London University external degree or the Open University.

As for life-chances after graduation, the Council for Industry and Higher Education, among others, has pointed out that employers have been notoriously slow to appreciate the benefits of a wider and more inclusive pool of graduates (CIHE, 2002).

## **5. What works (here and elsewhere)?**

The English Higher Education Act of 2004 put the concept of 'under-represented groups' into legislation (I believe) for the first time. While undoubtedly well-meaning, this may turn out to be a dangerous development. The notion of a political

majority deciding at any time who is and who is not most ‘under-represented’, for the purposes of selective help, should chill the blood.

A survey of the fate of what might be regarded as under-represented groups around the world will show what I mean. Turn the question on its head, and look at local cultural and political hang-ups. Who, in fact, is meant to be left outside? The experience of other countries is that targeted positive discrimination invariably has unintended knock-on effects (for several examples – including the effect on the Chinese ethnic minority in Pacific Rim countries – see Watson, 2005b: 137).

To look through the other end of the telescope, how much should a university try to look like its host community? How important is this as an institutional and/or a sectoral priority? How, in enrolling and developing students from across the current groups in society, can the university or college seek to change that community for the better?

In the United States, elite universities compete for excellent students from minorities and from disadvantaged communities because they are trying to construct a ‘class’ which will be representative of the best and brightest that American society can offer in the future (there’s an element of self-interest here too) (Bowen et al., 2005). In the UK the discourse is structured much more around a deficit model, agonising about the under-representation of lower socio-economic groups in the system as a whole, and especially in the more prestigious institutions (see the Secretary of State’s letter to HEFCE quoted in section 7 below).

In both countries this has become a contentious issue, as American institutions move their financial aid away from ‘need’ and towards ‘merit’ (scholarly and athletic), and as UK institutions tackle the unwelcome fact that the conventionally qualified students from poorer backgrounds are just not there in sufficient numbers to satisfy the political critics. In both countries there is a dearth of clear thinking about the empirical bases of the argument, partly because of the lack of solid longitudinal, controlled evidence about the motivation, assets and characteristics of the actual and potential ‘market’. This is the big message in the Gorard report: we don’t really know what we think we know.

## **6. What is to be done?**

As in most circumstances of moral panic, one response is an almost pathetic search for the single-issue intervention that will improve the situation (often without consideration of knock-on effects); another is a similarly dysfunctional search for scapegoats.

Closer investigation will reveal that many such prejudices are irrational, and that many conclusions arising from systematic research are counter-intuitive. For example,

in the UK it is increasingly clear that widening participation is *not* about the following (at least to the extent that is often claimed).

WP is not about consistently perverse decisions by higher education admissions tutors. Especially in some universities, these gate-keepers can be pompous, narrow and seriously uninformed. But such *traits* have not created the system. If anything, says Gorard, university admissions have improved rather than further undermined distributional fairness (Gorard: 41). A recent study by the Nuffield Foundation's 14-19 group showed how hard well-motivated admissions tutors do try – across the system – although this carefully nuanced report played all too predictably in the press as another moral panic (see Wilde et al., 2006, and then the *Times Higher Education Supplement's* lead story 'Tutors in despair at illiterate freshers', 10 February 2006).

Meanwhile, advocates and opponents of an admissions system in which offers of university places are made after pupils know their A-level results, add another variety of single-issue debate. Whatever the merits of getting rid of the system of conditional offers might be, it's not at all clear that the main benefits would be felt by well-qualified, socially disadvantaged students doing better in examinations than either they or their teachers predict. (Another proposal, referred to by Gorard, is for the random distribution of places. This is highly unlikely to persuade the Headmasters' Conference.)

Nor is WP about well-qualified students from poorer or minority backgrounds making irrational choices of institution. This is one of several mistakes made by Stephen Schwarz in his two reports (DfES 2004a and 2004b). In these 'fairness' is related to 'equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and background' (DfES 2004a 4.1). That is, it's not about a simple competition which some will win and some will lose. Instead this definition assumes (absurdly) that if everybody behaves appropriately, the number and quality of the places available will match the number and quality of the applicants. (As the *Guardian's* Guy Browning said: 'the trouble with fairness is that there isn't enough to go around' [18 September 2004]).

