

**English higher education : the historical and political context for marketisation, differentiation and equity.**

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**English Higher Education: the  
historical and political context  
for marketisation,  
differentiation and equity  
BERA Conference 2015**

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# Drivers of widening participation and differentiation

- global system expansion 60s to 70s
- binary divide - Polytechnics as a responsive 'public sector' of HE from 1965
- different types of student
- different ways of doing and being HE
- part-time and distance education

# Elite to mass HE: the social divide

*Both sectors function within the assumptions of elite higher education; the creation of the polytechnics simply allowed the system to grow up to the Robbins ceiling without diluting the social and academic distinction of the universities.*

**Trow, M.** (2007) [Reflections on the transition from elite to mass to universal access: Forms and phases of higher education in modern societies since WWII](#), Springer

# Systemic growth from mid-1980s

- UK context - market ideology
- expansion at lower unit cost
  - but growth restricted mainly to polytechnics
- 1988 Education Reform Act; 1992 Further and Higher Education Act
- End of the university/polytechnic binary divide
- HEFCE - need for diversity of mission

# Differentiation

- the presence of *markers* by which things can be seen to differ
- can be for different purpose or for use by a different group of people
- in educational terms it can differ by what people want from it: enlightenment or a better paid job?
- or how policy is shaped by governments
- markets rely on differentials - especially in the absence of price

# Vertical scales of system differentiation

## HE institutions

Prestige

Quality

Scarcity

Price

Research

# Horizontal scales of system differentiation

Higher education	
<b>Learning type</b>	academic ---distance--vocational---- work based learning
<b>inst. type</b>	university ----- specialist institution ----- polytechnic
<b>social aim</b>	social mobility ----- widen participation for all underrepresented groups
<b>policy aim</b>	fair access ----- system diversity
<b>workforce</b>	philosophers --- lawyers -----engineers---- nurses-- ????



# Horizontal differentiation valued

*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).

# The state and WP

- Dearing Review (1997)
- The new Labour government and WP targets
- Aimhigher
- The 'fair admissions' debate - Schwartz Report 2004
- OFFA and the coming of fair access (HE Act 2004)
  - overt marketisation ... in bursaries if not fees
  - competitive WP positioning

# WP and 'Fair Access'

*Broadly speaking, widening participation is a sector-wide issue whereas fair access is one that concerns individual institutions...*

*....the term [fair access] refers to the fairness, or otherwise, of the admissions processes of institutions..... But it has also come to refer to the mix of students in individual institutions. On the one hand, **it is quite possible to widen participation without having fair access in either sense of the term.** On the other hand, **it is possible to concentrate on fair access in a way that detracts from a broader effort to widen participation.***

Bekhradnia, B (2003) *Widening Participation and Fair Access: An Overview of the Evidence* (HEPI)

# WP and market differentiation

Access agreement analysis (from 2006)

Reveals mission and values divide between pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions

Raising aspirations for all (WP) versus social mobility for the few (Fair Access)

Reveals differential markers in

bursaries

differential outreach targeting

by age and social groups

# Overt marketisation

- League tables emerge mid-2000s
- Browne review of student finance (2009)
- Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition (2010-15)
  - fee increase
- 2011 White Paper 'students at the heart of the system'
  - variable fee market
  - driven by student choice based on information
  - best institutions can expand numbers of higher qualified students
  - weaker institutions would have to lower fees to maintain numbers

# Competition as the market driver

*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. Institutions will then be free to recruit **as many of these students as wish to come.** ..... This should **allow greater competition for places on the more selective courses and create the opportunity for more students to go to their first choice institution if that university wishes to take them.** ..... AAB will represent a starting point, but **our ambition is to widen the threshold** over this parliament, ensuring that the share of places liberated from number controls altogether **rises year on year.***

BIS 2011 White Paper: *Students at the Heart of the System*, para 4.19

# Impact on post-1992s: risk averse behaviours

- HEA research into the new marketised landscape (Taylor & McCaig 2014)
- raising of entry requirements
- dropping of lower entry, sub-degree and part-time courses
- emphasis on employability
- 90 institutions chasing a place in the 'Top 50'

# Risk aversion

I think there is a pressure point [around widening participation] there because I know that the governors are very keen on the widening participation, widening access...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, low participation neighbourhoods, BME, percentage state schools, mature students ... So losing some of those numbers would not probably make a very big significant impact on that agenda* (Post1).

The market effect meant that "the business model is absolutely simplified: **recruit, retain, recruit, retain**" (Post2)



# Marketised differentiation

**Marketised differentiation - vertical but no horizontal axis**

**Price (maybe but not yet)... but**

**League table rankings**

- **entry qualifications**
- **student satisfaction**
- **outcomes data**

**Prestige - e.g. research rankings**

**Quality**

**Scarcity**

**Levels of financial support**

**Institutional type**

# Can differentiation foster equity and diversity?

- vertical differentiation reinforces hierarchies
  - good for 'fair access' and social mobility
  - pathways to the top for the brightest of the poor and underrepresented
- horizontal differentiation values difference
  - diversity of provision
  - diversity of learning styles
  - diversity of students' backgrounds

# Summary discussion

- Vertical differentiation preserves elite universities' autonomy
- Market needs vertical differentiation, especially in the absence of price
- Leaves no space for horizontal differentiation values
- Once state became involved in WP pre-1992s interests came to the fore
- Fair Access and the 'crisis of social mobility' rhetoric maintains the differentiation
- WP at post-92s threatened by the focus on league tables- chasing the 'top 50'
- Less part-time study, less sub-degree and less diversity?

# Further reading

- Bekhradnia, B (2003) *Widening Participation and Fair Access: An Overview of the Evidence* (HEPI)
- McCaig, C (2011) "Trajectories of higher education system differentiation: structural policymaking and the impact of tuition fees in England and Australia" *Journal of Education and Work*: 'Vol. 24, Nos. 1–2, February–April 2011, 7–25.
- McCaig, C (2015) The Impact of the Changing English Higher Education Marketplace on Widening Participation and Fair Access: Evidence from a Discourse Analysis of Access Agreements, *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, Volume 17, Issue 1, March 2015
- Taylor, C. and McCaig, C. (2014) *Evaluating the impact of number controls, choice and competition: an analysis of the student profile and the student learning environment in the new higher education landscape*, Higher Education Academy, York, August 2014
- Trow, M. Policy Analysis, In *Educational Research, Methodology, and Measurement: An International Handbook*. John Keeves, ed