

(Re)conceptualising 'disadvantage' in UK widening participation policy: possibilities for transformation?

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Published version

MCCAIG, Colin and STEVENSON, Jacqueline (2016). (Re)conceptualising 'disadvantage' in UK widening participation policy: possibilities for transformation? In: Widening Participation Conference : 'HE: Transforming lives through life-wide learning', Milton Keynes, April 27-28th 2016.

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(Re)conceptualising 'disadvantage' in UK widening participation policy: possibilities for transformation?

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Dis/advantage and what to do about it

- who is advantaged?
- who is disadvantaged?
 - definitional issues
 - subjectivity/problematising framings
 - diverse policy responses
 - diverse institutional responses
 - the impact of the market

Defining disadvantage

- 'disadvantaged students' - variously described as:
 - working-class;
 - from low social-class groups;
 - from low-participation neighbourhoods;
 - former recipients of free school meals;
 - first-generation (more recently 'first in family')
 - white males?
 - state school pupils??

Considerations

- Often no clear definition: often defined by what they are 'not'
- Positions students – 'not', 'non', 'other'
- Related to ways of imagining 'potential' and 'ability' & potential to benefit from HE
- Constructions are often political ('excluded'; 'hard-working families')
- Lack of intersectionality (other than race and gender)

And categorisations are problematic

- Social class...
 - NS-SEC 8 is assigned to:
 - all students with disabilities;
 - those who are full-time parents or carers;
 - those on means-tested benefits;
 - those who are retired;
 - those who are unemployed - 'long-term' or otherwise
 - Other problematic proxies used e.g. FSM, LPN/POLAR

Focus of national policy gaze(s)

- Diverse drivers and interests: individual, social, economic benefits for making the 'non' become 'traditional'
- Widening participation, social mobility, equality and diversity policies: shifting focus on specific groups (though with some consistency e.g. low socio-economic)
- Time and context specific

Shifting gazes: UK context

Non-traditional Students

- Black and Minority Ethnic
 - (male only, female only)
- Low Socio-economic group
 - NS-SEC marker
 - State school
 - Free school meals
 - low participation neighbourhood
 - white w/c boys
- Part time learners
 - Mature/Adult learners
 - Work based learners
- Students with disabilities
 - with mental health support needs
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Care leavers
- Religion/belief
- Parents/carers

Gaze

- HEFCE WP performance indicators
- Aimhigher/national WP outreach activities
- HEFCE student outcomes activity
- OFFA access agreement guidance
- Institutional localised policy concerns
- Institutional WP localised practice
- Institutional pedagogic practice and concerns
- Single Equality Act/Equality and Diversity activities

HEFCE's current national gazes

What	Who
HEFCE WP performance indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young FT: state school/college; NS-SEC 4-7; low participation neighbourhood • Mature /young PT: no previous HE qual. + low-participation neighbourhood • In receipt of the Disabled Students' Allowance
Networks for collaborative outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people • National level: Oxford or Cambridge, older learners, care leavers.
National strategy for access and student success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to benefit from HE; equal opportunity to participate/succeed regardless of background, age, ethnicity, disability, gender. • Student life-cycle from access to employment.
National Scholarship Programme – NSP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-income backgrounds
HEFCE Inequalities activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inequalities of degree and employment outcomes for BME students • Inclusive LTA environments for students with disabilities
PG Support Scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where students are under-represented on courses

Policy in practice

- From WP to Fair Access - a brief history
- Mechanisms of framing (1): low participation neighbourhoods
- Mechanisms of framing (2) government policy and institutional discourses (re)defining disadvantage

State involvement in WP

- History of access to higher education in the UK being strongly stratified by social class / disadvantage. Hierarchy of institutions based on currency of entry grades
- A diverse and differentiated sector (ancients; civic universities; post-Robbins universities; polytechnics and colleges of HE (now post-1992s); specialist institutions (arts, drama etc); large FE colleges
- 1992 Act: HEFCE encourages institutional diversity in unified sector
- Increased participation = widening - by type of HE and by the type of students

State involvement in WP

- Significant policy interest from Dearing review of HE funding 1997 and the new Labour government - National *Aimhigher* programme (2004 to 2011) – around £1 billion invested
- 2004 HE Act: variable fees and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA): significant financial investment from universities from 2006 onwards – now around £100 million per year.
- HEFCE funded national Networks of Collaborative Outreach/NCOPs and new HE participation targets set by a Conservative Govt

The differentiated HE market and the rise of 'fair access'

- Generic WP has little effect on research-intensive institutions which maintained high entry grades
- OFFA can exhort *applications* but no powers to change *admissions*
- Schwartz report (2004) on fair admissions recommended 'transparency'
- Thereafter the focus shifted more towards 'fair access' (non-discriminatory) and social mobility :-
- Hence the AAB+ student number controls policy; hence information driven choice by consumers (SHS, 2011)
- But social mobility has to be for more than the few - how to identify those with potential?