Genuinely 'fairer admissions' will involve telling some apparently well-qualified students (especially those whose families have spent a lot of disposable income making them so) why they have *not* been selected. Meanwhile reassurance will be required to well-qualified students from poorer backgrounds that going to an institution other than 'the most selective' can be a life-affirming choice. For some students, pharmacy at Bradford, or fashion textiles at Brighton, will make a lot more sense – in academic, as well as career and networking terms – than medicine at Oxford, or history of art at Exeter.

Above all there is the question of how many such students there are. Bahram Bekhradnia and others have consistently reminded us that high A-level grades also correlate with family prosperity (Foxwood, 2006: 142). In this sense, the problem of raising aspirations, or of 'fair access' to prestigious institutions, is a tiny one

compared to the genuine WP challenge of getting more people to the matriculation starting gate.

WP is not always about lack of aspiration by those whose compulsory schooling has taken a wrong turn (or even a rational turn into vocational routes). There is not enough research on the feelings and capabilities of the non-engaged. Gorard points out how quickly most studies simply focus on the players rather than the non-players, who are relegated to a passive and silent background role. What this can disguise is how many of them are not passive by choice, but seriously angry about the hand they have been dealt (see Gorard et al., 2006: 32; Slowey and Watson, 2003: xix-xx).

WP is not just about aversion to debt. We need to look at attitudes to debt in the wider young population. We should certainly be tracking all the current studies about student debt, but also those about debt in society (where we often don't see debt aversion, but rather debt joy). For those who haven't read the latest chronicle of our time by Sue Townsend, I strongly recommend *Adrian Mole and the Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Penguin 2005); the joke is that the weapons referred to are store cards.

WP is not simply about supply-side issues, such as the lack of short-cycle alternatives to traditional degrees, even though these can be a most popular magic bullet. It is not clear that the latest such experiment – the two-year foundation degree – will prove any more successful than its predecessor, the Diploma in Higher Education (DipHE). Certainly the propensity for its greatest take-up to be among public service 'uniforms' – health workers, classroom assistants, the police and the armed forces – seems reminiscent of the way in which the DipHE rapidly became the normal initial qualification for nurses.

In fact there is no silver bullet in prospect by fixing any of these perceived problems. At the same time, the evidence is increasingly clear (and hard to live with) that the following interventions would help.

Widening participation in the UK *is* potentially about improving the quality of school-based experience for all students, but especially those from under-represented groups. Success in compulsory education is vital. What is more, you don't get this by separating sheep from goats, whether or not the pens are labelled 'academic' and 'vocational' or 'public' and 'private'. This goes to the heart of national ambition, and, as set out above, I think that the UK is seriously wanting in this respect, including most recently in the political response to the Tomlinson Report.

WP *is* about parental expectations; and there is a danger in the current cross-party consensus that giving more 'power to the parents' who are already powerful is likely to increase rather than reduce polarisation. This is not to say that poorer parents don't want 'choice', just that it is notoriously harder for the system to supply it. However, Gorard points to the higher than average positive influence of parents from some ethnic minorities (Gorard: 98).

WP is about governments and employers recognising that Level 3 (high school graduation in international terms, or university matriculation in UK-speak) is the pivot, or tipping point, for the creation of a learning society.

Perhaps most importantly it is about getting employers to live up to their rhetoric of supporting both younger and older workers in their personal learning trajectories (especially the former). The quarter of all English 16-18 year-olds who are receiving no education and training at all, even when in work, all too easily converts into the one third of all adults who engage in no further learning at all after the school leaving age (NCE, 2003: 11; Gorard: 5). And things are apparently getting worse; the proportion of 16 and 17 year-olds not in education, employment or training went up from 9.4% in 1994 to 12.6% in 2004 (HEPI, 2006: 5).

There are some genuinely ‘wicked issues’ here. One is the tension between expansion and participation. As set out above, to achieve increased ‘fairness’ will require further expansion, but at the same time it risks increasingly disadvantaging those who do not participate. So there are difficulties in working out how to help the disadvantaged without further advantaging the advantaged. At the practical level, there are further difficulties with targeted interventions that end up by undermining and confusing each other.

Finally, on this track, we have a problem about lack of patience. The solutions here (including growing a broader base in society that will have confidence in mass or universal higher education because it has experience of it) are inevitably long-term.

