

**Neoliberalism and the drivers of system differentiation: a journey from equality to equity**

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# **Neoliberalism and the drivers of system differentiation: a journey from equality to equity**

Colin McCaig

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# Research context

- Differentiation and how it plays out in English marketised HE context-competition
- Equity and its relationship to neoliberalism
- Equality and Equity in policy discourses

# Differentiation and competition

Marketisation of HE systems is based on differentiation

Competitive differentiation (e.g. English system) may be harmful to social justice outcomes

Differentiation can appear in indicators of value, quality and prestige (vertical differentiation)  
or

In different *types* of HE: by discipline; by learning mode; by relevance to labour markets (horizontal differentiation)

# Vertical differentiation

- familiar 'better than' way of seeing our higher education sector
- from Oxbridge at the top to the 'bog standard ex-Poly' and FE college at the base
- League tables show how institutions compare on a linear scale
  - entry requirements
  - staff-student ratios
  - proportion achieving good degrees
  - income from research
  - no. of post-grad students

# Horizontal differentiation

- A 'different to' way of seeing our higher education sector
- recognises that there are different types of HE for different needs
  - learning types (vocational, WBL)
  - learning modes (full-time; part-time; distance)
  - institution types (universities, specialist institutions, FEIs)
  - social aims (fair access; widening participation)
  - policy aims (social mobility; system diversity)
  - labour market needs (philosophers; engineers; nurses)

# Horizontal differentiation encouraged in policy

*A diverse HE service should be able to provide choices of curriculum offer; choices as to the mode, pace and place of delivery; choices regarding the physical and intellectual environment available; and choices between a range of different institutional forms and missions.*

(HEFCE: 2000, para 14).

# Equality vs Equity

Equity: the fairness or impartiality of access to higher education

More specifically the extent to which equity is affected by the processes of marketisation and increasing differentiation (Lynch 2006).

System diversity: a system cannot be equitable if it is not socially diverse, but

A system that socially engineered diversity could not be considered equitable if it impinged on access for others (Meek 2000; Savage et al 2013).



# Equity and neoliberalism

The key drivers for more equitable systems are often cited as national efficiency and competitiveness, and as such ***equity is a notion closely allied with human capital***, the restructuring of education and the development of the 'neoliberal imaginary' (Lingard 2010).

In a neoliberal universe equity is about equality of ***opportunity (rather than outcome)*** and places the onus on individuals to maximise their own educational success (socio-economic and cultural backgrounds ignored).

The obligation to make the system more equitable, rather than more equal, shifts responsibility from states and universities to (***meritorious individuals***).

Equity (as fair and impartial access) is a ***variable*** concept, context dependent rather than an absolute concept like equality, and is often framed as a market enhancing mechanism (Savage 2013)

# Context of English access policy

## Policy shift since 2000

- steadily more pro-competition policy 2003 HE Act; Brown Review 2009; 2011 White Paper; 2015 Green Paper

## Discourse shifts:

- from 'Widening Participation' to 'Fair Access'
- social justice (for all) to social mobility (for the few)

# Data

two sources

- Impact of number controls policy and marketisation in the 'changing HE landscape' (mixed methods; 2013-14; HEA funded)
- Access agreements (longitudinal 2006-2013; comparative content and discourse analyses)

# Choice and competition (2012-13 regime)

## Effect on post1992 institutions

- Closure and rationalisation of some courses
- Withdrawing modules that have been shown not to recruit strongly
- Increased emphasis on recruitment and retention, league table positioning, and NSS scores
- Freeing up resources for more lucrative/prestigious activities (i.e. other provision, or for research)

# The changing student profile of institutions

- All institutional types **experienced greater volatility** in admissions and enrolments
- **Half** of all respondents reporting higher UCAS points for entry
- Declining numbers of part-time students (since fee increase)
- BTEC-qualified students are increasingly clustering in post-1992 institutions (implications for transition support)

# Pressure on the notion of widening participation

The commitment to Widening Participation in many universities who are worried about their [numbers are] almost disappearing because of the risks that go with students arriving, not being retained, that affecting effectively your income streams.. (Post-92 2)

.. I think we are starting a conversation around whether or not we would want to be offering some unconditional places to people that we feel are *really highly likely to come to us* and that takes the worry away for them. (Post-1992 3)

# The move 'up-market'

...there is a tension within the institution, there is this trade-off about "quality, quality, quality, don't worry about the numbers", versus "quality, **plus** worry about the numbers", if I can put it that way.

Widening participation, I think there is a pressure point there because I know that the governors are very keen on the widening participation....agenda, **versus the fact** that of course if you look at our numbers at the moment, **we exceed all of our benchmarks** on widening access...

..... so **losing some of those numbers** would not probably make a very big significant impact on that agenda. (Post-1992 **1**)

# The squeezed middle?

.... it's interesting I think as to whether ***trying to chase into the middle ground***, which is what the university strategy is, is the most sensible strategy, or whether you get squeezed out of the squeezed middle. ... if I was to look around other Post-92 universities in [this region], it seems to me to be that ***everyone is following the same strategy*** and ... it's not something you wouldn't say, go for excellence, go for quality [but] on the other hand ***if 90% of your other institutions are doing that....*** (Post-1992 1)



# Neoliberal business case scenarios

... retention's a big issue, it's not only the idea that [dropping out] is a terrible thing for a student in terms of life changing events, but the ***financial imperative is manifest***. So that's a grand challenge and the business model is absolutely simplified: ***recruit, retain, recruit, retain***. Particularly if you are not going to be a big attracter of AAB/ABB (Post-1992 **2**)

# (re)branding hunger games

I do see a lot of branding which is ***much hungrier than ever before*** and not just about the academic brand, the academic reputation.... I think branding [is] like an algorithm of components derived in terms of the indicators within league table algorithms.

