

Who are we Widening Participation for?

MCCAIG, Colin <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4364-5119>>

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Who are we widening participation for?



COLIN MCCAIG

SHEFFIELD INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION,
SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

Before considering who we are widening participation (WP) for, we need to think about what WP is and how we do it. Etymologically, WP has its origins in the political need to *increase* participation, going back before the Robbins report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963), which came up against various structural constraints that policymakers had to address. More places were needed than universities were willing to make available, and more people had to seek entry to higher education (HE), meaning governments had to think more broadly about who should be attracted into the system. Socially, participation had to *widen* in order to increase and, as universities' autonomy over admissions was inviolable, it fell to state sector polytechnics, further education colleges and the Open University to show the way.

WP is about bringing into the system people from all social categories underrepresented due to the selectivity of a rationed system. This is an inherently political project based partly on human capital theory but equally on notions of social justice: simply, as Robbins noted, nobody should be denied, due to their background, the opportunity to achieve their educational potential, and the system should be expanded to create places for all who desire the opportunity.

There are still severe inequalities in access and participation, especially in the more selective parts of the system.

The relative success of this project means that nobody would think of denying access to HE on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, disability and so on – indeed, thanks to the Equality Act 2010, such discrimination is illegal. Nor is it acceptable, as it was before the Office for Fair Access was established in 2004, for research-intensive universities to ignore WP on the basis that they have to

maintain global excellence via high entry requirements (McCaig, 2015).

Nevertheless, there are still severe inequalities in access and participation, especially in the more selective parts of the system. More outreach work is now carried out by selective institutions, often accompanied by a more thorough approach to evaluation than found elsewhere (Harrison et al., 2018), yet most is designed to attract those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have already demonstrated their likelihood to attain the requisite A-level grades and participate in HE anyway. Such outreach work is either market-competitive or 'deadweight' in WP terms (Chowdry, Dearden, Jin & Lloyd, 2012).

So who are we widening participation for? Is it WP if we merely shuffle some of the 'deserving poor' from one highly selective institution to another?

I would argue that we only *widen* participation when we reach those who would not have participated without intervention.

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