(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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What</th>
<th>Who</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HEFCE WP performance indicators</td>
<td>• Young FT: state school/college; NS-SEC 4-7; low participation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>neighbourhood</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mature /young PT: no previous HE qual. + low-participation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>neighbourhood</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• In receipt of the Disabled Students' Allowance</td>
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<td>Networks for collaborative outreach</td>
<td>• Young people</td>
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<td>• National level: Oxford or Cambridge, older learners, care</td>
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<td></td>
<td>leavers.</td>
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<td>National strategy for access and student</td>
<td>• Ability to benefit from HE; equal opportunity to</td>
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<tr>
<td>success</td>
<td>participate/succeed regardless of background, age, ethnicity,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>disability, gender.</td>
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<td>• Student life-cycle from access to employment.</td>
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<td>National Scholarship Programme – NSP</td>
<td>• Low-income backgrounds</td>
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<td>HEFCE Inequalities activity</td>
<td>• Inequalities of degree and employment outcomes for BME</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Inclusive LTA environments for students with disabilities</td>
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<td>PG Support Scheme</td>
<td>• Where students are under-represented on courses</td>
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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.


- 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?

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

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<th>Inst</th>
<th>2006/7</th>
<th>2012/13</th>
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<tr>
<td>post7</td>
<td>Access, progression, student achievement and employment are all central to the University’s raison d’être and have been for well over a century…. <strong>the University today is seeking to build on its proud record</strong> of service … and on its <strong>traditional strengths</strong> in vocational and professional education</td>
<td>[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 <strong>creating opportunity for our students</strong> and equipping them to become highly successful in their <strong>chosen</strong> field. Our focus is on the professions. Widening participation is achieved by delivering <strong>success for our students</strong>. We can help create the best possible opportunities for our <strong>students to succeed</strong>.</td>
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Neoliberal focus shift - from (our) diversity to (your) employability

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<td>Post3</td>
<td>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’.</td>
<td>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.</td>
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## Discourse shifts? Post-1992s

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

http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/0309877X.2013.858681

McCaig, C (2014) The retreat from Widening Participation? The National Scholarship Programme and new Access Agreements in English higher education, Studies in Higher Education. Published online 9th June 2014