.....But I do think that's where you're starting to see sharper consideration of brand, whereas in the past it was almost like, brand was more about, ***come here, we're a little bit different, quirky.***

[The use of NSS data in marketing] it's real schizophrenic behaviour, ***as academics we know that the data is pretty flaky*** in many ....

With poverty sometimes there's a diminution of ethics. ***Hungry people do hungry things, so it's one of the reasons not to let people be hungry.*** (Post-1992 2)

# Discourse and social control: reinforcing the hierarchy

Oh they've been planted and seeded, it's great politics, the management of that discourse is amazing. .... and it just infiltrates the press and infiltrates the man on the street who doesn't really understand the issues, but can say ***the better universities, the top universities.***

I really do lament that because people's life chances, it's old-fashioned kind of ***control your masses stuff***, but it's cleverly done, ***if these things were publicly spoken it would be determined as fascist.....***

.. (Post-1992 **2**)

# Access Agreement data

- 2003 HE Act; Office for fair Access
- Additional Fee Income
- Access expenditure: financial support and outreach
- Institutional policy rationales: markedly different approaches pre- and post-1992
- Content analyses; discourse analyses; comparative analysis time-series 2006-2012

# Access Agreement - themes of neoliberal discourse

- from the institution to the individual
- from diversity to employability
- the drive upmarket
- the 'challenge' of widening participation

# **Institution to the individual: 2006**

We are a ground-breaking and distinctive higher education **institution**, whose vision is: to combine academic rigour with vocational relevance; to work in partnership with other providers and the public and private sectors, to make a substantial contribution to **meeting the higher level knowledge and skills needs of the [region] and beyond.** (post2)

# Institution to **individual**: 2012-13

The University's mission is to '**unlock the potential within individuals** and organisations through the excellence and responsiveness of our teaching, research and student support'. The University is committed to part-time, vocational and professional education; widening participation and **extending educational opportunities** to mature students and other under-represented groups (**post2**)

# Institution to individual: 2006

Building on **our current strengths**, we aim to engage with our students and customers and to **offer them the products, skills and opportunities** they need to succeed. We recognise that this means that our academic provision will **need to be market sensitive** .... By this opening up of opportunities **we will liberate, for the economy and for society**, the talents and skills of thousands of graduates every year (post8)



# Institution to **individual**: 2012-13

The University is committed to ensure that students have access to **an education which will be valid and relevant to them as individual learners**. We recognise that a diverse range of students require diverse learning styles and support structures. .... the University will **offer a diverse range of learning opportunities that suit individual needs (post8)**.

# Diversity to employability: 2006

The University uses the term **‘widening participation’** in its broadest sense and **encompasses dimensions such as race, social class, age, gender, sexuality and disability**. It also relates to the whole student experience of HE, ranging from pre-entry through to progression, achievement and employment. .... The University has a diverse student population. One of its shared values ... **is ‘respect for diversity amongst members and prospective members of its community’**. (post3)

# Diversity to **employability**: 2012-13

We will ensure the accessibility of all our courses through a comprehensive programme of support that starts in local primary schools **and extends to assisting our graduates into their chosen professional careers.** .... The University .... has a long-standing and well evidenced commitment **to widening participation and fair access.** (post3)

# Moving upmarket: 2006

Widening Participation has been a **leading mission** for the University [...] for 15 years, reflected in an ongoing Strategy for Widening Participation which underpins the Corporate Plan, and is reviewed and revised annually. (post4)

# Moving upmarket: 2012-13

The University will **maintain its commitment** to delivering fair and facilitative access and progression arrangements as part of its overall commitment to widening participation. Activity relating to **retention, achievement and employability** already forms part of **our holistic approach to widening participation**, as detailed in the University's Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (**post4**)

# The challenge of WP: 2006

The University has performed well in terms of recruiting regionally and especially from low-income groups and local ethnic-minority communities. Despite sector-wide growth in these areas, further improvement has been achieved with the result that we continue to exceed the benchmarks. **The scope for further improvement is now more limited.**

(post5)

# The challenge of WP: 2012-13

The change in University funding, in which the balance of the cost of studying has been largely shifted from the State to the graduate, **may become a major challenge to widening participation and through it to increasing upward social mobility.** ..... research also suggests that changes to the national funding model may also **change the relative demand for particular programmes** and specific institutions. In response we have **reviewed our portfolio, and withdrawn degree programmes which our research suggests will not fare well in the new environment.** (post5)

# Discussion: how is marketisation playing out?

Is competitive behaviour in the English HE system creating vertical differentiation?

Does increased vertical differentiation mean less system diversity?

What prospects are there for equality of access to HE in a less diverse system?

2015 Green Paper - DAP & UT becoming easier; 'failure' and 'exit' to become easier

Expansion / replacement to drive down public cost of HE



# Thanks

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