This is not to say that, from the perspective of the university or college, ‘fair access’ and ‘widening participation’ are somebody else’s problems. Indeed this might be said to be a test case of how far the higher education system is genuinely integral to and implicated in the success of civil society, rather than apart and downstream from its day-to-day dilemmas. HE can’t tackle this problem by itself; equally it can’t simply say that it’s somebody else’s job.

In this context, we must accept (and respond to) the fact that institutions can be hard-wired to resist this agenda. A classic problem is the ‘header tank’ on admissions, whereby institutions recruit first the students whom it is easiest to recruit and then go looking for the rest. Another is our reluctance, inside universities and colleges, to make constructive use of credit accumulation and transfer (as opposed to devising frameworks for credit accumulation, but rarely for transfer [HEPI, 2004b]). A third is the tendency to over-hype ICT-based solutions to almost any pedagogical challenge (in relation to WP, Gorard takes this as a ‘case-study’: 13-17).

The sector and its representatives have also been slow to lead the relevant public policy debate. On the latter point, as in the United States, we seem to have here a set of priorities that institutional leaders discover when they are about to retire (Broers, 2005).

## 7. What could HEFCE do?

HEFCE is, of course, under almost permanent pressure to do more. The latest letter of direction from the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (31 January 2006) is a case in point. The key paragraph reads as follows:

‘The second [priority] is on widening participation in HE for low income families, where in spite of the recent progress we have made we do not perform well enough. Low rates of participation in HE among the lowest socio-economic groups represent entrenched inequality and in economic terms a waste of human capital. I am therefore asking the Council to explore options for additional support in widening participation in 2006-07, building on the work that has already been done in understanding the costs to institutions.’

In the terms of this paper, the interesting point here is the selection of indicators, interventions, and levers. The political focus is on income (as a proxy for class?), on human capital formation, and on responding to a case made by HEFCE for additional teaching funding (to improve targeted recruitment and subsequent retention). These are all worthy and rational causes, but they may serve to disguise other variables: other forms of discrimination; the social capital effects; and the inadequacy of core institutional funding. Meanwhile, the implication of this paper is that, in pursuing such objectives, HEFCE should strive to take more responsibility for the medium and long-term prospects for WP; and in particular that it should avoid the trap of ‘over-promising’ in the short-term.

As a first step, HEFCE should take the Gorard report seriously. It confirms the fact that we know some very simple things securely, especially about the sources of educational inequality in other forms of inequality. In this sense it validates HEFCE’s earlier statistical foray into the field. *Young Participation in Higher Education* (January 2005: HEFCE 2005/03) established definitively that HE life-chances are set well before presentation for matriculation is a question. Meanwhile, Gorard underlines that, by normal social scientific standards, we know very little about the more complicated things, especially the prospects for more specific short-term interventions, and how to improve matters – short of utopian redistribution and cultural change. The barriers so frequently referred to are large, multi-faceted and mutually reinforcing. The Teaching and Learning Research Programme should serve to improve our understanding of at least some of these diverse matters.

The problem for HEFCE may be that, given the constraints of annual letters of direction from the DfES and three-year spending reviews, it has, understandably and inevitably, camped in the field of the short-term. It has put its faith (and spent its reputation) in little steps (often followed by disappointment and confusion) rather than in publicising the big picture. How could it regain the higher ground? A start could be made by establishing some softer (but simultaneously bolder) objectives.

The first step would be to get ahead of the game by integrating rather than proliferating initiatives. Work with schools and communities does not fit short-cycle initiative timetables, and in the field of WP it also breaks out of regional boundaries. Take Lifelong Learning Networks as a test case (Watson, 2005a).

More contentious would be the goal of assisting better understanding of the issues raised here, on the part of politicians, the public, and the sector. A degree of courage would be required, for example, in taking a stand on the 14-19 curriculum framework (as the sector palpably failed to do on the Higginson Report in the 1980s, or the proposals in the 1970s for normal and further [N and F] levels below A-level); on youth employment without training; and on employment discrimination affecting graduates.

At the highest level a commitment could be made consistently to frame short-term initiatives within an ambitious overall policy goal. For example, HEFCE could encourage a view of both modal achievement of young people at 18, and lifelong learning that is set at the same aspirational level (and with the same long-term goals) as the Government's commitment to eliminating child poverty (see Toynbee and Walker, 2005:48). That would be evidence of deep thinking about widening participation.

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