Mechanisms (1) Low Participation Neighbourhoods

- Geographical areas having a significantly below average proportion of young people going on to higher education – introduced in 2005
- Quintiles 1 & 2 are areas that have a lower-than-average propensity to send young people to university (the bottom 40% of electoral wards home to 40% of 18 year olds)
- Based on electoral council wards: highly variable in size and population, some correlation with area measures of deprivation
- http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/POLAR/Map_of_young_participation_areas/

But wards aren't neighbourhoods

- LPNs based around electoral geography, not meaningful communities
- Usually far too large to capture a single community
- Postcodes too small (20 homes) - wards too large (ave 6,600 homes)
- Whole towns/cities can be LPNs - but often contain 'gentrified' areas populated by the 'advantaged'
- Social housing increasing located in more affluent areas – 'sustainable communities'
- Massive rural areas (e.g. North Yorks) can have small pockets of deprivation

Who actually lives in LPNs?

Socio-economic groups	LPNs (Quintiles 1 & 2)	Neighbourhoods that are not LPN (Qs 3-5)'
Higher groups (NS-SEC 1 to 3)	65,310 (29%)	163,044 (71%)
Lower groups (NS-SEC 4 to 7)	133,451 (44%)	169,624 (56%)
Unclassified (mainly unemployed and benefit-dependent)	35,087 (50%)	35,339 (50%)

Source: estimates of 17 year olds based on 2001 Census data

- More young people from lower socio-economic groups outside LPNs than in them
- 54% of applicants from LPNs are in positions of relative advantage

Consequences of defining LPN as disadvantage

- Poorer young people living outside an LPN are less likely to get outreach activities targeted at them
-and less likely to get discretionary financial support from institutions than their peers within LPNs
- Labelling effect- people living in an LPN have themselves become *a disadvantaged group*

Mechanisms (2) Access agreements

- Institutional perspectives: the neoliberal turn from widening participation to fair access
- Sample: 10 x pre92s 2006-7 and 2012-13; 10 x post92s 2006-7 and 2012-13
- Analysis by type and across time; *content* (age/social groups engaged with; level of financial support and eligibility criteria); *discourses employed*

Neoliberal focus shift - from the institution to the individual

Inst	2006/7	2012/13
post7	<p>Access, progression, student achievement and employment are all central to the University's raison d'être and have been for well over a century.... the University today is seeking to build on its proud record of service ... and on its traditional strengths in vocational and professional education</p>	<p>[The] University has a history of supporting access to advanced education, which stretches back to its foundation. Today, our mission statement reflects that: We are about creating opportunity for our students and equipping them to become highly successful in their chosen field. Our focus is on the professions. Widening participation is achieved by delivering success for our students. We can help create the best possible opportunities for our students to succeed.</p>

Neoliberal focus shift - from (our) diversity to (your) employability

Inst	2006/7	2012/13
Post3	<p>The University uses the term ‘widening participation’ in its broadest sense and encompasses dimensions such as race, social class, age, gender, sexuality and disability. The University has a diverse student population. One of its shared values ... is ‘respect for diversity amongst members and prospective members of its community’.</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>The University has a long-standing and well evidenced commitment to widening participation and fair access.</p>

Discourse shifts? Post-1992s

Post 2006	Post 2012
Institution focussed	Individualised focus on how good they are for the 'student as consumer'
Diversity of student body an aim and celebrated; Welcoming and student friendly	Retention and success are the main focus of access expenditure
Flexible Vocational provision; Ties to the local labour market	Employability, links to 'the professions'
Local and Regional focus	Regional and National focus for recruitment
Bursaries for all; Outreach focussed on raising aspirations for all	Merit aid (financial support for those with higher ability) merit and subject specific targeted outreach

Discourses of division: the 2011 White Paper

... “We will move away from the tight number controls that constrain individual higher education institutions, so that there is a more dynamic sector in which **popular institutions** can grow.

We propose to allow unrestrained recruitment of **high achieving students**, scoring the equivalent of AAB or above at A-Level. Core allocations for all institutions will be adjusted to remove these students.

“The second element is the creation of a flexible margin of about 20,000 places in 2012/13 to support expansion by providers who combine **good quality with value for money** and whose average charge (after waivers have been taken into account) is at or below £7,500.” (BIS 2011: paras 4.18; 4.19; 4.20)

Summary.....

- Framing disadvantage: in whose name?
- Drivers: ideological & political
 - lack of evidence base
 - diverse institutional interests
 - market reforms encouraging differentiation (dual price mechanism - tuition fee, entry grades)
 - neoliberal assumptions about individual responsibility feed **and** reflect policy

Further reading

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